

Reflection

GOD IN NATURE

My Experience with *Clean Himalaya*

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1. Introduction

"In the Western tradition, there is an old metaphor called the two books of God that expresses the different ways to access the mystery of God. God has given us the Bible as well as the book of nature to know Him."¹ The Book of Nature is the book that is written by God, whereas the books of the Bible are written by human authors under divine inspiration, according to Catholic theology. It is, however, shocking to note that desecration of the holy scriptures of any religion is responded with thousand protests, but the desecration of the second holy book, the nature goes unnoticed. If anybody helps to clean a holy place, it is considered a noble work and they believe that they will get a reward from God. The pity is that nobody worries about dirtying nature, which also has God's presence in it. No one worries about making our surroundings unclean by throwing waste, plastic and garbage. Very few people understand God's presence in everything, as it was understood in ancient times.

We are very careful to keep our places of worship clean and beautiful, because we want to feel the presence of God there, as beauty is always associated with God. It is said, "*Satyam shivam sundaram*" (Truth is eternal and beautiful). Are we not fools to limit the omnipresence of God within the limits of the four walls of our places of worship? If we are able to find the presence of God in everything, we will naturally keep our environment clean and will beautify it, as a place of worship. But the people who actually clean our surroundings and restore its beauty are often disrespected. Jesus took incarnation to clean humankind of its sins and restores its old beauty, and in a similar way the municipality cleaners, road sweepers and rag pickers are cleaning the environment to restore the lost beauty of the nature. They carry the burden of sins of the present day

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¹Florio, "A Second Naivety in the Contemplation of Nature," *Third Millennium* 13, 4 (October-December 2010), 6-19, 6.

atrocities done to the nature by the human kind in their sacks. Will a day come, when the rag pickers are accepted as the saviours of the nature?

2. The Road Less Travelled

I would like to share my experience with *Clean Himalaya*, a Non-Government Organization (NGO) guided by Ma Amritarupanandaji from the Sivananda Ashram. This NGO works to make people aware of global warming, the ecological system and the duty to protect our environment and surroundings. With this purpose in mind, there is a group of dedicated workers, under the manager ship of Jitendra Kumarji, who go from house to house to collect waste and recycle it so that it is not thrown out to the roads, into the gutters or even into the Ganges. This NGO also has got a group of volunteers who regularly go along the banks of the Ganges, ravines and roads near Rishikesh to collect plastic and other waste materials. Through this work they are making people aware of the need to keep the surroundings clean and tidy.

I am one of those volunteers with *Clean Himalaya* who go every Saturday to clean the streets and gutters, and my team includes the other brothers of Samanvaya community. I joined the group of volunteers out of curiosity, and I was happy when I got a shirt with Clean Himalaya's logo, a badge on which "Volunteer" is written and a pair of red gloves. But my heart sank when Amritarupananda Mataji opened a packet and gave each of us a garbage-collection bag. We went out to the roads and gutters, and after one hour of this tedious work I was really exhausted. Collecting plastics and garbage from the gutters was really disgusting, but yet, the first plastic packet I collected did not go to the sack but into my pocket, since I wanted to keep it as a souvenir!

Often we had to go into extremely filthy places. They were wet, foul-smelling and contained all the possible waste materials that one could imagine. I had to go to the very places I would have otherwise avoided during my walks. People who put these waste materials there want the waste to be very far from them, so very often they throw it from a certain distance to these places. I was supposed to go and collect the waste with my own hands from a place where I was not even willing to walk. As I was collecting garbage, I saw the local people – from whom I used to walk away, as they seldom took bath and had a foul smell – they were covering their noses and walking away from me! I was surprised; I smelled myself and found that I really smelled foul. More than that, the collection bag

with all the waste materials was wet and dirty and had a very bad smell which I had never experienced before.

Thereafter, I chose to collect from the roadsides that were cleaner and had less waste. I was careful to avoid the gutters and the wet places because there would be plenty of garbage. So, I used to change from one side of the road to the other to avoid coming face to face with the heap of waste and wet plastic materials which I was supposed to collect. When I was coming back after the first day as a rag picker, I was thinking, "How can I avoid this volunteer work next Saturday?" I had already decided that I wouldn't come next Saturday for this disgusting work.

3. Breaking the Barrier

The following week we had classes on Luke and Acts by Fr. Babu Chirayath. He was speaking about eco-spirituality and the importance of preserving our environment, since our lives are interdependent. He drew our attention to certain facts and values about the environment. For example, ten thousand Tulsi plants are being planted around the Taj Mahal to protect it from becoming black because of the carbon monoxide and carbon dioxide produced from the vehicles and industries in the area. Even shifting all the industries from its vicinity did not help much, so this solution – the natural curative method for the Taj Mahal – was proposed: to plant the highest oxygen-producing plants around it. This had a huge positive impact on the monument. And I really understood these words, "every creature co-operates with God; shares in the act which God is, participates in divine creativity, and has its own activity."²

