

Religion and the Ecological Problem: From Dominionism to Protectionism

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Abstract

This paper examines the contemporary environmental conundrum which poses a serious threat to human existence. The paper identifies modern industrial and technological advancement, socio-economic inequalities and the Christian concept of dominionism as key factors responsible for the present ecological problem. It argues that the present ecological problem requires urgent response, if sustainability of our planet and human existence must be guaranteed. Scholars who have sought to address it approached the matter from various dimensions. However, a careful analysis of the literature in this respect shows that majority of scholars limit their arguments on religion and the ecological problem to the Christian concept of dominionism. As a philosophical research, the paper extends the scope of this debate to include the concept of protectionism in which religious people have a duty to protect nature. After a careful analysis of the phenomenon, the paper recommends an eco-religious ethic of adoration, reverence, empathy, responsible population control and protection of nature as a possible exit to the prevalent ecological crisis.

Key Words: Religion, ecological problem, dominionism, protectionism and eco-religious ethic.

Introduction

It is no longer a speculation that something has gone wrong with our environment. Perhaps, amongst the list of problems confronting mankind are socio-economic inequalities, political marginalization, religious extremism, and underdevelopment, none is as challenging as the question of the present environmental status of man and all other living creatures. Accordingly, scholars have captured the phenomenon with words such as: “ecocrisis,” “ecocatastrophe,” “eco-apocalypse,” “eco-locaust,” “ecojustice,” and “eco-ethic” (Nkem 2006/2007:103). They used such words against the backdrop of the fact that the ecological problem poses a serious threat to human existence since it endangers the very life of the planet and raises the question of survival itself (Abraham 2018). Thus, it has become a matter of urgency that requires people from various works of life to address. Religion also needs to be actively involved in the development of a more comprehensive world-view and ethics that would lead to sustainability. This is critical because, the attitudes and values that shape people’s concepts of nature evolve primarily from religious worldviews and ethical practices. Although, there have been a growing scholarly interest in the area of religion and ecology (Benson 2000; Taylor 2005; Deane-Drummond and Strohm 2011), however, a great deal of the literature focuses interest only on the debate surrounding the Christian concept of dominionism (Kahan et al. 2011; Arendt 1998; Wanliss 2010; Carr et al. 2012; among others). The purpose of this article is to expand the scope of this debate on religion and the ecological problem within the context of protectionism. To achieve this, I will begin by placing the terms “ecology” and religion” in the context in which they are used. The whole research would be an attempt to philosophically explore the role religion can play in curbing the ecological problem. The term “ecology” according to the New International Webster’s Comprehensive Dictionary, is the science which

deals on the relations between organisms and their environment (2012:400). One chief concern of ecologists is on how the relation between an organism and environment affects each other. Hence, it could be succinctly put that ecology is the science which studies the relationship of living creatures to each other and how this relationship affects their environment. “Religion” on the other hand is notoriously difficult to define, it is at the very least as Peterson et al. observes “a set of beliefs, actions, and experiences, both individual and collective, organized around some idea of Ultimate Reality that is recognized as sacred and in relation to which persons enter into a transformative process” (Peterson et al. 2001:1). The understanding of who the Ultimate Reality is differs from religion to religion. In some cases, it may be understood as a unity or plurality while in other cases, it may be understood as personal or non-personal, divine or not. However, these important elements are present in every cultural phenomenon we call religion (Peterson et al. 2012:1). The relationship between religion and the ecological problem is that the beliefs, attitudes, rituals, and doctrines of various world religions can directly or indirectly affect our environment.

Conceptualizing Religion and the Ecological Problem

The first place to begin in conceptualizing the ecological problem is to consider diverse scholarly views on the possible causes of the environmental crisis and the role religion in particular has and can play in addressing it. In the first instance, some scholars attribute the ecological problem to modern industrial and technological advancement (Abraham 2018; Chetti 1991; Victor 1972). Those who approach the dilemma from this standpoint note that western industrialization uses enormous capital to exploit natural resources especially the non-renewable ones without paying attention to the resultant environmental effects. In particular, Victor (1972) strongly acknowledges this when he articulates that the most pressing aspect of the ecological crisis is not merely a crisis of survival but that of an erroneous estimation of man’s potentialities, in a wrong reading of human nature, through the creation, misuse and proliferation of the wrong technologies used in the wrong way. This ruthless exploitation of nature is responsible for this pattern of development.

