

Ecology: Some Theological Challenges

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Ecological crisis is a spiritual crisis. The relation between human and nature is based on a vision of God who created heaven and Earth as an interdependent organism of unity. Any disruption in this fragile unity mostly by human irresponsibility and avarice is a grievous problem and plunges our life into great peril. The purpose of this article is not to analyse the Earth crisis and to suggest a remedy, but to look afresh some of the challenges it brings to our understanding and practise of Christian faith, including raising some critical observations about some aspects of church's tradition. We are committed to a vision of human wholeness, which includes not only our relationship with one another as humans, but also our relationship vis-à-vis nature and universe.

Our thinking on theology is totally anthropocentric. The world of non-humans rarely comes to our consciousness. Salvation is understood as a process by which humans and humans alone are rescued from the material world. The pious Christians believe that the created world will face the dooms day and it is pointless to try to alter the destiny. These movements are challenging us to commit ourselves to a radical restructuring of the given patterns of relationship and moral presuppositions that govern society. For many it means changing our tradition-bound attitudes and value system.

Ecology and the debates on it are not merely about growing more trees, caring for the gardens or even of growing organic food, although they are all necessary. Thanks to the environmental NGOs, UN related agencies and other social activists there is a greater awareness about ecological issue. Even the governments and planners are forced to address this concern in their policy decisions. At least they have adopted the rhetoric on ecology in their open statements, but when they have to make a choice between the so-called "development" and ecological preservation they opt for the former. This is abundantly clear in the attitude of political leaders and technocrats involved in the Narmada valley issue.

Ecological crisis raises some fundamental questions to our value system and life style especially to the modernist totalizing ideology of progress. An alternate life style based on a prudent use of natural resources and a redirection of our social and economic structures are urgently required, if we were to respond to this crisis. The discussion, especially from the third world, focuses its attention on justice concerns.

It is a well-known fact that the resources are distributed unevenly. The

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industrialised nations consume disproportionately high share of resources and contribute by their life style to the destruction of the ecological equilibrium in the South. Many low-lying areas of Bangladesh are being subsumed under water not by the 'fault' of the people in Bangladesh, but by the impact of the economic activities of the people in the Northern hemisphere, in particular the burning of fossil fuels for space heating, transportation industry and electricity production; they cause global warming and the resultant rising of sea level. The same imbalance in the consumption pattern is found within each nation. A discussion on ecology has to address the justice issue.

A couple of years ago I joined with a North American professor to teach environmental ethics at San Francisco Theological Seminary. The global warming was the focus of the course. In the discussions, I found myself raising at every point the justice perspective. This I feel is the role of third world scholars. But the justice concerns should be discussed in relation to other issues that are considered for constructing a discourse on environmental ethics.

This article will discuss the following issues that reappear in our debates on ecology:

1. The relation between ecology and technology;
2. The Bible and Ecology: especially the problem of the anthropocentric orientation of the Bible;
3. Some theological themes that tend to be anti-ecological.

These are by no means new issues; but new questions and concerns have been raised in recent discussions. The new insights we gain from them are helpful in giving a firm foundation to our commitment to the life of the Earth. It is our hope that the discussions on these issues will help us to draw some implications for our theology and spirituality.

Ecology and Technology

Larry Rasmussen, in his admirable volume *Earth Community, Earth Ethics* draws our attention to three revolutions that have drastically changed human–nature relationship. They are Agricultural, especially the intensive form of cultivation for large-scale production, and Industrial and Informational. The crucial factor in all these revolutions is the technology used. The nature of technology has an impact on the character of the work humans do. The pressure on environment also varies according to the kind of technology that is used. Perhaps the industrial revolution brought about a situation where Earth's resources are exploited and manipulated to such an extent that the life of the Earth itself is in great peril. "To Earth, industrialization looks more and more like a succession of more complex and environmentally disruptive and damaging ways to meet the needs and wants of one particular, inordinately aggressive species."² The industrial culture is based on particular mind-set

² Rasmussen, Larry, *Earth Community, Earth Ethics* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1996), 60.

or an assumption that aggressive domination over nature is the absolute right of the human species and Earth has limitless resources for human use. Science and technology are tools for further exploitation. We need not repeat the discussions on the ecological damage, in most cases irreparable, of the industrial revolution. But we note that industrial era paradigm for development consists of the following elements: “expectation of unlimited material progress and ever growing consumption; faith in science and technology to solve all problems; goals of efficiency, growth, and productivity; mastery of nature; and competition and individualism.”³

This paradigm has led to ‘environmental degradation, resource depletion, loss of meaningful work roles, inequitable distribution, and ineffective control of technology’.