When I reflected upon it, I understood that all these plants and trees have lives and that my own life is dependent on them. More than that, if somebody comes to cut a tree it is not able to protect itself, nor does it have a voice to cry for help, and it does not have hands and feet to defend itself or run away. If somebody were to throw some waste on it, it would not be able to clean itself. God created human beings as the crown of his creation and blessed them with the faculty of reason to take care of the environment and to protect and uphold the dignity of the lesser creations. "Human beings are made in such a way that they always find themselves with and in the creation. Proceeding in accordance with the divine thrust which they bear, having received it from God, in whose image and

²Nehring Andreas, *Ecology A Theological Response*, Madras: Gurukul Lutheran Theological College, 1993, 186.

likeness human kind is made.”³ With this inspiration I decided to continue with the cleaning of the streets.

The next Saturday when I went out for cleaning, I chose the best dress I had, and instead of sandals I wore covered shoes. I made it a point to speak in English and that too loud enough to be audible to the passersby, so that the people would not think that I was an ordinary rag picker. I also made it a point that, not to collect the wet and smelling waste materials so that people would not avoid me. I observed myself: I was handsome dressed in my best attire; I did not smell foul because I was collecting only the dry plastic, more than that, I was speaking in English. But to my surprise I had the same experience – people just walked away from me! I was thoroughly disappointed.

Add to it, one of the local women in the shanties – whom I could easily identify from her dress as a daily labourer from another state – asked me to collect the plastic which was piled up behind her temporary house. I was surprised and humiliated. An English-speaking, handsome young man is asked by an ordinary poor woman to clean the backyard of her house. I lost my temper, but I did not say anything; I left the place unclean. Even an English-speaking rag picker is just like any other rag picker; a person cleaning the streets will be seen by others only as a rag picker. He is never considered as a better human being, at least as a social worker who does this unpleasant work of carrying the burden of others sins done to the nature, in his collection bag.

In addition to the humiliating experience, there was a foreign woman working that day as a volunteer and she said, “We are not doing anything good by picking up the garbage by the roads. We are just giving reasons for the people to put more waste on the roads and in the gutters, because they know that we will clean it every week.” She then quit right in the middle of the work. I had every reason to stop the cleaning with that Saturday.

4. Tears of Ganges

That Saturday night and the following day were raining incessantly, after the morning Mass I went to have a look at the Ganges. The people call her Ma Ganga (Mother Ganges) comparing her with the love of a mother. She was in flood – breaching her banks and gushing with destructive power. Some people said that she was very angry and that she was going to destroy all. Indeed, it was the biggest flood for the present generation;

³Boff Leonardo, *Ecology and Liberation*, New York: Orbis Books, 1995, 47.

nothing so furious had been seen in the past fifty years. I was surprised to see her so violent, because from my past few months' experience I had seen her calm, quiet and soothing, creating in me also a feeling of calmness and peace. But today her sight brings shivers in my body and I just want to be away from her.

As I came back to my seminary, I was in a dilemma. The Ganges which had been so calm and used to give me so much joy now created restlessness and fear in me. I pondered the reasons behind her fury. I came to the conclusion that God has created the earth just like a sponge. As the rainwater falls on the surface of the earth, the earth absorbs that water and releases it slowly and continuously to the adjoining rivers. This system provides enough ground water as well as keeps the amount of water same in the rivers throughout the year. More than that, it prevents immediate flooding after heavy rain.

But all the roads and houses we have constructed, and the plastic that we throw to our surroundings act like a polythene layer over the surface of the earth, preventing the rainwater from being absorbed. As a result, whenever there is an extreme amount of rainfall, the water gushes through the gutters to the Ganges, suffocating her with garbage and run-off. Mother Ganges is not angry, but she is struggling to save her children as she bears the burden of her children's mistakes. Adding to her agony, human beings have encroached the surrounding mountains. They have eradicated the vegetation, cut down the trees and caused havoc in the environment by creating the conditions for landslides. When the heavy rain comes, so much surface soil is washed into the Ganges, and she is being suffocated by this soil. I must do something to reduce her pain. Since I knew "the ecclesial community must feel part of the human community, and the human community has to feel it is part of the cosmic community."⁴ I decided to be more active in my cleaning.

5. Manifestation of God

On the following Saturday I was very happy to go with the *Clean Himalaya* volunteers, because I knew that I was helping the Ganges whom I loved so much. That day, for the first time, I thought about the *Clean Himalaya* programme from another perspective. Till that time I had been looking at it from my own point of view and the profits I would receive from it. But from that day onwards I was looking at things from the Ganges' point of view. This perspective made me happy, and I spoke

⁴Boff, *Ecology and Liberation*, 48

about it with my fellow volunteers. To my surprise for the first time I noticed that Amritarupananda Mataji was very happy doing this disgusting work. She had the smiling face of a mother carrying her child as she was carrying the waste. I could see that I too was growing more altruistic, and this personal growth made me happier. Now I know that if anybody wants to be happy, one should not be selfish, but should find real happiness in serving. We often limit our understanding of service to helping our fellow human beings. But that day I understood the broader meaning of brotherhood and sisterhood as St. Francis of Assisi lived: "St. Francis used the loving terms brother and sister to address the moon, fire and water and even weeds, as we all have God as our father."⁵ Service is not a term to be limited to helping just human beings but it also includes the service to the nature. Being a sanniyasin for more than 30 years must have helped the Mataji to understand the wider meaning of service. I have uncovered the secret of her smile even when she carries the waste.

