

ECOLOGICAL REALITY: Its Crisis and Praxis

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1. Introduction

The ecological reality that shapes the consciousness of a human mind has a dual face: the crisis it undergoes and its praxis. This presentation delineates the dual face of the ecological reality, crisis and praxis, as a basis for an ecological conscientisation appropriate to an average human mind.

In an attempt to clarify further the complicated nature of ecology, postmodern ecologists have pointed out certain laws and principles regarding ecology.¹ They are: (a) The earth is more complex than we can ever think of (principle of complexity). (b) Everything is interconnected and intermingled with everything else (principle of dependence). (c) The earth's life support system can take much stress and abuse, but there are limits to what it can take (law of limits). (d) Each species and each organism can tolerate only a certain range of environmental condition (principle of tolerance range). (e) Any chemical that we produce should not interfere with any of earth's life-support systems. (f) No population can keep growing indefinitely (principle of carrying capacity).

These laws and principles provide a basis for the understanding of ecology. Ecological reality has become a matter of grave concern for organizations, people movements, nations, etc., because of the 'doomsday scenario' that predicted imminent "ecotastrophe" if present trends in population, food production, global warming, ozone depletion, species extinction, and worldwide toxic pollution resulting from the eco-impact of industrial civilization, and continuous resource depletion go on unabated.²

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¹These laws and principles clearly show the complicated nature of ecological reality, which is the web of life-nonlife, each interrelated, interconnected, interdependent, and interbonded to each other and to the whole: variety-similarity patterns, interactions-interdependencies, continuity-change, cycles-rhythms, and evolution-adaptation. For further reference, see Gene Wilhelm, "Theology of Ecology," in *Ecology and Religion: Scientists Speak*, eds. John E. Carroll and Keith Warner, Quincy, IL: Franciscan Press, 1998, 270.

²See R. L. Sarkar, *The Bible, Ecology and Environment*, Delhi: ISPCK, 2000, 227-41 and 251-68.

The present ecological crisis has developed as a result of the disruption of the structure that is designed within the web of relationships.

2. Eco-Crisis: A Cancerous Reality

Even if we witness and live in the very core of the historic consciousness with all its consequences, there is evidently a growing awareness that the world is in a crisis. The cosmos is in a critical situation of decay and its continued destruction by human beings poses serious problems that affect the human beings themselves. Large issues, like global warming, the depletion of ozone layer, and natural resource management, and more local problems, like safe drinking water and toxic storage and clean-up, affect God's creation. The poor in the Asian countries disproportionately face environmental hazards that affect their communities and the future of their children. Through some international pacts, or manipulative schemes, the developing countries are forced into a suicidal export of its forest and natural resources. Enormous amount of rain forests, trees, and vegetation have disappeared every year in many of the Asian countries due to indiscriminate felling of trees and damming of rivers.

The present ecological crisis did not happen abruptly. People are to be blamed for such a situation on this earth. 'Crisis' means a state of emergency or difficulty or distress. Ecological crisis is, thus, a situation of distress that has been created by the human interaction with the ecological systems to the extent of inflicting distress or a state of emergency on the earth. The contributing factors in creating an ecological crisis are multidimensional and have a vicious nature. Among them there are power-play, over-population, anthropocentrism, and developmental thrust.

Power-Play: Power plays a major role in creating ecological crisis. Nations, authorities, corporations, etc. become sources of this kind of power; the power invested upon those persons/corporations is used in an abusive way that has victimized the weak and the earth itself.³ A distorted notion of power engulfs the rights and the resources especially of the poor nations and endangers their survival. Ecologically, this situation makes the Asian region a crisis-stricken area in the world.

³For example, the production of high-grade-copper cathodes is a hazardous business. Japan Inc., therefore, exports the operation to the places made vulnerable by poverty, like the Philippines. There they acquired four hundred acres of land, appropriated from the poor, and the emissions from the plant spew out high levels of boron, arsenic, heavy metals, and sulphur, contaminating local water, reducing fishing and rice yields, killing forests, and sickening the people. David C. Korten, *When Corporations Rule the World*, West Hartford: Kumarian Press, 1995, 31-32.

Over-Population: Life of the earth-community in this planet is delicately controlled by a check and balance system that has helped maintain the population level of most species. Human beings are the only exception. Out of the total world population of 6.5 billion, Asia shares more than half of it with the population of China and India going up to 2.3 billion. By the year 2050, the UN Population Fund forecasts, world population will rise to ten billion people before levelling off at 11.6 billion after the year 2150.⁴ With 11.6 billion people competing for the planet's soil, water, and air, will the earth stand the strain – without suffering an ecological breakdown? An increase in the human population is likely to place more strain upon the life-support systems of the earth. Although an aggressive population control is one measure to meet the crisis of the increase of human species, there are some basic human values that development policies should keep.⁵ Such a situation generated by the inordinate increase in the population on this planet amidst the limited and temporal resources makes the crisis situation more severe.

Anthropocentrism: Environmentalists use this term to refer to the current concept of placing humanity at the centre of the world and all life forms. According to Lynn White, Jr., anthropocentrism is the result of a western life-style, which is being 'exported' excessively to the developing countries in the form of technology and progress.⁶ Authors argue that in handing over the power to humanity, the writings of western intelligentsia,⁷ like Francis Bacon, René Descartes, and Isaac Newton,

⁴See David S. Toolan, "Open to Life-and to Death: The Church on Population Issues," in *Embracing Earth: Catholic Approaches to Ecology*, eds. Albert J. LaChance and John C. Carroll, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994, 37.

⁵From an Asian point of view, especially, concern about the limited resources of the earth and about sustainable development has to be seriously taken into account. Often, these Asian aspects blind people to the necessity of basic human values, such as love, family, etc., that are involved in the population problem. The Church in Asia believes that such basic values are being ignored by development policies that prescribe an aggressive population control, which is targeted especially against the majority poor of Asia. See Orlando B. Quevedo, "Development in Asia: A View from Below," *Landas* 10 (July 1996), 145-46. For a detailed exposition on relationship of population explosion and the depletion of the earth resources, see Sean McDonagh, *The Greening of the Church*, Manila: Claretian Publications, 1990, 38-73.