Unfortunately, while the most developed countries like Europe, USA, Japan, China and others are possibly benefiting from it, the underdeveloped countries especially those in Africa and elsewhere are probably at the receiving end. It is on record for example that Japanese multinationals as Abraham observes indiscriminately destroy forests and other natural resources in the Philippines, Indonesia and other Asian countries (Abraham 2018). In Africa, and particularly in the Niger-Delta region of Nigeria, oil exploration by European multinationals have also devastated communities even though much of the environmental destructions in the Niger-Delta is also due to illegal oil activities. In Ogoniland alone for example, over 1000sq km (386sq miles) area of land is said to have been systematically contaminated by Shell and other oil firms due to oil exploration according to the UNEP Report of 2011. This has disastrous consequences for human health and wildlife according to the UNEP Report 2011. Apart from the destruction done to the soil, the air is also heavily polluted as industrial pollution has risen alarmingly. Similarly, a report by the Environment Protection Agency, states that the United States is second only to China in Carbon Dioxide emissions; in 2003, Carbon Dioxide accounted for about 82% of all U.S. greenhouse gas emissions from human activities (EPA 2015). It is understandable then why David (1999) describes the ecological problem as the crisis of modernity. David arrives at this conclusion because he believes that for the first time in human history, human society faces the possibility of a global ecological disaster as a consequence of its

modification, exploitation and pollution of the biosphere. Therefore, the notion that nature is a commodity to be exploited by contemporary industrialized societies has contributed significantly to the issue at stake. So as man uses science and technology in a bid to improve the living standard of mankind, he indirectly or directly impinges on the equilibrium existing between other creatures, the environment and man himself. Technology and industrialization therefore have a link in the ecological problem.

Aside the industrial and technological dimension, the ecological problem is also sociological in nature. By sociological factor in this context, one is referring to attitudes and value systems inherent in traditional human society. Attitudes and values differ from one person to another. Often times, the values and attitudes found in a particular historical setting may differ from that of another. The value system inherent in a person or society determines the action of a person or society. A good value system about nature would definitely give birth to a good attitude towards nature and vice versa. The problem, however, is that in most underdeveloped societies like the ones in Africa, there is a marked absence of good value system towards nature. Most people in rural communities in Africa have little or no value attach to nature. Thus, animals, birds, fishes, etc. are indiscriminately hunted and killed for food without replacement. It is a common place in Africa to set a whole forest ablaze for purpose of either farming or hunting. In addition, the lack of mechanized system of agriculture in rural communities in Africa and elsewhere leaves villagers with no other option than to resort to a crude way of farming in which case deliberate burning of farmlands and cutting down of trees become a routine. Against this backdrop, Rust (1972) describes man as the crux of the ecological problem. The extinction of some species could be attributed to lack of value for nature. Gaylord (1972) is then proven right to have argued that “people have learnt how to destroy tomorrow in order to live today.” Hence, it is crystal clear that there is a sociological dimension to the ecological problem.

In a related development, the ecological problem has also spurred scholars to conceive socio-economic inequalities as a significant contributor of it (Abraham 2018 and Moltmann 1979). Two crucial elements of the socio-economic inequalities are: population and poverty. At one side of the spectrum, the alarming increase of population demands full and immediate attention. Many of the ecological crisis are aggravated by it. Scientists have argued that it took mankind nearly a million years to reach the first billion by about 1850 (William 1972). Unfortunately, this number has been exceeded due to uncontrolled birth rate. The situation is worst in underdeveloped countries where there are no effective political policies to check population growth. Increase in population also leads to increase in demand for economic commodities. Space and natural resources are also being contested. This creates a phenomenon of an imbalance of the ecosystem as we see today. At the other end of the spectrum, capitalism has also become a monster leading to an increase gulf between the rich and the poor. The gulf between the “haves” and “the have not,” “the rich” and “the poor” has been widened by forces of capitalism (Omotosho 2003). This provides opportunity for the poor to resort to all manner of anti-environmental friendly activities as a means of survival. Where this exits, the environment becomes more vulnerable. It is regrettable to note however that while all are affected by the ecological problem, the life of the poor and marginalized becomes further impoverished by it (Chetti 1991:96). In this light, the injustice meted on the environment would be difficult to address if the socio-economic inequalities in modern society remain unaddressed (Moltmann 1979:128). Therefore in a way, socio-economic inequalities promote a culture of exploitation, industrialization, deforestation, etc. which in turn account for the ecological problem.