That week we had classes on Christology by Fr. Kuriakkose Mananthil, in which he explained the love of God as being the reason for his manifestation. God so loved the world that he sent his only Son for our salvation. He was also speaking about recapitulation (the evolving back of everything to Godhead). From that class I understood not only humankind but the whole of creation is growing back to God. I was convinced that by making the salvation of human beings possible, the establishment of the Kingdom of God is not fully made possible on this earth. We need to consider the salvation of this whole world because they too are my sisters and brothers, whose care and salvation is also my responsibility. With these thoughts, I continued the *Clean Himalaya* sanitation work. I felt so happy, and I never felt the need to speak in English in order to be recognized as someone other than an ordinary rag picker. I intentionally chose the dirtiest places by the side of the road, and I was very particular to collect even the smallest piece of waste. The work was tiresome and smelling, but I felt joy in doing it.

6. Consistent in Commotion

The following week we had classes on Grace by Fr. Davis Varayilan, where he spoke about the Christian understanding of Communitarian salvation; we do not have an individual salvation but our salvation is communitarian, which means salvation of the universe. My global family includes not only human beings but also birds, animals, trees and

⁵Boff, *Ecology and Liberation*, 52.

everything that I see around me. We need to consider the world as one family. As a human being – the crown of God's creation – I have a duty to lead and guide the entire creation back to God. I was convinced that when I remove the waste from the places, I am helping that place to restore its beauty back. This beautification will bring everything closer to God because beauty is always associated with God. This process will lead to the establishment of the Kingdom of God.

That Saturday the volunteers for *Clean Himalaya* were led by Mataji to a new place where we had not yet gone. I was shocked to see the piles of plastic and heaps of waste there. I was disappointed, and I knew even if I cleaned for an entire week, that place was not going to be fully cleaned; there was so much of waste. I didn't know what to do, and I was totally confused. Because I thought if I want to be saved it is possible only if all of God's creations are restored back to their original beauty. As our salvation is communitarian, as long as there is a single part of creation which is not fully ready to welcome the second coming of Jesus, there will not be the establishment of the Kingdom of God on this earth. I found no solution to this.

Then on Sunday, Fr. Davis gave us a reflection. We should not be so selfish and so particular that this work must be completed in and through me in my lifetime. Who knows the plan of God? Everything on this earth has a particular reason, which we may not be able to grasp. God has got a particular plan which will be fulfilled in due time. It is not for me to say that this work should be completed by me alone. I also reflected that I need not feel so bad thinking that I am the only one facing an insurmountable work. For as I do my work, even apparently alone, I am supported by the power of God that brings all His creations back to Himself. Not only that, I am supported by all others who have the same aptitude and join the same cause anywhere else in the world as they are also supported by the same power of God. These reflections gave me the much needed peace of mind.

7. Conclusion

The ordering of the universe in chapter one of *Genesis* reflects the construction of a temple. The firmament is made like a dome or a vault with luminary bodies. Constructing of this cosmic temple is completed by creating human beings in the image and likeness of God and placing them at the centre, to be the stewards of the entire creation. Moreover, God blessed the human beings with reason to lead the entire creation back to God. Forgetting these responsibilities, human beings destroy the natural

order, and limit God's presence within the walls of their places of worship – leaving their surroundings unclean which is the cosmic temple of God created by God and given to the stewardship of human beings. They have the responsibility to protect it, at least not to destroy it; if it is destroyed to restore back its old beauty. As Jesus came to restore the broken relationship of human beings with God, the need of the hour is saviours who restore back the broken relationship of human beings with nature.

The concept of finding the presence of God in everything is in tune with the Indian ethos and cultural heritage. Thousands of years back the ancient *Rishies* of India taught the people to find the presence of God in everything around them. The opening verse of *Isavasya Upanisad*, “*isa vasyam idam sarvam*” is one of those teachings. Similar vision is practised when one is taught to greet the other with *Namaste*. The word *Namaste* means “I see God in you”. That is the reason when one greets a person with *Namaste* he /she holds the hands and just bows the head. The typical bowing and holding of the hands are done by an Indian only in front of God, or to say, Indians understand the other as God. Going a step further the ancient sears also found the presence of God in all the creation of God. When one person bows before a tree or a river, we need to understand that, the person has grown up to a stage, to find the omnipresence of God in everything around him or her. Let us wish and pray that all may understand the presence of God in everything around us, especially in the nature. Let us respect the presence of God in the nature rather than limiting His presence to the places of worship.