⁶Lynn White, Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155 (March 1967), 1203-1207.

⁷As the founding fathers of modern science, Descartes, Bacon, etc., recognized that the emerging scientific revolution would give humans greater control over nature. As McDonagh opines, "... Once rebellious nature is tamed the complete

provided justification for the progressive drive to manipulate and conquer nature. While this western 'dominion' in Asia was anchored only in the fifteenth or sixteenth century, the roots of anthropocentrism date back to the earliest forms of western consciousness both in the Jewish and Greek experience. Although there is an apparent excessive permissiveness in its interpretation, ecologically, an anthropocentric conception of the modern world presents human beings as the pinnacle and crown of creation, in contrast to the theocentric conception of the world in the Bible.⁸ Humanity is provided with power over the natural world, which, in turn, is seen as a power to manipulate and mould raw materials for their own purposes and betterment. It is clear that the anthropocentric concept is in strict conflict to that of the ecological concept, in that the latter puts in the centre the totality of the cosmos, or nature, or life.⁹ From the perspective of an ecological crisis, this erroneous phenomenon of anthropocentrism creates excessive damage not only to humans but also to the earth.

Developmental Thrust: 'Development' is a complex phenomenon, which includes both negative and positive connotations. From an ecological point of view, the prevailing concept of development is not so much in line with 'pro-life.' This is a paradox since development is said to be executed in the name of civilization, precisely to effect a global

human control, which was thought to have existed in Paradise before the Fall, would be restored. Thus in Descartes' celebrated phrase, it would make humans 'masters and possessors of nature.'" Sean McDonagh, *Passion for the Earth: The Christian Vocation to Promote Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation*, Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian Publications, 1995, 126.

⁸Jürgen Moltmann in his famous work, *God in Creation*, has developed this concept of anthropocentrism and discovers the related consequences on earth. His main thrust in this book is to establish a cosmological theocentricity by which God's dominion over the world has to be reinstated. According to him, "the crown of creation is not the human being; it is the Sabbath," a mentality to be re-read in the eco-theological spirit. For an interesting discussion on this subject, see his work, *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation*, New York: Harper & Row, 1985, 20-40.

⁹Affirming the Christian vision of anthropocentrism Pope John Paul II, in his encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, places "man" – meaning, of course, humanity – at the centre of the world, entrusted with responsibility for the well-being of the planet [30]. Acknowledging the Christian tradition, the Pope reiterates the central position of "man," not because "he" is powerful; human beings are central because they are *persons*. To be a person is to have reason; it is to have access to truth. So this placing of human beings at the centre of the world need not be misinterpreted as anthropocentrism. The Pope is only re-emphasizing the Christian meaning of being a *person* whose position is *central*, not to rule, but to be responsible.

institutional human culture. John Haught calls this side of 'development' as "scientific materialism," which means that, "*matter* alone is real and that all phenomena in the universe can be adequately understood as special applications of the laws of chemistry and physics."¹⁰ Purely economic measure of well-being, such as the Gross National Product (GNP), fails to capture the variety of goods that contribute to human happiness and indeed produces a great deal of confusion and dissatisfaction in the human pursuit of happiness, and the integrity of the creation. The risk of what Pope John Paul II called 'economism' is that it reduces everything to its economic value, so that, in a pursuit of profit, humans lose the appreciation of the goods that make them whole.¹¹ The Pope's critique of western materialism and development is a sober reminder of how destructive economics can be in the absence of human and ecological considerations. A mad rush for development, devoid of the principles of justice and ethics, always intensifies to uproot ancient cultures including their habitat, disappearance of species, degradation of eco-systems, soil erosion, etc. Enumerating further the tragic consequences of this thrust, Baird Callicott writes,

Now, however, in addition to local events, such as those that recently occurred in Prince William Sound, Bhopal, and Chernobyl, the environmental crisis is understood to have an additional, global dimension – global warming, stratospheric ozone thinning, abrupt massive species extinction, destruction of the world's girdle of tropical forests, etc.¹²

The developmental projects and schemes of governments, corporations and states, thus, cause great deal of fear and anxiety among peoples and environmentalists because of the insensitivity of those programs to the lives of the people and the eco-systems of the earth.¹³ The above-

¹⁰John F. Haught, "Religious and Cosmic Homelessness: Some Environmental Implications," in *Liberating Life: Contemporary Approaches to Ecological Theology*, eds. Charles Birch, William Eakin, and Jay B. McDaniel, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991, 164.

¹¹John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens* (On Human Work), Encyclical Letter, 13.

¹²J. Baird Callicott, "Toward a Global Environmental Ethic," in *Worldviews and Ecology: Religion, Philosophy, and the Environment*, eds. Mary Evelyn Tucker and John A. Grim, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994, 31.

¹³One of the tragic consequences of these developmental thrusts is massive urbanization in Asia. Urbanization has profoundly transformed the natural landscapes everywhere throughout the world, inevitably exerting pervasive effects on the structure and function of ecosystems. Undoubtedly, urbanization in Asia will continue to have significant impacts on the environment as well as on economic, social and political

mentioned factors that generate and accelerate a crisis situation in the ecological reality of the earth are only a few to name. These factors clarify that the ecological crisis is not an accidental phenomenon; rather, it is being created, generated and actualized by human insensitivity. The crisis leaves concrete effects on the lives on earth and the eco-systems of nature. Deep within the human beings' consciousness, it leaves scars of an erroneous life-style evolving out of a valueless and ethic-free life.

The severity of the crisis urges humans to undo this ecological imbalance. In overcoming this crisis, humanity has to concentrate on the strengths of nature – nature as a perfect solidarity sharing and communicating to each other, mutually nourishing and perfecting. This calls for a praxis-oriented ecological consciousness, so that humanity may concentrate on the positive aspects of nature, and challenge the demeaning mentality of 'science.' This will provide a chance for change, a paradigm to inculcate values of eco-praxis. Change is possible in an atmosphere of conversion from self-centred to other-centred life or what has been called a movement "from 'egological' to ecological consciousness." To achieve this, awareness has to be created in all people that it involves a hatred of eco-devastation and a longing for eco-restoration and an imperative to "affirm and consecrate their solidarity with all creation."¹⁴ The following section discusses this aspect of earth-community, its relationships in terms of co-existence and pro-existence.