Perhaps, the most important scholarly view which forms the crux of this discussion is the one which interprets the ecological problem from a religious viewpoint. Religious studies scholars and philosophers who are pioneers in the field of Environmental Ethics have shown remarkable interest on the relationships between religions and environment for several decades (Taylor 2005; Benson 2000; Deane-Drummond and Strohm 2011). These scholars in their works have had to examine the ecological implications of the beliefs, attitudes, rituals, and doctrines of various world religions on the ecological problem (Palmer 2012). In the course of this inquiry, some scholars have arrived at the conclusion that certain religions view the environmental crisis basically as a consequence of moral failing (Kanagy and Wallits 1993; Shaiko 1987; Shibley and Wiggins 1997; Wilkinson 2012; Veldman et al. 2014; among others). Those who hold strongly to this position deny any form of man-made climate change arguing that “cyclical climate change is not primarily caused by human activity” but a fulfilment of the biblical Genesis prophecy (Beisner et al. 2006; Berna 2008; Wanliss 2010; Carr et al. 2012; among others). Thus, they give eschatological interpretation to the ecological problem and see those who believe in anthropocentric climate change as anti-human, anti-Christian ideas, and anti-dominion (Wanliss 2010; Kutney 2014; Beisner et al. 2006). In the U.S for example, a document released by the Cornwall Alliance in 2006 in response to an earlier report of the Evangelical Climate Initiative (ECI) refuted the notion that “Human emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases into the atmosphere as we burn fuels for energy are the main cause of global warming” (Beisner et al. 2006:2). By this some scholars especially evangelical Christians tend to attribute the ecological problem simply to moral failing and by far a fulfilment of eschatological prophecy. Man is therefore directly or indirectly exonerated from being a contributor of this crisis.

However, others who believe that religion is primarily responsible for the environmental problem have rejected the skepticism expressed by some scholars especially evangelical Christians. Most profound among these scholars is the historian, Lynn White Jr. who in his well celebrated essay, “The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis” (White 1967) blames the ecological crisis on what we may best refer to as the Christian doctrine of “dominionism.” This concept of dominionism, White argues has little or no regard for nature. Instead, it places man above nature and nature exists only to satisfy man’s aspiration. Hence, western Christianity for him is the most anthropocentric religion the world has ever seen and should be rejected before the ecological problem becomes worst. Perhaps, it should be stated that the doctrine of dominionism as explained by Spencer et al. (2005) and Ronan (2017) is the “belief that humankind has a duty to fill and subdue the earth and turn the wilderness into a garden.” Proponents of the biblical concept of dominionism usually draw their reference from the Book of Genesis which states as follows:

God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.” Then God said, “I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds of the air and the Creatures that move on the ground- everything that has the breath of life in it- I give every green plant for food.” And it was so (Gen. 1:28-30, NIV Bible).

Notable proponents of this view of man's dominionism over nature in contemporary time include Beisner (2006), Inhofe (2012), Wanliss (2010), and others. What appears most shocking however in present time as Ronan (2017) observes, is the fact that Donald Trump presidency is almost at the verge of endorsing the notion that the environmental problem has been over-exaggerated.

