



DOMINION ATTITUDE TOWARD NATURE IN WESTERN JUDEO-CHRISTIAN TRADITION

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Abstract

Today, degradation of environment is the biggest question on our survival. It has become the major need for a spiritual ecology to intertwine and to look back again to our culture, religion and their teachings- whether they can really help us in finding solution considering current environment crisis? or how one has interpreted religious scriptures to our present search for creating mutually enhancing human-Earth relations? Religions can be at the same time both conservative and progressive, limiting and liberating form. In this paper, I will focus on anthropocentric nature of Western Judeo Christianity which includes three religions, also known as 'Abrahamic traditions'- Islam, Judaism and Christianity. While Religion has shown some transformation and flexibility over time in freeing ourselves from slavery, women's rights, health productivity but at the same time they sometimes resist to change. For example- In the history of Israel, we observed at the time of Canaanite culture in Sedentary agricultural communities, mainly female deities are worshiped. On the other hand, there is a Patriarchal religion in which female and nature are given low status and subdued by man.

Keywords: Anthropocentric, Dominion, Ecology, Dualistic, Patriarchal.

Introduction

There is no doubt that we are facing environmental crisis globally. Problems like ice-caps melting, chopping down of forests, global warming, poisonous air etc. are degrading the nature and lives in every possible way and this is because of our failure to understand the inter connectedness with nature. Although we are progressing towards the development, we are somehow distancing ourselves from what is natural and shifting towards the artificial means. Can artificial man-made materials really match up with natural creation? We have created in front of us a great wall of china which is a symbol of our unsociability. Unsociability means being so much reserved within oneself that we do not feel the need to indulge in any social activity until and unless it is directly affecting our purpose. We relate with one another only with our killer innate instinct- to trump over them and this unsociability is extended more to ecology. As per author Anand Veeraraj who has worked on Religion and Ecology, "Homo sapiens has become the greatest single threat to the rest of the species. Sardonicly, homo sapiens has been lately added on to the Red Data Book."¹

According to Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Allen Grim, co-founder and co-director of the Forum on Religion and Ecology at Yale University asserts that "the particularistic claims to truth in Abrahamic traditions have contributed to conflicts between Jews, Christians and Muslims historically and at present."² It has been interpreted that with their community division and their different history about survival and oppression by other states, there has been many conflicts between them about the stand they take. "The ecological bankruptcy of Christianity, in its Western form is found to be common to most, if not all of them. For instance, one does not see much concern for nature either in Islam or in Marxism."³ Karl Marx talks about labour theory of value. If we think about it in contemporary context it talks about exploitation of labour and replacing them with machines. But he is criticized for never talked about devaluation of nature by man. Whether we realize it or not, we relate to our surroundings so well that any ecological crisis affects every area of life. Geologists calls our period "anthropocentric" which means man made nature. Nature has been devalued for meeting the time of modernization needs: science and technology, economic growth development etc. Pope Francis outlooks that 'the technocratic paradigm "tends to dominate economics and political life'. Inconsequence, "our freedom fades when it is handed over to the blind forces of the unconscious, of immediate needs, of self-interest and of violence.' Basically, it is a domination of human focused morality.

Karl Bath, Swiss Calvinist theologian regarded biblical scriptures as primary source of revelation where other concerns like nature were ignored. According to David Kinsley, author of various books and Professor of religion says there are three arguments which works against these Biblical scriptures and increase the negative influence on environment. 1) Nature is ceased to be regarded as divine. 2) Anthropocentric (man dominates nature) view. 3) There is a hierarchical in creation in which nature (non-spiritual being) has been given low status. There is a story based on Adam and Eve who have fallen from the heaven on this earth because of the sin they have committed by disobeying the divine. All human beings are living earthly life to reach back to the heavenly life. And in this earthly

¹ Veeraraj, A. (1989). Christianity and the Environment. In O.P. Dwivedi, World Religions and The Environment (pp. 36-117). New Delhi: Gitanjali Publishing House

² Grim John and Tucker, M. E. (2014). Problems and Promise of Religions: Limiting and Liberating. In Ecology and Religion (pp. 13-28). USA: Island Press

³ Veeraraj, A. (1989). Christianity and the Environment. In O.P. Dwivedi, World Religions and The Environment (pp. 36-117). New Delhi: Gitanjali Publishing House.



