

EDITORIAL

In recent years ecology has become a very hot and passionate theme of discussion, study and research, not only among academicians, but also among economists, politicians, statesmen, religious leaders and the like, and also in institutions like educational establishments, religious bodies, people's action groups, etc. The study of ecology has got diversified into different branches of learning, like eco-feminism, ecologism, ecosophy/eco-philosophy, eco-theology, eco-spirituality, eco-ethics and so on. We also often hear and read people talking and writing about eco-centrism, eco-dynamics, deep ecology, eco-mind, eco-literature, eco-watch, eco-friendliness, etc. There is a flood of literature, both scientific-scholarly and popular-fashionable, in our times on these themes. Most of these works on ecology express deep and genuine concern and alarm about the irreparable damages that are being meted out to the environment and warn that if things do not change for the better, that if man does not take care of this planet now, one day life on it will be miserable and eventually even impossible.

The concern and interest for ecology is and had always been a basic element and keynote of all religions, whether they are the so-called world religions, or traditional religions, or subaltern religions. Religion deals with or should deal with the total embodied existence of humans on this earth, with all its exigencies, enigmas and problems. Religion has the sacred duty and responsibility, and also the privilege, to try to ameliorate the physical, psychic and spiritual wellbeing of humans. Unfortunately sometimes it happens that some religious traditions concentrate only on the spiritual dimension of the followers and preach and teach the ways and means for their eschatological good and happiness in the other world. This material world where one lives and moves, and which is the locus where one has to work out the ultimate liberation or salvation, is often regarded as of lesser value and worth and deserved only second rate attention. In fact, a deep concern for ecology is one of the leitmotifs of all religions. Look into the sacred scriptures of these religions, into the teachings of the their founders and early prophets, sages and gurus: they all unequivocally admonish people to love and respect the environment and maintain a

friendly and caring relation with nature. We should remember that the scriptures of all the major world religions were composed and preached in a distant past, and were immediately addressed to peoples who were inextricably bound to the earth for their sustenance and survival, and whose social, cultural and religious customs and practices, feasts and celebrations were inseparably linked with and deeply rooted in nature. The earth, with its mountains, rivers, trees, animals, birds, flowers and fields provided them the stage and settings where they could with ease and poise celebrate the life. It is only natural that the religious scriptures exhorted the faithful to be gentle and kind, sweet and civilized to the mother earth, which is the source of all life, the matrix of growth and the promoter of prosperity.

Religion has also the sacred duty to exhort its followers to try to seek and find God in and through nature and things of nature. It has to say to us that the way to God is not only prayer and meditation, rituals and sacraments, scriptures and beliefs, but also this cosmos in which we live, move and have our bodily existence. God reveals himself in cosmos and in the created things in manifold manner. 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. This dimension of religiosity is experienced, expressed and lived in all religions in diverse ways and in varying degrees. They do this by using different symbols and models, allegories and scriptural testimonies.

All religions of the world confess God's presence in this cosmos, and no religion preaches use of violence against nature. God is present in cosmos, some said, through his power and knowledge, through his grace and goodness. 'God pervades every entity in nature', says the Upanisad: *isavasyam idam sarvam*. The pantheists would say God is everything and everything is God. Some said that cosmos is the ontological extension of God. It is his body, etc. Therefore, acknowledging God in and through nature is a matter of fact and also a concern of every religion.

All religions attribute, in varying intensity, sacredness to water, fire, air, mountains, rivers, trees, etc. and use them symbolically in their

religious worship and are mentioned in their sacred scriptures as objects dear to God and sacred to the faithful. We may call these elements and elemental objects as cosmic symbols used in religious and cultic contexts. Some religions even attributed certain degree of divine character to elements, matter and nature. And therefore they were afraid to do unreasonable savagery, explorations and experiments on elements. They set a limit to their interactions with elements. Beyond this limit lies the *mysterium dei*, which is sacred and nobody should step into this sacred domain. This limit is now not respected and the consequence is the ecological disaster.

If some sort of presence of God in the universe is acknowledged, if the universe is a positive entity and if the earth is common property of all, then our dealing with the universe and the things of this universe has to be ethically and morally correct and our relation to the created things should be conducive to help us discover God's goodness and generosity in the universe and thus make our own spiritual life richer and more productive. We are handling with not an anonymous and nameless property. We did not create the earth. It has been handed over to us by our ancestors for use, for sustaining our life and for completing our life span in her bounteous lap in peace and happiness. While using it for our survival and happy living, we have the grave moral responsibility of dealing with it with love, respect and care, and transmitting it to the future generations intact and undamaged, if not enhanced and improved, for their use, for their survival and happiness. Failure to do this is a sacrilegious transgression. Nobody can do what he/she wills with the nature.

It should also be noted here, as Fr. Thomas Berry says, that much before God revealed himself to humanity through scriptures, or, long before he inspired human agents to communicate his messages and instructions to his devotees in written texts sacred to respective religious traditions, God personally wrote his own scriptures, namely, the nature, and he keeps this sacred book always wide open so that the humans may read it and imbibe inspirations and insights from it for their own happy existence on earth and for the happiness of all beings. Our ancestors were

better disposed and eminently inclined to respect and safeguard this sacred book of almighty God.

Believers in God and religion deem that the earth came into existence not by accident. It is not a product of chance. Hinduism and some other oriental religions may believe that the matter is eternal as God himself is eternal. Other world religions believe that there is a conscious creator for the earth and earthly goods, whom they may call God, Allah and the like. Creation has also finality. Firstly, creation proclaims the glory, power and love of God. Secondly, it is in this created world that human beings have to work out their salvation. Matter, body, nature, etc. are instruments for our sanctification. It is true that a spiritual seeker has to transcend these things to reach the divine. But the locus where the pilgrimage of the seeker to his ultimate eschatological good takes place is this earth, and created world helps him/her in his/her passage to perfection. And therefore human beings as spiritual aspirants (*sadhaka*) should encounter created world with gratitude and love. These are all the concerns of this small volume.

All world religions regard human beings as inseparable part of nature, and at the same time consider them as superior to the other created existences. Even the eastern religions like Hinduism, which regard humans as equals to other beings of the world and as constituent components of the cosmos in the same way as other entities are, because all corporeal beings house in them the immortal, unchangeable and infinite self in the same way, grant some superiority to human beings. This is because they believe that normally the self can break the chain of births, deaths and rebirths and thus attain total liberation only in its existence as a human person. This superiority of human person entails responsibility also; responsibility for the earth and things of the earth. By safeguarding and respecting the earth and earthly things man is taking care of the property of God and the common heritage of humankind. In the execution of this duty, as has already been mentioned earlier, man is ameliorating his own spiritual dimension. The substance of this small book wants to tell the readers about these matters.

Editorial

Journal of Dharma celebrated the twenty-fifth year, the silver jubilee, of its service to humanity in 2000. As part of the celebrations we brought out four books on relevant and meaningful themes. One book was on ecology. Some of the articles of this issue are taken from this book. We thought that these essays should be made available to a wider public through the Journal. This editorial is also part of the Preface I wrote for the above-mentioned book. (For more articles on Ecology from the perspectives of other world religions and religious traditions, please see the book published by Journal of Dharma: **Augustine Thottakara, (ed.), *Eco-dynamics of Religion: Thoughts for the Third Millennium, Bangalore: Journal of Dharma and Dharmaram Publications, 2000***). We hope and pray that the readers would find the articles useful and inspiring.

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