Further it paved the way for the ‘rule of corporations’ over the world creating not only a global economic order but also a culture. “The emphasis is to overrule all local interests and local culture, to give way to the larger global good that free market exchange creates” Korten gives a summary of “the ideal world of global dreamers.”

The world’s money, technology, and markets are controlled and managed by gigantic global corporations; a common consumer culture unifies all people in a shred quest for material gratification; there is perfect global competition among workers and localities to offer their services to investors at the most advantageous terms; (One may be reminded of the competition for outsourcing among third world countries) Corporations are free to act solely on the basis of profitability without regard to national or local consequences; Relations, both individual and corporate, are defined entirely by the market; and, there are no loyalties to place and community.⁴

For our purpose it is to be reiterated that technology is the tool for creating a new culture. The question is how to change this paradigm. What kind of growth? And whose growth? What is the role of technology? These are relevant questions. They have to be raised even now when, as we will presently see, the nature of technology has changed.

Information Technology and Cyber Culture

Our attention is often drawn to the fact that we are now in the informational age. The cyber culture has opened new possibilities for humans to continue their production process without serious damage to the Earth. Again technology has won; we will go on with our life style and expand our growth-oriented activity.

No doubt, achievements brought about by the new technology are remarkable. The cyber culture has ushered in a new world. Peter Drucker, a

³ Barbour, Ian, *Ethics in an Age of Technology* (London: SCM Press, 1992), 258.

⁴ Korten, David, *When Corporations Rule the World* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 1996), 122.

sociologist, suggests that this technology is bringing about a massive social transformation. He writes, “It is the first society in which ordinary people – and that means most people- do not earn their daily bread by the sweat of their brow. It is the first society in which ‘honest work’ does not mean a callused hand. It is also the first society in which not everybody does the same work, as was the case when huge majority were farmers or, as seemed likely only forty or thirty years ago, were going to machine operators. This is far more than a social change. It is a change in the human condition.”⁵

Its culture creates borderless networks and for this reason loyalty to localities and community is not a virtue to be jealously safeguarded. A global culture that cuts across all barriers is in the making and we still do not see the full impact of it. As someone said a civilizational change is envisaged. Already we see signs of this new culture and the attitudes in our urban areas where IT industry is flourishing. Many ethical questions can be raised to the situation created by this new culture. We cannot go into them here. Our purpose is to ask how it impacts the life of the Earth.

The claim is that the new technology is less polluting and more desirable than the heavy machines of the industrial era. Rasmussen analyses this question: “Information societies try to break loose from Earth and its distress. ‘Information’ here is largely disembodied content, the ‘codes’ of things abstracted from all that makes the codes living flesh...Information as coded, recoded, transcoded reality carries a certain contempt for being Earthbound at all. It prefers avoiding the messy world of finite, limited, placed, dependent bodies.”⁶

He adds, “the Earthbound is denigrated, the abstract and precisely mathematical is elevated”. The logic of unlimited growth and control of the nature remains the same. Enormous power is now concentrated in humans who have the access to the new technology and there is no guarantee that they will use it for the well-being of the Earth. In fact the corporations to increase their profit by managing money and market are using the new technology. In split seconds investments can be withdrawn as it happened in the some of the South East Asian countries a few years ago.

Rasmussen closes his analysis of the information technology with raising some questions. “What kind of knowing that we need? Is it ‘information’ via the information superhighway or other routes? Are we dying for want of information? Is Earth’s distress traceable to facts we need that are not yet known?” He says: “It is not so much information of the kind the information revolution manipulates as it is the choices that ethics poses; what understanding do we lack in order to live with Earth and one another, on terms enhancing for life in its many guises?...What norms and values do we measure information

⁵ Quoted in Rasmussen, 70.

⁶ Rasmussen, 71.

itself by, as a moral guidance system for kind of society?”⁷

Earlier Ian Barbour has developed some typologies on our attitude towards technology. One, the optimists' view. It is characterized by the argument, “better technology is the solution”. There is always a technological solution for our ills. “The IT culture has heightened this sense of optimism. But the optimists overlook the fact that “the solution to one problem often creates new problems”.

The other typology is expressed in the phrase “Technology itself is the culprit.” The “pessimists say that technology is inherently destructive of both environmental and human values”.

But a third typology holds the view that “technology is neither inherently good nor inherently but an ambiguous instrument of power whose consequences depend on its social context”.⁸

Barbour argues for a redirection of technology. The discussion arose in the context of the Industrial culture, but with modification it can apply to the new technology. In other words, how can the new technology, the borderless and powerful as it is, can be accountable to ethical guidelines, especially as they relate to the ecology? Here ethical is used in a foundational sense.⁹ It is the responsibility to the “Other.” In this case the “Other” is the Earth. This is an area where political action and community participation in development becomes crucial. In fact technology is power; who controls technology becomes a crucial question.