3. Care for the Earth and Rights of the Earth: Paradigms for Eco-Praxis

Ed de la Torre, a liberation theologian from the Philippines, rearranges the priorities of the WCC's JPIC programs in a simple but radical way, which may provide a suitable context for this presentation. To quote,

Liberation, peace and ecology are all important causes, but fundamental to each of them is justice. If they are represented as three overlapping circles, justice is the area of their overlap, and the

processes at local, regional and global scales. Rapid urbanization in most developing countries in Asia since the 1990s has been accompanied by a proliferation of slums and dysfunctional neighbourhoods with high health risks. High rates of urbanization and industrialization have increased the demands for land, water, and energy, and resulted in expanding transportation networks that constitute a key accelerating factor in economic growth as well as environmental degradation. For example, urbanization and economic growth in many Asian countries frequently result in air and water pollution, loss of productive agricultural land, loss and fragmentation of species habitats, over-extraction of groundwater resources, and deforestation as a consequence of increased demand for construction timber (UNEP 2000).

¹⁴William McNamara, *Earthly Mysticism*, New York: Crossroad, 1983, 103.

closer they draw together the greater becomes the scope of justice. Peace and ecology are thus reclaimed as universal, not merely First World issues, but only insofar as they become arenas for the practical working of justice.¹⁵

This idea would be clearer through a linguistic analysis. The idea of justice, owing as much to biblical *sedakah* and *mishpat* as to the Roman concept of *ius*, is a cardinal principle of the entire western tradition. Among the finest fruits of western tradition of justice are the theory of *ius naturale* and the universal declaration of human rights to which it gave rise.¹⁶ Based on these perspectives of *ius naturale*, many of the Asian religions like, Hinduism, and Buddhism argue that nature also has a 'Justice Tradition' and that they have 'Rights,' too. The Bible also refers to the Rights of Nature.

If the cultural metaphor of the West is *ius*, which refers to an anthropocentric view of the world, the East has developed an equal but more significant word *dhamma* (also *dharma*), which connotes not mere justice but encompasses 'cosmic order' in which human beings actively participate. The religious traditions, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, etc., can each provide a plausible basis for human rights. However, a mere intellectual justification of these rights is of little help. For Thomas Berry, the domain of ecological ethics "concerns the manner whereby humans give expression at the rational level to the ethics of this larger community."¹⁷ Broadening their horizons people may see themselves within the larger context of the earth as an integral community of all living and non-living components. Concretizing this aspect of becoming one among the larger community of the earth, humans have to employ the "caring" mentality; as the lack of it consequently results into a crisis in this world.

3.1. Towards an Ethics of Ecological Care

Respect and care for the earth and its symbolisms require ecological sensitivity and life-centeredness. To be ecologically caring is to be

¹⁵Cited from John D'Arcy May, "Rights of the Earth and Care for the Earth: Two Paradigms for Buddhist-Christian Ecological Ethics," *Horizon* 21 (Spring 1994), 51-52.

¹⁶"Natural Law, Rights, Human," and "Justice," in *The New Dictionary of Theology*, eds. Joseph A. Komonchak, Mary Collins and Dermot A. Law, New York: Crossroad, 1987; and also in *A Dictionary of Christian Ethics*, ed. John Macquarrie, London: SCM Press, 1967, s. v. "Natural Rights."

¹⁷Thomas Berry, "Ethics and Ecology," unpublished paper (1994); cited from Sean McDonagh, *Passion for the Earth*, 138.

knowledgeable about, and respectful of, the beauty and dynamic equilibrium of ecosystems, particularly those upon which one has an impact and of which one is a part. To be ecologically caring is also to be cognizant that all entities – from protons to living cells to animals and galaxies – are formed by their relations to their environments. In the Asian religions, to be life-centred is to be especially attuned to the value of living being amid one's ecological sensitivity, cognizant of their value in, and for themselves, for one another, and for all beings. This 'caring' concept reminds one to recognize the value of living beings in and for themselves and the intrinsic value of creation's existence. By doing so, there is no danger of denying the creatures' relationality; rather it is to recognize that, amid their dependence on environment, they are concerned with their own survival and well-being. Their lives are of value for themselves, and ought concomitantly to be of value to us. Caring for creation entails, thus, the recognition that all living beings, humans and non-humans alike, are "neighbours." This metaphor, "neighbour," can help human beings to see more vividly that wisdom, responsibility, justice and caring comprise the essence of humankind's relationship with other creatures.¹⁸

A Genesis text on the 'covenant relationship' also exemplifies this task of human beings to be a "neighbour" (Gen 9:8-13). Robert Murray recognizes the environmental implications of passages like this in the Scripture as one of being biocentric, rather than a homocentric, which calls for an understanding of the depth of being a "neighbour." For him the Noah text (Gen 9:8-17) involves a cosmic covenant, which "binds humans and animals together as the Creator's partners."¹⁹ For some environmental authors, this concept of being a "neighbour" to the earth realities is termed as "an ethic of companionship."²⁰

The 'caring' aspect of the earth and its beings is nothing new to Asian Christians. However, the Asian Church has to re-emphasize these aspects in its theological-pastoral framework while actively entering into

¹⁸In an environmental ethic, the definition of "neighbour" can be extended to all living creatures, indeed to the earth and the universe. For Hill, "it (neighbour) is not only private and individual but also public and social, concerned with justice and resistance to evil, violence, and oppression in all forms." B. R. Hill, *Christian Faith and the Environment: Making Vital Connections*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998, 270.

¹⁹Robert Murray, "The Relationship of Creatures within the Cosmic Covenant," *The Month* 251 (November 1990), 427.