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life, angels come after God, then man and at last species and another low creature. Man connects both with divine and low creatures (for survival of his material being, he depends upon other species). Thus, man do not give nature, the status of its own 'intrinsic' value. Rather, he assigned instrumental value. Lynn White says "To a Christian a tree can be no more than a physical fact. The whole concept of the sacred grove is alien to Christianity and to the ethos of the West." It has been assumed that Judeo Christian concerns more about idolatry, "Christians have historically emphasized the transcendence of God to be fault. They believed that God is elsewhere, not here and thus all things this world bear no intrinsic divine significance."⁴ They believed nature do not have mystical spirit and is meant to be manipulated by human beings. Examples have been given by the Buddhist scholar D.T Suzuki of how human tries to dominates over nature: When they invent flying machine, they say they have conquered air. Similarly, when they climbed the mount Everest, they announced conquered the mountain.

Historical and Ecological Contours of Judeo-Christian Tradition

Jesus Christ is regarded as the founder of Christian religion. 'He proclaimed the "Kingdom of God" and taught his countrymen to follow its ideals and ethics.'⁵ His followers looked upon him as a Messiah, but Jewish religious functionaries regarded him as a threat. After his sudden death and banishment of body, the disciples believed that he would come back to life as he said he would. Though there were differences in their ritual expressions, they still believe they are under an obligation to spread their religion throughout the world. The God of Christianity is essentially the God of Jewish religion as revealed in Jewish scriptures and Old Testament.

A. Veeraraj says, "Although Yahweh, God of Israelites is transcendent, the appropriation and the infusion of this supreme deity with the historical person of Jesus Christ has made the God of Christians more concrete than the Jewish deity."⁶ Thus, New Testament refers to "trinity doctrine"- One God in three persons. What it tries to say that before Jesus, God of Jews existed and Christians just follow their practices and cultures. Jesus was only a moral man who appeared in this earthly life to teach lesson. It is being inferred from this, that ultimate God or power lies in hands of God of Jews.

To understand where problem of ecology rest, one needs to look upon the history of Israel. "The history of Hebrew religion begins with stories about legendary heroes, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob- the Patriarchs and their descendants."⁷ It has been claimed by Patriarchal people that they believed in monotheism, despite the fact that there are many forms or names of deities.

When Egypt conquered Israelites, there was one Israelite who saved them from slavery and since then they believed it was their God, Yahweh who saved them and later see human as a reflection of divine. There was no recognition given to nature.

Passage from Bible

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." (Gen.1:26) Hebraic peoples used connotations of 'kabas' for dominion and 'rada' for subdue.

The Hebrew world view underwent a drastic change of how man deals with nature in different culture. It has been assumed that since then whatever exists in nature example- milk, honey, animal and plants exists for humans only. 'Nature for them turned out to be an object of subduction, and man instead of fleeing nature became the very source of threat'. In this way, we can say that Christianity is following shallow ecology concept. Arne Naess makes a distinction between shallow ecology and deep ecology. Shallow is anthropocentric (instrumental value) whereas deep ecology does not separate human from natural environment (instinct value). It is spiritual, human feel connected with cosmos. As per theology of Origen (185-254 C.E.), nonspiritual creatures are existing in this earthly life with humans only to teach them to return to the realm of pure spirit. At the end, nature will return to nothingness. Therefore, human take their permanent abode in heaven and treat earth as their temporary living in it. In the words of Aquinas: "As we observe...imperfect beings serve the needs of more noble beings; plants draw their nutriment from the earth, animals feed on plants, and these in turn serve man's use. We conclude, then, that lifeless being exist for living beings, plants for animals, and the latter for man. The whole of material nature exists for man, in as much as he is a rational animal."⁸ Human is considered rational and superior above all. Everything exists for

⁴ White, L. (2005). The Historical Roots of Ecological Crisis. In J.B Callicott, Clare and Palmer, Environmental Philosophy (pp. 9-18). Routledge.

⁵ Veeraraj, A. (1989). Christianity and the Environment. In O.P. Dwivedi, World Religions and The Environment pp. 36-117). New Delhi: Gitanjali Publishing House.

⁶ Ibid pp. 45. Trinity doctrine- worship of God of Israel, the accessibility to this God made possible through the person of Jesus, and the continuous divine presence with believer in holy spirit.

⁷ Ibid pp. 49

⁸ Kinsley, D. (1996). Christianity as ecologically harmful. In R. S. Gottlieb, The Sacred Earth: Religion, Nature and Environment (pp. 104-124). NY.



his pleasure. This patriarchal nature of man considered himself as a ruler of mother earth. Nature is just the puppet which transform itself as per man's needs.