The new technology has not obliterated our ethical concern. Rather, a heightened awareness of the questions, who controls it and for what purpose, has become urgent. The other question that looms large is what kind of development is envisaged? The concept of sustainability is suggested as the goal. I have dealt with this concern in one of the pervious articles. The important point raised in the current discussions is that sustainability should not be reduced to a mere strategy of development but it should incorporate a vision of alternate consciousness and lifestyle. It presupposes a renewed relationship between humans and between human and nature. A participatory society that assumes responsibility for one another and for Earth alone is sustainable.¹⁰

The Earth and the Bible

It is widely acknowledged that the Bible is the source and authority for our theological and ethical reflections. But there is no unanimity as to the use of the Bible. This issue has now sharpened when we look at it from the perspective of

⁷ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁸ Barbour, 14.

⁹ Levinas, E., trans., Lingis, Alphonso, *Totality and Infinity* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969)

¹⁰ Santana, Julio, ed., *Sustainability and Globalization* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1995), 14.

ecology. Earlier there has been a discussion on the thesis of Lynn White who maintained that the roots of environmental crisis could be traced to Christianity, especially the Biblical command to human to have dominion over Earth and all creatures in it. Our attention is now turned to the problematic use of the Bible and a possible reading of the Bible from the perspective of Earth. I find the book, *Readings From The Perspective Of Earth*, edited by Norman Habel,¹¹ a significant publication. It has brought together mostly Australian scholars to reflect on the question of Biblical hermeneutics from Earth perspective. This landmark publication should deserve attention of all who are committed to develop ecological ethics from a Christian perspective.

It begins by acknowledging the anthropocentric orientation of the Bible and the problem it poses for an interpretation from the ecological perspective. “We may legitimately suspect the Biblical texts, written by human beings, reflect the primary interests of human beings—their welfare, their human relationship to God and their personal salvation. In short we may suspect that Biblical texts are anthropocentric. As these texts were also written by men, we can expect them to be androcentric, and probably patriarchal.”¹² For this reason a reading of the Bible from the perspective of Earth becomes an arduous task. It is further complicated by the fact that even our interpretation of passages that do not have an explicit anthropocentric orientation is influenced by the Western dualistic perceptions of reality. Contrasting pairs characterize the dualistic thinking: Human/nature; male/female; heavenly/earthly; reason/matter and so on. These pairing have been understood to have a hierarchical relationship. Human is superior to nature and male superior to female. To see them as complimentary we need a change in our perspectives. For this reason it is argued that we need to retrieve the Biblical texts from this distorted reading. For example, the phrase ‘heaven and earth’ can be read through the western dualistic terms as one opposing the other. But if it is rendered ‘sky and land’ they are understood as complimentary.

A new way of reading the text is advocated—reading with Earth. This methodology is influenced by the liberationist and feminist reading of the Bible. “Liberationist stand with the oppressed poor as they read; feminists stand with oppressed women as they read; we stand with the oppressed Earth in our dialogue with the text. We are concerned with eco-justice: justice for Earth. Our approach therefore can be called eco-justice hermeneutic.”¹³ It is reading Earth as a subject rather than an object in the text.

The important contribution of the book is in its suggestion of six eco-justice principles that guide us in our interpretation of the Bible. They are,

¹¹ Habel, Norman, ed., *Readings from the Perspective of Earth* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000)

¹² *Ibid.*, p.39.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.34.

1. The principle of intrinsic worth: The universe, Earth and all its components have intrinsic worth/value.

2. The principle of Interconnectedness: Earth is a community of interconnected living things that are mutually dependent on each other for life and survival.

3. The Principle of Voice: Earth is a subject capable of raising its voice in celebration and against injustice.

4. The principle of Purpose: The universe, Earth and all its components, are part of a dynamic cosmic design within which each piece has a place in the overall goal of that design.

5. The principle of Mutual Custodianship: Earth is a balanced and diverse domain where responsible custodians can function as partners with, rather than rulers over, Earth to sustain its balanced and a diverse Earth community.