²⁰Michael J. Himes and Kenneth R. Himes, "The Sacrament of Creation: Toward an Environmental Theology," *Commonweal* 117, 26 January 1990, 46.

the scene of ecological conscientization among its flock. In enabling the people to take care of the values of eco-ethics, the elements of eco-justice take its precedence. Without the awareness and consciousness of their justice principle, the caring aspects will be incomplete. To deepen this way of life where one has to care for the earth and its beings, the following section regarding 'Justice' and 'Right' of the earth would be helpful.

3.2. Eco-Justice: A Cry from the Bottom of the Earth

Only recently did humankind come to the consciousness of the 'justice' aspect of the earth and start to campaign to protect the 'rights' of the earth, accordingly. This attempt to link concern for justice with ecology is now being called working for "eco-justice." This concept of 'eco-justice' is undeniably different from that of the western concept of justice. If the West has designed its ethical systems to curb the worst excess of consumerism, the 'eco-justice,' by contrast, though it does not assert "human rights" in the western sense, safeguards them indirectly in the ascetic ethic of the *ahimsa* and *pancasila* ('the five basic precepts') of the Asian religious systems. This justice system, which has its flavour and taste of the Asian religiosity, invites not just respect for, but identification with all beings, not because of their usefulness for humans, but because of their own intrinsic value. R. L. Sarkar, an Indian eco-theologian, speaks strongly on this theme:

Eco-justice pushed us to the formation of a new social paradigm, a new set of assumptions, standards, values, and habits appropriate to a new era in the history of the world, an era in which men and women come to terms, with the lessons of the ecology crisis – that the planet is finite and that justice must be eco-justice.²¹

Virtually identical concerns were also voiced at the WCC's Canberra Assembly in 1991:

Responsibility requires that we recognize the character of the crisis in our midst ... Pursuing justice requires us to learn new ways of paying attention to all creation – the land, water, air, all people, plant life and other living creature. A new vision will integrate our interdependent ecological, social, economic, political and spiritual needs. We want to say as forcefully as we can that social justice for all people and eco-justice for all creation must go together ... This way of viewing justice helps us understand the linkage between

²¹Sarkar, *The Bible, Ecology and Environment*, 197.

poverty, powerlessness, social conflict and environmental degradation [1, 5].²²

Apart from the World Council of Churches, the Catholic Bishops' Conferences from many parts of the world, the Earth Summit Council at Rio de Janeiro – all stress eco-justice, so that recognition of relational harmony and the interdependence of all forms of life are established.²³ All these voices unanimously call out for justice for the earth that should not be viewed as a mere depository of natural resources for human exploitation in support of endless economic growth. In this context, the values articulated by the Church, which stress respect for the integrity of all members of creation, human and otherwise, provide the criteria for evaluating economic approaches in terms of their social and ecological justice. In short, the eco-justice life-style, which also protects the "rights of the earth," moves toward community: away from the competitive individualism that maximizes one's own gain and causes another's loss, and towards cooperative, mutually supportive work. With less strain upon natural and social systems, there is more joy, more wholeness, more friendship and more protection from hunger and hazard. Thus, a life-style that acknowledges the effects of caring and eco-justice allows the people to be aware of the "rights of the earth," too.

3.3. The Ecological Nuances of the "Rights of the Earth"

From the above discussions on Ethical Care and Eco-Justice of the Earth, it is evident that the principles of responsibility and discursive ethics each in their own way pick up the age-old theme, "No Heaven without Earth," in order to work out the foundations and perspectives of an ethic of responsibility toward nature. Western Christian and humanist ethics find it hard to accept these insights because it balks at the fundamental *rights* of nature to be free from human ravishment. From an Asian point of view, these rights and care of the earth are a religious responsibility. Asian religions have striven in markedly different contexts and with

²²Michael Kinnamon, ed., *Signs of the Spirit: Official Report, Seventh Assembly, Canberra, Australia, February 7-20, 1991*, Geneva: WCC & Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991, 55.

²³All these movements/organizations, in one voice, insist that eco-justice must become a part of the preaching of the churches. They also hold that eco-justice preachers must review the doctrines of Creation and Salvation, biblical principles of stewardship, theologies of nature and natural theology. For further discussions on the theme/s, see Kinnamon, *Signs of the Spirit*, 200-02.

characteristically diverse motivations to exercise, or at least to influence the exercise of, and responsibility towards the "rights of the earth."

It must be clarified, however, that the recognition of the rights of nature (non-human nature) may not lead to the violation of any stage of conventional human existence or the denial of its rights. Rightly understood, the extension of guarantees in law to non-human forms of life also means more thorough legal guarantees for any facet of human life. One problem, at this juncture, may be encountered in the realm of morality by the world religions, especially the Asian religions. This problem concerns the possibilities of intervention provided by modern biotechnology, especially gene technology and the biology of procreation. If living beings have a right to life and to procreation in line with their species, interference with heredity and the reprogramming of their species is extremely problematical.²⁴

With regards to the above arguments, the 'Berne Draft Resolution,'²⁵ delineates basic principles: (a) Nature, animate or inanimate, has a right to existence, i.e., to preservation and development; (b) Nature has a right to the protection of its ecosystems, and of the network of species and populations; (c) Animate nature has a right to the preservation and development of its genetic inheritance; (d) Living beings have a right to life in accordance with their species, including procreation, in the ecosystems appropriate to them; (e) Interventions in nature need to be justified... Nature, therefore, must be accorded its own rights. These "rights of the earth" are envisioned, basically, to protect nature from the atrocities of human arrogance and anthropocentric mentalities which cause various diverse effects. According to John Paul II, "The right to a safe environment is ever more insistently presented today as a right that must be included in an updated Charter of Human Rights."²⁶ Paul Taylor strongly asserts that the denial of human superiority is "the single most important idea in establishing the justifiability of the attitude of respect for nature."²⁷

²⁴G. Altner, "The Community of Creation as a Community in Law: The New Contract between the Generations," *Concilium, No Heaven without Earth*, 1991/4, 59.

²⁵*Evangelische Theologie* 5, 1990, 436ff, quoted from Altner, "The Community of Creation as a Community in Law," 60.