Unlike the Patriarchs, the people of Israel want to create organic living relations same as Canaanite culture. Canaanite culture was rich in their land and agrarian cultural values. "But just after that we see that armies of Babylon destroyed the organic existence of Israel". "And the Jewish captives were forced to rethink their theology and redefine their relationship to their native land". "The confrontation of Judaism with Persian religion transformed it into a dualistic religion overnight."⁹ Thus, Persian philosophies transformed Judaism into dualistic world views. In my understanding, not only Persian or Judaism contributes towards dualistic views but almost every other culture follow dualism. This dualism between human and nature is wrongly assumed as we are equally dependent upon them. If they do not exist and we degrade them to this extent, then our survival is also not possible. The biggest problem of human is we differentiate between this world and other world. But we forget that if have just fallen from earth to redeem ourselves then also to live peacefully for years without disruption, ecology needs to be revered, respected, restored. We risk our long-term survival for short term benefit.

British philosopher Passmore blames 'Christianity for destruction of nature'. To the extent, that he doubts that Christian theology can ever reshape itself in an ecologically helpful way without ceasing thereby to be Christian'. But Passmore assume Greek to be more responsible than Judeo Christian tradition for this.

Evolution/Contribution towards Global Theology

Till now we have seen how man devalued nature in reaching this other world or divine. But with modernization and rise in consumerism, salvation is not their goal but to utilize the resources for their needs. Although change is appropriate only if it does not cause any harm to the whole world. Today, it becomes easy for a man to have autonomous and mechanical control over nature. Example – "United States, the so- called Christian nation with only 7 percent of the world population, "used up in the decades of sixties more resources than entire human kind in all previous history."¹⁰ Human feels that resources are given infinite to them and the resources which are limited, they can also be advanced through technology. By distancing ourselves from the natural rhythms of the world we have more power under control which we are now unwilling to give up. Basically, science objectify nature, it looks at the world as a perfect machine. According to White, Judeo Christians in comparison with non-Judeo Christians are more likely to subscribe in their adherence to mastery over nature. 'White conceived of the resolution of the environmental dilemma in terms of a religious transformation, he was implicitly advocating a "new environmental paradigm" (NEP) as the only viable alternative to the anthropocentric view of the world which had come to dominate Western society (Pirages and Ehrlich, 1974; Catton and Dunlap, 1978; Dunlap and Van Liere, 1978; Milbrath, 1984)'¹¹. NEP included six core components in direct contrast to the dominant social paradigm: (1) high valuation of nature; (2) compassion toward other species, peoples, and generations; (3) avoidance of technological and environmental risks; (4) conservation; (5) societal transformation; and (6) rejuvenation of the political system. Political system in today's world plays crucial role in handling the problem of environmental crisis by formulating rules and regulations for industries. But Pope, instead of seeking any other alternative goes on to look biblical scriptures for a stronger foundation to respect nature.

According to my view, the term 'dominion' is dangerous somehow as it means you are above all but ecological crisis has demonstrated to us that destiny of both human and world of nature is interlinked. The term 'destinies' is used by Lynn White in making us understand that how we are interlinked with the nature. Its direct adverse effect can be seen in our living. And if we talked about 'stewardship' it also suggests human is central among all other species.

Stewardship describes one's responsibilities towards nature which contrasts with supremacy. Pope Francis says 'a spirituality which forgets God as all- powerful and creator is not acceptable. If we see him as a creator, then all the beings and nature are created by him. Nature was created first but after man existence in this world, he was assigned as a manager to took moral responsibilities. Responsibility means valuing nature for its own. Otherwise, if we looked upon nature for our purpose or assign values as per our means then the concept of stewardship goes wrong. Judeo- Christian view our creation as dominion and this human tendency to rule and create violence surge gradually. Capra feels there is a need of paradigm shift from mechanical to holistic approach. Appropriate example to understand holistic approach is 'When nature is dissected to this extent, it loses its life, and when it loses its life, it loses its sacredness; death and decay set in. And in this process, man is totally alienated from nature.'¹²

⁹ Veeraraj, A. (1989). Christianity and the Environment. In O.P. Dwivedi, World Religions and The Environment (pp. 36-117). New Delhi: Gitanjali Publishing House.

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Shaiko, R. G. (1987). Religion, Politics and Environmental Concern. JSTOR.

¹² Veeraraj, A. (1989). Christianity and the Environment. In O. Dwivedi, World Religions and The Environment (pp. 36-117). New Delhi: Gitanjali Publishing House.



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This explains how man is in uniform unity with nature. As Gandhi said ‘Be the change you want to see in world’. We can follow deep ecology or green movement but with this, there is a call for awareness to understand present crisis and reform our optimistic beliefs.

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