6. The Principle of Resistance: Earth and its components not only differ from injustices at the hands of humans, but actively resist them in the struggle for justice.¹⁴

These principles give us a direction in the new reading of the Bible. The method adopted is similar to that has been followed in the re-reading of the Bible from the perspectives of women, *dalits* and other marginal groups. Here the Earth and its interest will provide the interpretive focus. The reader-response approach, which claims “that meaning is a property of the act of reading and is located predominantly in the reader,”¹⁵ plays a key role. ‘Readers engage in meaning production by reflecting upon the text with her/his plural identities, eco-social locations, commitments and subject positions, directed also by the conventions of the time.’

The book gives examples of the study of several passages making use of the guidelines given by the eco-justice principles. Interpretation on one of the key texts, Gen. 1.26-28 is a case in point. Normally it is interpreted as the basis for stewardship—humans as stewards ruling on behalf of God. The image of stewardship comes from the feudal background. God as an absentee landlord put humans in charge of his property. In our interpretation we tend to assume God as ruler, again a feudal legacy, humans as rulers of the Earth. But the principle of custodianship changes the mode of relationship. ‘Custodianship is a mutual partnership. Earth and Earth community have, in spite of the assumed rulership of humanity, been the custodians of human beings. Earth has provided food, shelter, beauty and many other riches to sustain the body and the spirit of humanity. In return humans have assumed these riches as their right rather than the contribution of their partners in the Earth community’.¹⁶ The important challenge is to read the Bible with the eyes of the subjugated

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.26

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.60.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.51.

Earth. The meaning of the text is enriched by this perception of eco-justice. Certainly, this requires a new commitment to the Earth and her future. From that commitment we should be prepared to look critically at the text and the Biblical interpretation that is accepted as 'normative'. What we consider normative is often a culture-bound reading. For this reason the Earth Bible project asks us to make certain commitments before we begin to interpret the text. These commitments are expressed thus:

1. to "acknowledge, before reading the Biblical text, that as Western interpreters we are heirs to a long anthropocentric, patriarchal and androcentric approach to reading the text that has devalued Earth and that continues to influence the way we read the text
2. to recognize Earth as a subject in the text with which we seek to relate empathetically rather than as a topic to be analysed rationally;
3. to take up the cause of justice for Earth to ascertain whether the Earth and the Earth community are oppressed, silenced or liberated in the Biblical text;
4. to develop techniques of reading the text to discern and retrieve alternative traditions where the voice of the Earth community has been suppressed."

In the above commitments the use of 'Earth community' is important for our perspective, for we are assuming that it is not only the biotic community but also the poor and marginalized who live in solidarity with the Earth. The cry of the poor and the cry of the Earth are inseparable.

Some Theological Hesitations

In the development of theology and church one may identify an anti-ecological stance to them.

Boff has identified following anti-ecological accents in Christian theology and in Church life:

1. Patriarchy. Male values are preferred in the Church. Women and Earth are ignored as if the experience of them has no consequence whatsoever for theological reflection. Theological reflection almost exclusively is based on male experience where Earth is subjugated by human greed.
2. Anthropocentrism in the interpretation of Biblical texts and the development of theology. This point has already been dealt with in our last section. Certainly there is a problem in the interpretation but we need to ask whether the Earth gets precedence in our reading of the Bible.
3. Tribal theology of election. It is believed that Jews are the chosen few to work out God's salvation in history. 'Nothing is more hostile to ecology than this fissure of solidarity'. They stand apart from other nations and the Earth in working out the salvation for the world.
4. The fall of nature. The reformation emphasis on the fall that affects human

life and nature has dominated our (Protestant) theological construction. Whole universe seems to have lost its sacred character; it is no longer the temple of spirit. The evangelical emphasis presupposed the depravity of human nature. Certainly the grandeur and wretchedness exist together; this paradox of human nature is in delicate balance.

5. Monotheism. While mono-theism was accepted as important in the context of Christianity's struggle against idol worship, its exclusive emphasis has generated a preference for 'mono' in the Church and in society. Political authoritarianism and monarchical form of governments are justified by the preference for 'mono'. One God, one church and one pope – all these are rooted in the mono-culture. Globalisation has created mono-cultures that exclude all diversity and forges a monolithic system of thought and social structure and finally,

6. The teaching on original sin. An interpretation of a fundamental experience of human beings as evil is inherent in them. They are prone to destroy the other. There is a modicum of truth in this observation but to see this as the sign of human depravity and as the natural state of human is to ignore the creativity bestowed in humans by God. Rather 'fallen' is to be seen as a condition of all things within and evolutionary process.