²⁶Cited from Drew Christiansen and Walter Grazer, eds., "And God Saw That It Was Good," Washington, D. C.: United States Catholic Conference, 219.

²⁷Paul W. Taylor, "The Ethics of Respect for Nature," *Environmental Ethics* 3 (Fall 1981), 211.

The religious implications of the "rights of the earth" are very important within the larger interest of this thesis. The ecological nuances of the rights of nature are so deep in the Asian religions, especially in the ethical formulations of *ahimsa*, which strongly insists on an undoing of violence. The Christian paradigm equal to this ethical code can be interpreted in "love" that discloses a "hyperethical dimension" which prevents the golden rule (cf. Luke 6: 31) from becoming just another version of *do ut des*, "I give you that you will give." James Nash is convinced that this biblical account of justice can easily accommodate the contemporary need to formulate both human environmental and "biotic" rights:

As this conception of rights implies, rights entail correlative responsibilities on the part of communities of moral agents. This correlation does not imply that only moral agents can have rights ... but rather only that moral agents have responsibilities to respect rights.²⁸

The principle of "rights of the earth" suggests to, and even demands from, human beings this ecological integration, viz., to deal with planetary life as companion rather than enemy.

3.4. Relationship between the Earth and Life

The notion of community within the context of ecological reality needs to be broadened to include all living beings and the earth itself. The relationship between earth and life demands the recognition of the rights of both humans and non-humans to their existence and their place in their home environment. Such a relationship is 'co-existence' and 'pro-existence,' which is concerned with the creation of a total community of life that allows the human family to flourish, come to its full stature and give rise to 'earth family,' with whom "we share the obligation to promote the nurturance and well-being of each member."²⁹

As a working principle to this relationship of the earth and life, Martin Buber provides the deepest foundation for the reverence of creation through his renowned formula, "I...thou." Himes gives an eco-ethical meaning to this formula:

The recognition of the other as a creature and, therefore, that which exists because it is loved by God cannot occur where the other is

²⁸James A. Nash, *Loving Nature: Ecological Integrity and Christian Responsibility*, Washington, D.C.: The Church's Center for Theological Policy, 1991, 170.

²⁹Jane Blewett, "Social Justice and Creation Spirituality," *The Way* 29, January 1989, 20.

regarded as "it"... in Buber's terms, a sacrament is always "thou." Since every creature can and should be a sacrament, so every creature can and should be "thou," a companion.³⁰

These principles of "new ethic" fundamentally embody the context for assessing humanity's responsibility toward the environment. Since human beings are so accustomed to industrial and technocratic mind-set, Berry opines that, "we have been entranced with the industrial world of wire and wheels, concrete and steel, and our unending highways, where we race back and forth in continued frenzy."³¹ The communication formula that Buber suggested has not been accepted in this technocratic mind-set. Berry is optimistic that it will return to the earth community where the focus will be enhancing the presence of humans and the earth for each other.

Another realm of the relationship between earth and life is its 'evolving' nature. Nature is "being" and "becoming," and as such, it manifests, and is related to, the dynamism of the interrelationship of each and every being in the world. The same evolutionary idea of nature is stressed by Teilhard de Chardin. His vision of nature is presented with a picture of universal *genesis* or becoming.³² Similarly, the relationship between earth and life is not a typified reality, but the quality has to be improved through a process of continued relationship. To qualify the humanity's inter/intra-relationship with the natural world, eco-theologians propose the medium of human body as a valid tool.

It is the case that human beings are deeply alienated not only from the nonhuman world but also from themselves, their own bodies. Healing the deleterious effects of dualism on our relationship to our own bodies may lead to a greater sense of the sacramentality, integrity and intrinsic value of one's own body, of the bodies of others and of the body of the earth.³³

³⁰Michael J. Himes and Kenneth R. Himes, "Sacrament of Creation: Toward an Environmental Theology," *Commonweal* 117, 26 January 1990, 46.

³¹Thomas Berry, *Befriending the Earth: A Theology of Reconciliation between Humans and the Earth*, Mystics, Conn.: Twenty-Third Publications, 1991, 1.

³²For Teilhard, the whole universe is moving forward with an increasing process of 'becoming,' which he termed as *cosmogogenesis*, the coming into being and organization of cosmos. The summit of this process of 'becoming' for Teilhard is Omega, the Godhead of everything. See Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Christianity and Evolution*, London: Collins, 1971, 91-92; also see Ursula King, *Christ in All Things: Exploring Spirituality with Teilhard de Chardin*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997, 45.

³³Christina Vanin, "The Significance of the Incarnation for Ecological Theology: A Challenging Approach," *Ecotheology* 6 (July 2001-January 2002), 118.

The above reflections on human relationship to the outside world realities lead to the affirmation of the value and meaning, the sacredness, of living and non-living beings. Fully awakened by this aspect of relationship of the earth realities and their life, Rasmussen proposes a new ethic of relationship, "partnership model." This model, according to Rasmussen, develops a respect for the earth and for other living things to the point where all are given serious consideration in every aspect of their relationship so as to effect progress and development in the relationship.³⁴ Equally important to Rasmussen's proposed model is "global ethics," which "confronts global social and ecological problems in global solidarity."³⁵ These models represent the whole creation as a self-expression of God, the theophany.

4. Seeking Connections: Toward a Critical Approach

The threats of the environment have always been with humanity, but they never reached the hazardous conditions of today. The previously discussed factors that contribute to an ecological crisis, together with the industrial revolution and the invention of chemicals, have become so severe that some predict dire results in the not-too-distant future. This human dominion is manifested in the so-called "power" of humankind: egoistic human power, scientific and technological power, knowledge as power and the power to control and subjugate.

Human consciousness, being the seat of awareness of the things that are occurring inside and outside of one's "microcosm," is the prime faculty that is affected by the impact of the ecological crisis. Therefore, how a person evaluates one's free deliberation before so many changing factors within the context of present ecological crisis that influence humanity's choices becomes an important part of ethics today. This affectivity and deliberations of a person are summarized and evaluated critically below through two analogies: 'Dominion Vs Stewardship' analogy and 'Quantitative Vs Qualitative' analogy.