But the stark reality of the ecological problem confronts us at the face with facts that are difficult to deny. Today, there are significant evidences of flooding across the globe and a drastic rise in temperature due to the depletion of the ozone layer. Some living creatures have gone extinct and many more are at the verge of it because of global warming resulting from heavy emissions of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. This explains why Pope Francis in his recent 192-page encyclical, "On Care for our Common Home," released in June 2015, pontificates that "Christians have misinterpreted Scripture and must forcefully reject the notion that our being created in God's image and given dominion over the earth legitimizes absolute dominion over other creatures" (Francis 2015). This view is shared by other scholars who believe that the dominion given to Adam and Eve over creatures is problematic in the sense that in its original Hebrew meaning, it refers to taming and controlling the forces of nature which have destructive and violent tendencies (Moltmann 1979; Abraham (2018). Consequently, they maintain that certain religious ideologies or doctrines that religious people hold about nature are not in tandem with sustainability of our environment. In this way, religion cannot be totally exonerated from being one of the factors responsible for the ecological problem. Religion by its spiritual teachings as Gottlieb (2004) observes, has "celebrated and consecrated our ties to the non-human world" thereby fundamentally neglecting and disregarding the relationship between human, other creatures and the environment. This wide gulf has in many ways contributed to the ecological crisis as we have today. Therefore, to address the ecological problem headlong, there is need to identify the role religion can play. But what role can religion play given the circumstances above?

It is pertinent to state that the question of whether religion has a role to play in addressing the ecological conundrum is no longer an issue as we have seen in the debate about religion and ecological problem. There is a convergence among scholars that "world religions, individually or collectively, can positively address anthropogenic climate change" (Posas 2007; Reder 2012; Tucker and Grim 2001). Some scholars also conceptualize religion as a meaningful human endeavour that have the potentials to provide answers to central human questions bordering on behaviours, human motivation and socio-political order (Ronan 2017). Moreover, Raynolds and Tanner (1995) have shown in their work that "throughout history religions have shaped human behaviour, survival, and adaptation." Hence, Veldman et al. (2014) believe that religion can serve as the strongest instrument to mobilize millions of people on the issue of climate change since it is the most pervasive and powerful force in the lives of world's people. What are some of the ways in which religion can be used as a mobilizing force to address the ecological problem? In the last section, I will highlight some ways in which religion can be used as a mobilizing force to address the ecological problem.

The Role of Religion in Addressing the Ecological Problem

Religious people have a role in curbing the environmental problem and this point has been clearly stated by scholars from various standpoints: ethical, philosophical, sociological and economic. In the last section of this paper I would argue that this can be achieved through a holistic teaching and understanding of an eco-religious ethic that moves from dominionism to protectionism.

First, in the epoch of Noah's Ark in Genesis 7:1-8:22, Noah was given the responsibility of entering the Ark with a male and female of every living specie. This implies that God himself places maximum value on nature thereby protecting it in the midst of danger. The words of Schweitzer therefore have to be taken seriously who in his commentary on man and nature, asserts that "the planet is given to us on lease and we must return it back at the end with the same value as it was at the beginning of the lease" (Schweitzer 1993). Religious people have a duty to protect nature by inculcating in them a sense of adoration for it. This was a common tradition among ancient Hebrews who conceived nature as a reflection of God's glory and splendor. Hence, the Psalmist fittingly describes nature as declaring the glory of God as well as proclaiming the work of his hands (Psalm 19:1, NIV). The relation between man and nature is so crucial that Canus (1962) also equates attempts to disassociate man from nature to that of expelling God from history. Rather than see nature as something which only exists to serve man's desires, religious people should seek to protect it at all cost.

Closely linked to the eco-religious ethic of adoration is the ethic of reverence for life. The account of Matthew 6:25-33 reveals that God places maximum value for the life of even the least creature on earth. Hence, he protects and provides for the birds as well as dresses the lilies of the field. The centrality of the ethic of reverence for life is well captured by Schweitzer (1993) who again argues that "all living things have the right to live and that no man is fully ethical unless all of life is sacred to him." Reverence for life is a *sine qua non* if the ecological crisis should be holistically navigated. Religious leaders should deliberately inculcate this attitude in them. The traditional belief that nature has no other purpose other than serving man must be replaced with the belief that man has the responsibility of protecting nature. As Barnette (1972) correctly observes, man depends largely on the activity of the smallest micro-organisms to exist because without the oxygen producing animals and plants, man simply cannot exist. A holistic eco-religious ethic capable of addressing the ecological problem should therefore include man's moral responsibility for the environment in which he lives and have his being.