Boff concludes: "a certain theological tradition dominant in some ecclesiastical circles encouraged suspicion of physicality, disdain for the world, rejection of all forms of pleasure, and contempt for sexuality and femininity. It favoured the idea of a God detached from the world, thus promoting the formation of a world separate from God. All such tendencies assist in the abandonment of the world to human aggressivity."¹⁷

Nevertheless, Boff and other theologians do not agree with Toynbee or Lynn White in their negative judgement about Christianity nor pantheism as the solution for the present predicament. They are fully aware that there is at least a minority view in Christian tradition, a positive attitude to the Earth-bound realities. They further argue that these positive insights should form the 'core of an ecologically sensitive theology. Going beyond anthropocentrism, we need to start with creation and see humans as part of it.

Boff observes, "But certain positive elements act as a counterbalance to these negative trends: the affirmation of matter by virtue of the mystery of the incarnation; the sacraments, especially the sacrament of the eucharist; the resurrection as a transfiguration of the world, of matter, and of the human body; the discovery of the sacramental nature of the cosmos, receiving the very blessing of God; the mystery of creation, which makes all living creatures brothers and sisters; and the mysticism of brotherhood and sisterhood of St. Francis, St. Clare, and their followers."

And again, "we should see creation as an expression of God's joy, as dance

¹⁷ Boff, Leonardo, *Ecology & Liberation: A New Paradigm* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995), 46.

of God's love, as the mirror of both God and all created things".

This is the new paradigm of theology that helps us construct a new paradigm for ecumenism. As mentioned, it is different from 'wider ecumenism'. Boff's suggestion is to reconceive God as an 'ecological God'. He takes Trinity as the Christian understanding of God and not necessarily monotheism. Trinity presupposes community. Trinity becomes the paradigm for society. Boff writes,

"The universe is a reproduction of this diversity and of this union. The world, indeed, is complex, diverse, one, united, interrelated, because it is a reflection of the Trinity. God invades every being, enters into every relationship, erupts into every ecosystem".¹⁸

The Trinitarian understanding has helped Boff to formulate a new way of articulating God reality. He would differ from Toynbee that Christian concept of God, a monotheist God, should be replaced by pantheism, seeing God in everything. Boff has made a beautiful suggestion that Christian concept is panentheism and not pantheism. Whereas pantheism maintains that everything is God, panentheism starts from 'the distinction between God and creature, yet always maintains the relation between them. He writes, "The one is not the other. Each of them has his/her/its own relative autonomy yet is always related. Not everything is God, but God is in everything, as we might deduce from the etymology of the word pantheism. God flows through all things; God is present in everything and makes of all reality a temple. And then, vice versa, everything is in God. We are only through God, we move only through God because we are always in God, for indeed: "It is in him that we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28)¹⁹

This Trinitarian understanding of God interpreted ecologically is the basis of a new paradigm for ecumenism.

A new understanding of the God experience is, for Boff, crucial for an altered ecological consciousness. In a recent article he says about two distinct but interrelated ways of experiencing God. The first he describes as the 'Personal Path of Communion with God, Who is all'; this is the way of the West. God is perceived as the absolute "Thou", a fundamental alterity, an insurmountable opposite. The basic characteristic of this path is love. But this tradition, points out Boff, entails a risk: the feeling of exclusivity; the attitude that others do not have the truth, an attitude that is at the root of crusades and religious warfare. The other path, which is Eastern, is the 'Path of Communion with the All, which is God'. "Everything meets in the One, diverse and dynamic. This final unity is the result of a process of identification with that which is different, of action that creates identity with what is different." "God" is the word that translates the experience of the unified all. In this way of experiencing God also there is risk.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.48

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.51.

“The mystical experience runs the risk of being transformed in to mysticism, which at times becomes mixed with the business interest of gurus or supposed spiritual masters who accumulate influence and wealth.” Boff argues that these ways are not opposed to each other; they are complimentary. He says, “there is an urgent need to connect or reconnect all things by means of a powerful Centre.This Centre makes us suffer when it breaks apart, which we perceive as an unjust attack against the Earth, its ecosystems, its flora and fauna, and particularly against its poor and oppressed, both men and women.” Again he observes, “the first path, that of the West, is more that of the prophets, men and women of the word and of dialogue. The second that of the East, is that of the mystics, men and women of reverent silence and visions of totality. We need both these paths.”

Boff closes his article with these words and they could be a fitting conclusion to this article: “As always, though particularly at the present time, spirituality demands a prophetic commitment, born not of simple indignation, but of a mystic experience of unity with the Divine and with all things. Such commitment will be indispensable in inaugurating or at least reinforcing a new civilizing paradigm that is more spiritual, compassionate, tender, and fraternal. This spirituality will help to guarantee a promising future for planet Earth and for all tribes that inhabit it.”²⁰

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²⁰ in Aravind, Sharma, ed. *Religion in a Secular City* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2001), 147.