³⁴Larry L. Rasmussen, *Earth Community, Earth Ethics*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996, 236.

³⁵James A. Nash, "Seeking Moral Norms in Nature: Natural Law and Ecological Responsibility," in *Christianity and Ecology*, 241. Commenting on this global ethics, Hans Küng opines, "There is no survival without a world ethic, universal or common, values, ideas, and goals that will optimize the social and ecological common good." Hans Küng, *Global Responsibility: In Search of a New World Ethic*, London: SCM Press, 1990, xv.

4.1. Dominion vs. Stewardship

Among the factors that allow human beings to have a domineering hand over the creation, is the (mis)interpretation of the priestly theology of human dominion – “subdue the earth” – found in Genesis 1. The notion of humanity’s having dominion over “all the living things that move on the earth” (Gen 1:28) has been a subject of extreme debate, especially since the much-debated article by Lynn White, in which the author charged that this notion led to a western dualism of humans over nature and resulted in extensive exploitation of the environment.³⁶ Even though White’s criticism could disturb the Christian theological circle, many of its allegations are yet to be evaluated for its veracity.

Considering the most complicated and different aspects of “domination” that aggressively act against nature and which causes ecological damage, this author proposes an alternative paradigm which may move people to grow into an ecological consciousness in contrast to today’s power-consciousness of serving and caring through proper stewardship. Genesis 2:15 is often used to champion the notion of stewardship as one of the most appropriate Judeo-Christian concepts for

³⁶White, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” 1203-07. The original meaning of the dominion given to humans over all living things on the earth does not seem to carry any connotation of exploitation or abuse, as being criticized by White. White may be overly influenced by what “dominion” implies to the mind of a twentieth century speaker, questioning whether “dominion” is the type of a control exerted by a ruler over his/her domain. God’s entrusting of humans as the head of “all that moves on the earth” is to be understood as a commissioning of human beings as *persons* who belong to the earth and is bound to it and all the other creatures that inhabit it. See Anne M. Clifford, “Foundations for a Catholic Ecological Theology of God,” in *And God Saw That It Was Good*, 25. In fact, the position of human beings as responsible *persons* is also considered as a *vocation* – a vocation to be higher and distinguished more clearly from other lives on this earth. Cf. Theodore Hiebert, “The Human Vocation: Origins and Transformations in Christian Tradition,” in *Christianity and Ecology*, 141-43. All these interpretations strongly challenge the position presented by White, and equally denies any tinge of dominance in the Genesis account of priestly theology. Besides, Claus Westermann points out, the divine charge for humans to name the animals (which was also misinterpreted by some as a mark of dominion) is not an exercise of human power over the animals, nor is it an indication that animals are to be exploited for human ends. He opines, “By naming the animals the man opens up, determines, and orders his world and incorporates them into his life. The world becomes human only through language.” Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Commentary*, trans. John J. Scullion, Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1974, 228.

addressing the environmental question. In order to overcome the denigrating effects of domination of humans over the earth, the stewardship analogy should be ecologically befitting as a paradigm for human consciousness. In the formation of an ecological consciousness, Genesis' relationality serves as a paradigm.

In spite of the paradigmatic possibilities of this stewardship analogy, there are some serious difficulties and dangers attendant to this analogy. Clare Palmer questions whether the stewardship concept is really suitable for addressing many of the complex issues raised by contemporary ecological crisis.³⁷ The stewardship analogy, it seems, aims to give humans some proprietary rights over the rest of creation, which is strongly challenged by biblical traditions. As the Psalmist puts it: "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof" (Ps 24:1). Leviticus uncompromisingly insists, "It [the land] must not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine, and you are but aliens who have become my tenants" (Lev 25:23).

Taking these dangers into consideration, the analogy of stewardship need not be out-rightly rejected or ignored in an ecological theology. Rather, the stewardship analogy invokes one to rethink and undo the domineering mentality that one has learned before. Instead, one has to become ecologically conscious by caring, nurturing and respecting the environment. The domineering mentality of humans should be curbed to facilitate the inculcation of an ecological consciousness.

4.2. Quantitative vs. Qualitative

Another dimension that creates an ecological imbalance on the earth is the influence of modern scientific and technological advancements. The problems that arise from a misuse of science and technology – the loss of ecological balance, for example – demand that humanity look seriously for

³⁷The first difficulty with regard to this analogy is that God is viewed as an absentee landlord who has put human beings in charge of the rest of creation (e.g., Dan 1: 11, Matt 24: 45-51). Having created the world, God has absented himself from its day-to-day activities and left this earth in the hands of humans. Cf. Clare Palmer, "Stewardship: A Case Study in Environmental Ethics," in *The Earth Beneath: A Critical Guide to Green Theology*, eds., Ian Ball, Margaret Goodall, Clare Palmer, and John Reader, London: SPCK, 1992, 122-41. In addition, within the context of the understanding of this analogy, the earth is reified and becomes either inert property to be cared for or financial resources to be managed in a way that gives a good return on the investment. A reified earth stripped of any divine presence gives a very impoverished understanding of creation. It is, needless to say, challenged from within the biblical tradition itself (cf. Gen 1: 10, 12b, 19; Ps 19: 1, etc.).

a congruent paradigmatic concept to lessen the ecological problems. The mechanistic view that is shaped by the inordinate valueless involvements of science and technology sees people as atomistic individuals whose interacting and interrelationships are valued according to function and utility alone. Sindima explains the trauma of such a mechanistic view:

Feelings and emotional needs are not important in mechanistic view. Hence, concern and care do not enter into everyday living. Moral conduct in a mechanistic society is often guided by self-interest, and often there is no agreement on what is "moral." Mechanistic society undermines the ties that bind persons and their communities to one another and to the cosmos.³⁸

This mechanistic view, fuelled by a scientific enterprise with an extreme thrust for progress, has fallen into the consumerist trap, which eats into the environmental resources without replacing or renewing them. In general, the effects of such a mentality are quantification, fragmentation, reification, division, etc., whereby human and nonhuman are counted not as whole, integral and complete.³⁹ From an ecological background the quantification tendency is to be matched by a qualitative mentality affirming the wholeness, the unity of all, the communion and interdependence, and making humanity itself a part of this web of relationships which constitute reality as an organic whole.⁴⁰ It is qualitative because one with such awareness tries to qualify one's own life by the care and respect one gives to life and of the lives of others. Now, to enhance an ecological consciousness, "what is required is not just a new agenda for the scientific enterprise, but a shift to a new paradigm; from high tech to appropriate technology, from capital intensive inputs to people's participation, from being so professionally exclusive to being more humanly inclusive."⁴¹ The paradigmatic vision to switch humanity's perception towards science and technology may bring a better approach to overcome the present ecological crisis, that is to call a new consciousness, i.e., ecologic consciousness.