Third, an eco-religious ethic of empathy for nature is essential for man's healthy relationship with his environment. Abraham (2018) calls this "liberative solidarity model in which man, the strongest creature seeks to empathize with the weakest creation by protecting it. Tillich (1955) in his sermon "Nature, Also Mourns for a lost Good" laments that the advent of human civilization is causing nature to suffer under domination, ruthless exploitation, destruction and despoliation. Unfortunately, the suffering of nature is also the suffering of man. The salvation of nature is also the salvation of man. Paul rhetorically captures this idea in his notion of the liberation of creation from its bondage (Rom. 8:20-12). Religious people therefore have a duty to empathize with nature by protecting it from the prevalent notion of dominionism. By empathizing with nature, man is also directly showing empathy to himself. The ruthless, heartless, and indiscriminate destruction of nature is unacceptable. Therefore, to address the ecological problem headlong, there is need for religious people to have an eco-religious ethic of empathy for nature.

Fourth, population increase demands full and immediate attention if the environmental problem should be addressed. It is a fact that the ecological problem partly stems from the swelling numbers around the world. Unfortunately, some religious people abhor population control through family planning. Many of them hinge their belief on the fact that God commanded man to multiply and fill the earth as recorded in Genesis 1:28. It is interesting to note however, that Adam and Eve who directly received this command did not give birth to a million children for purpose of fulfilling this command. Therefore, a holistic eco-religious ethic

capable of addressing the environmental conundrum should take responsible population control measures into consideration. This is a difficult task since people have different attitudes and values about child bearing. However, it is necessary, if the ecological crisis facing mankind and nature should be navigated.

Fifth, a sense of beauty can nourish the deeper needs of man's being which transcends the tangible demands. Brown (1955) observes this dimension of life when he argues that "the flower and the vegetable garden, green grass, the fireplace, the hilltop, stars and moon are all necessary for the fulfillment of man's psychological and spiritual needs." Clearly, the sense of beauty appears to have been lost in contemporary time, especially among religious people. Today, the preservation of the environment means little or nothing to many religious people. Deforestation, air pollution, desertification, etc. characterize contemporary society, particularly the underdeveloped countries. A renewed sense of beauty could however be a pointer to the presence of God. It is this sense of beauty that Santmire (1970) describe as "a wondering onlooker who moves us from wonder to a celebration of the sense of the presence of God." An eco-religious ethic capable of tackling the ecological crisis should have a renewed awareness of aesthetics.

Finally, the ecological problem also requires an eco-religious ethic of alliance to address it. Some religious people are unwilling to accept the views of other people on the ecological problem because they feel such views are inconsistent with their religious ideologies. However, as Van Reusslaer Potter, a biologist in the year 1970, remarks, "ethical values cannot be separated from biological facts and ecology. Hence, actions which decrease the chances of survival are immoral. Those which increases the chances of survival are right and good". What this means is that an eco-religious ethic aimed at solving the present ecological crisis should be all-encompassing by involving people from different fields of human endeavours. The task of the ecological crisis is quite cumbersome for only religious people to attempt to address. Ethical values, religious, biological values, etc. should be integrated together in approaching the issue at stake. In all, the task of protecting the earth should be seen as the responsibility of all people. This explains why Rust (1972) thinks that the Christian church erred by emphasizing more on heaven and grossly neglecting the fact that the Christian life has to be lived out on earth. The environment should not be conceived as a temporal place where religious people exercise their dominion over other creatures. Instead, religious people should seek to protect nature because it is needed to make meaning. Both are mutually interrelated and interconnected. Perhaps the creation of man from dust by God himself, goes to further explain this interconnection and mutuality. To address the ecological problem therefore requires a holistic, all-inclusive ecological ethic, one which places maximum value on the earth is required.

Conclusion

Thus far, I have examined the ecological crisis and how world's religions can significantly respond to it. The ecological crisis as discussed here irrevocably demonstrates that there is an interrelatedness and interconnections between humanity and the rest of nature. The relationship between man and nature is mutually reciprocal. Humanity is an integral part of nature. Human wellbeing depends upon the flourishing of the non-human creation which in turn is deeply affected by human activity. The ecological crisis therefore is an urgent one, and the future of humanity depends upon how it is addressed. Religions can play a major role in this regard by encouraging values and eco-religious ethics of adoration, reverence, empathy, responsible population control, alliance, etc. that are all-inclusive and holistic. Also, religious

people rather than conceive nature as something to be exploited to fulfill man's desires due to the prevailing notion of dominionism should seek to protect it at all cost.

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