³⁸Harvey Sindima, "Community of Life: Ecological Theology in African Perspective," in *Liberating Life*, 139.

³⁹Roger S. Gottlieb, ed., "Liberating Life: A Report to the World Council of Churches," in *This Sacred Earth: Religion, Nature, Environment*, New York: Routledge, 1996, 251-70.

⁴⁰Felix Wilfred, "Towards New Frontiers in Inter-religious Dialogue," *FABC* 49, Hong Kong: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conference, 38.

⁴¹Rudolf C. Heredia, "Towards an Ecological Consciousness: Religious, Ethical and Spiritual Perspectives – II," *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Review* 55, October 1991, 573.

4.3. Ecologic Consciousness

The concept of Ecologic consciousness is viewed by authors in terms of a global consciousness where renewed traditional worldviews and associated environmental ethics corresponding to the historical reality are being stressed. Historically, Asian religions, whether they are the so-called world religions, traditional religions, or subaltern religions, have a deep concern and interest for developing an ecological consciousness among the followers.⁴² Asian religions have emphasized the task of inculcating ecological sensitivity by seeking and finding God in and through nature realities. According to Thottakara, "Discovering God's presence and revelation in the cosmos and in creation is a religious act, and therefore there is a religious dimension for ecology and ecological concerns."⁴³

It was this same ecologic consciousness that was considered as the trans-historic consciousness by the Asian Religions. The trans-historical consciousness ("ecological consciousness"), so called third stage in the developmental process of the human person's consciousness, is that demands a reinterpretation of the pre-historic consciousness according to the praxis of today's societies. Trans-historic consciousness is a new phase of the human consciousness, which brings about a global consciousness and an awareness that all human beings and all material creatures are inter-related in a unity of rich diversity, and through our human effort responsibly create such a new world.⁴⁴ Here, it is seen that no evolution infallibly can bring the human being into such a loving

⁴²By making such a general statement, this thesis does not want to establish that all Asian/world religions are practicing or admonishing to practice their followers to practice a spotless ecological awareness. In the process of living out the values of the founders, sometimes it happens that some religious traditions concentrate only on the spiritual dimensions of the followers and preach and teach the ways and means for their eschatological good and happiness in the other world. "This material world ... is often, unfortunately, regarded as of lesser value and worth and deserved only second rate attention." Augustine Thottakara, *Eco-Dynamics of Religion: Thoughts for the Third Millennium*, Bangalore: Journal of Dharma & Dharmaram Publications, 2000, 7.

⁴³Thottakara, *Eco-Dynamics of Religion*, 8.

⁴⁴"Contemplating such an international, scientifically grounded and expressed environmental ethic – global in scope as well as focus – I also envision the revival of a multiplicity of traditional cultural environmental ethics that resonate with it and that help to articulate it." J. Baird Callicott, "Toward a Global Environmental Ethic," in *Worldviews and Ecology: Religion, Philosophy, and the Environment*, eds. Mary Evelyn Tucker and John A. Grim, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994, 37.

community without humanity's free choice. Rather than an enforced, inescapable evolution into such a unity, the humanity must view this stage of planetary oneness as a challenge to all human creations to bring about such loving unity through creative service to the whole world.

Trans-historical consciousness, thus, speaks not about an actualized reality; it is a new perspective which can enable the present humanity to undo the negative repercussions of the effects of the historic consciousness. Trans-historical consciousness, thus, urges a change from the present historic consciousness to an ecological one whereby one may be able to view the earth as holistic and as a place where God could be intimately experienced. Teilhard's spirituality has much to offer here, for he was "madly in love with the divine influence which guides the world."⁴⁵ It transcends the experience of historic consciousness and comes to a sense of appreciation of the world for its own goodness. To change such a framework or *Weltanschauung* and to acquire a new consciousness, Berry insists that the creative power from any new, hologramic vision of human beings is a part of the Earth and of all living and non-living creatures can be found in the awareness of the human being.

All these [living and non-living creatures] are means whereby we articulate our special mode of being and fulfil our role in the universal order of things, all in response to the spontaneities that emerge from our genetic coding; ultimately, of course, they emerge from the larger community of life, from the integral functioning of the planet Earth, from the comprehensive functioning of the planet Earth, from the comprehensive functioning of the universal order of things, and from the numinous source from which all things receive their being, their energy, and their inherent grandeur.⁴⁶

It retrieves the religious insight that all human beings are not only interdependent with each other but also with all created nature through a sense of community. Thus, treading on the path toward trans-historical consciousness is also a religious act, and the concern is truly ecological.

⁴⁵Henri De Lubac, *The Faith of Teilhard de Chardin*, London: Burns and Oates, 1964, 74-75. The nuance of the quote shows that Teilhard actually experienced the world as animated by God and was able to feel divine energy in all material things around him.

⁴⁶Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth*, San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1988, 200.

5. A Critical Evaluation

This article was trying to shed some light on the very notion of ecological reality itself; apart from the crisis situation of ecological reality, it explains the other side of ecological reality, i.e., the praxis aspect of it, which is very often forgotten or ignored. The nuance of such a danger is seen in the message of Pope John Paul II for the World Peace Day, 1991, where the Pope reminds the people that a lack of respect for nature should be added to the arms race, local wars, and injustices as a threat to world peace.

Within the perimeters of this presentation, thus, ecological reality is a matter of critical concern, and this concern has been evaluated in terms of praxis. Even if the crisis situation deteriorates day by day, humanity has an obligation to maintain the balance and health of earth. In exercising this responsibility, the praxes that we take up serve as a paradigm to develop an ecological consciousness centred on "earth-theology." As certain eco-theologians argue, one of the main features of this "earth-theology" will be to cultivate a 'culture of care' for the earth realities. Christiansen presents the urgency in developing such a culture:

The appropriate expression for that human energy, the healing channel for our anxiety in this ecological age is – under the inspiration of the Gospel – to develop a culture of care. Just as the age of domination was followed by the age of possession, so it is time that the civilization of possession give place to a culture of care.⁴⁷

In spite of the growing ecological degradation, the ecological culture should serve as a paradigm for cultivating ecological awareness, and forming One Earth community. From an Asian point of view, this culture of care is not a new ethical system; it has been in the traditional heritage of the Asian blood until it was diluted and/or replaced through a transfusion of an 'imported life-style' from the West, which are characterized by dominion attitude, mechanistic mentality, developmental thrust, etc.

In this connection, a question may arise: 'What about those primitive people who felled down trees, hunted and killed animals and even destroyed certain eco-systems?' Can the ecological consciousness that was predominantly followed in these peoples' lives be generalized? These questions have to be evaluated within the perimeters of ecological ethics and ethical principles that were followed and respected in their life. Their life was closely integrated with the ecological community of which they were all interdependent parts. Their ethic rests upon a single premise, as

⁴⁷Drew Christiansen, "Christian Theology and Ecological Responsibility," *America* 116, May 23, 1992, 451.

Aldo Leopold provides a fundamental ethical criterion for the use of the land/animals/resources of earth by primitive people: A human decision "is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise."⁴⁸ This premise safeguards the primitive peoples' acts of making use of the land and its resources for their "vital needs," which is entirely different from the motivational or generated use of modern peoples' "economic needs" or "consumptive needs."⁴⁹ Within this perspective, the action of the people of historic consciousness (technocrats) can be evaluated. Their intention in destroying the eco-systems of earth can in no way, thus, be justified within the premise that was discussed above.

The basic attitudinal difference in propagating a technological consciousness originates out of the lack of respect for nature: Nature is viewed as a commodity out of which profit is generated. Here, again, the sublime notion of the ecological consciousness is disrupted; nature's sacramental character is ignored. Such a disruptive perception is seen as a threat and danger to the "ecological egalitarianism."⁵⁰ Apart from the mere physical and material value-oriented aspect of earth and eco-systems of the earth, this article reiterates the sacramentality of nature and the divine character that is deeply embedded in every earth-realities.

A third justification to preserve the ecological consciousness as a desired human consciousness within the ambit of this article originates out of a unique Asian religious consciousness. Asian religions, in a way, agree

⁴⁸Aldo Leopold, *A Sand Country Almanac*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1949, reprinted 1987, 203, 244-45. The author here distinguishes the difference in human perception regarding the use and abuse of land or any other earth-resources. He argues that the pre-historical people saw the land, even if they felled down trees, as a community to which they belonged to and learned to use it with love and respect. Instead, the modern humans abused the land by the same act of felling down trees because they see the land and trees as a 'commodity'.

⁴⁹Daniel G. Campos, "Assessing the Value of Nature: A Transactional Approach," *Environmental Ethics* 24 (Spring 2002), 60-63. Here "vital needs" are distinguished from "economic needs" where the former originates out of the necessity to survive, whereas, the latter is to satisfy 'created' needs, such as the needs of a consumer society.

⁵⁰This expression is used by Arne Naess, a deep ecologist, who argues for a sort of 'democracy of the biosphere.' Naess stands for the intrinsic right of all things to "live and to blossom" free from excessive human interference. Arne Naess, "The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement: A Summary," *Inquiry* 16 (Spring 1973), 95-100.

and propagate this value consciousness as an essential feature of religiosity. 'Respect life' and 'promote life' (pro-life) are considered as dictums of Asian religious consciousness. Such a major consensus of the religions of Asia fundamentally contradicts the type of awareness that the historic consciousness (technocratic) supports. In successfully showing the depth and breadth of the tradition concerning creation, and the possibilities of extending it to more contemporary circumstances, these Asian religions play a convincing role within the levels of their conscientization process by focusing and projecting the traditional values of the creation. Importantly, these religions also warn their flock not to be duped with the destructive tendencies that are being disseminated by the technocratic consciousness, and thereby to be disillusioned to become agents of biocide. Now it is high time to recognize the inspirational charisma of these religions, and become aware of the great Asian tradition that humans are related to all the members of the Earth community as their kin, an intricate and ancient family tree that comprises all parts of Earth since its origin. In spite of the growing ecological degradation, the eco-ethical norms and principles can serve as a paradigm for cultivating ecological awareness, and forming One Earth Community – in Thomas Berry's term, a "communion of subjects" with whom humans are to live fittingly.⁵¹

A stress on this kind of qualitative and value-oriented life prompts the Church to make an urgent response to the present ecological crisis. The moral status of nature can and must be seen to dwell at the very heart of Christianity, beneath all particular methodological and traditional approaches. In successfully showing the depth and breadth of the tradition concerning creation, and the possibilities of extending it to more contemporary circumstances, the Asian Church can play a convincing role within the levels of its conscientization process by focusing and projecting the traditional theological boundary of a loving Creator who values the creation, who charges human beings to do the same, and who promises to retain, even if transformed, all that is lovingly valued.

⁵¹Thomas Berry consistently uses this phrase and similar expressions in his works to remind the role of humans in creating unity among the beings in this world by shedding aside the superiority complex of humanity over against nature in a manipulative, polluting way of life. Humanity as "community of subjects," thus, takes precedence over all other exploitative tendencies of humans by which inexpressible amount of agony and pain are being created on this earth. See his work, *Befriending the Earth: A Theology of Reconciliation between Humans and the Earth*, Mystics, Conn.: Twenty-Third Publications, 1991.