

ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

A Christian Perspective

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INTRODUCTION

Environment is becoming a matter of ever-increasing concern today. Obviously, emotional reactions and cosmetic responses to environmental issues wouldn't do any good. Developing an environmental ethic coupled with sensitizing the public in that regard is the need of the hour. Christian outlook on environment is a theistic way of considering life that holds God as the core value of nature. Accordingly, Christian environmental ethics¹ presents a series of value-based perceptions, which can significantly contribute to environmental ethics at the global level.

The Bible deals with a number of ecological themes². A higher portion of them are in the Old Testament. A few specific teachings on environment are in New Testament, as well. The teachings of Jesus have great significance in the Christian perspective of environmental ethics. The creation stories in the Book of Genesis highlight foundational insights concerning creation of nature by God. They also draw up the outline of relationships and responsibilities that exist between God, humankind and the rest of the created order.

1. GOD IS THE CREATOR AND THE OWNER OF THE CREATION

1.1. God is the Creator of the universe

Genesis, the first book of the Bible, the first chapter and its first sentence goes thus: 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth'³. The Book of Psalms affirms this idea, 'God is the maker of heaven and earth, the sea and everything in them'⁴. The Book of Acts states, God 'made heaven and earth and sea and everything in them'⁵. God is the Creator of the universe.

1.2. God is the owner of the universe

The Book of Psalms states, 'the earth is the Lord's and everything in it; the world, and all who live in it'⁶. The Psalmist confesses, 'The heavens are yours and yours also the earth. You founded the world and all that is in it'⁷. The Book of Leviticus declares in the words of God, 'The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is mine; and you are but aliens and my tenants'⁸. God is the owner of the universe.

1.3. God takes care of the world

God (the heavenly father) 'feeds the birds of the air'⁹, 'takes care of even the lilies of the field',¹⁰ 'clothes the grass of the field'¹¹. He 'knows that you need them (food, drink and wear)' and 'all these things will be given to you'¹². Human being 'is much more valuable for God than all these members of the creation'¹³. The Psalmist admits, 'You open your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing. The Lord is righteous in all his ways and loving toward all he has made'¹⁴. Yes, he takes care of the entire creation so dearly.

1.4. God deserves the glory of the creation

The Book of Romans observes, 'For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made'¹⁵.

The Book of Psalms affirms, ‘May the glory of the Lord endure for ever; may the Lord rejoice in his works’¹⁶. Further, let the entire creation ‘praise the name of the Lord, for his name alone is exalted, his splendour is above the earth and the heavens’¹⁷. The Book of Revelation furthers this idea, ‘You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory, honour and power; for you created all things and by your will they were created and have their being’¹⁸.

1.5. God’s position in the creation is irreplaceable

The position of God as the one who deserves glory of the creation as well as the creator and the owner is unique and is irreplaceable. Transferring the same to any item or object of the creation and to indulge in the worship of any idol is blasphemous. The worship of anything in nature violates the Second Commandment in which God states: ‘You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them’¹⁹. Being attached to or giving more or equal importance to anything in the creation is a violation of the basic ethic of life the humans are bound to abide by.

1.6. Dignity of God’s creation

The Book of Genesis states, ‘God created man in his own image; male and female he created them; God blessed them’²⁰. Giving man the divine image and likeness is the most sublime way of showering upon man the dignity of divinity. This dignity is also shared with the entire creation in a general way. Therefore, Bible does not hold the Gnostic theory that attributes the good to the spiritual world and considers the material world bad. Nature, as it is God’s creation, cannot intrinsically carry any negative value. Whatever God created is good and the idea of resurrection upholds that everything including the nature is or has to be renewed in case of being tainted. This is the essential dignity of God’s creation.

2. RESPONSIBLE STEWARDSHIP OF MAN

2.1. Command to rule over the earth

God blessed the first couple, Adam and Eve, 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’²¹. Evidently, man is singled out from other creatures and is endowed with a superior role, for maintaining a discipline over the rest of the creation. He is entrusted with a responsibility to till the ground and develop as well as to multiply himself. The above command to rule over the earth as well as the superior position is grounded in the image and likeness of God he is endowed with.

2.2. Not a licence to lord it over

Obviously, the right to own something belongs to the one who has created it. Being a creature himself, man is not authorized to play God, in any way. Since man is neither the creator nor the owner of the world, he doesn’t really own anything, neither himself nor anything in the creation. He does not have a complete say over the creation, not even over himself. ‘To rule over the creation’ in no way means ‘lording it over’ or ‘exercise tyranny over’, in a dictatorial manner or ‘destroying it’ mindlessly. It would mean ‘to administer, to work, to guide and to take care’ of the creation. Man has to be sensitive to the plants and the animals in all projects of utility and development he undertakes. Greatest benefit as well as least damage to the organisms concerned has to be the policy. Man is not authorized to manipulate the creation in any way. All his decisions have to be taken in a spirit of playing the second fiddle, allowing God to play the first.

2.3. Duty to take care of the creation

The implication of the command to rule over the creation is much deeper than what the words suggest. The Book of Genesis notes, ‘The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and to take care of it’²². ‘To take care of it’ would mean ‘to till it’, ‘to cultivate it’, ‘to use productively’, ‘to keep’, ‘to guard’, ‘to exercise great care over’, etc. The objective of the higher role man is asked to play is for performing a double-sided duty -- towards the Creator and the creation. All the same, this duty could be performed in one shot, by ‘taking care of’ of the earth and all the creatures in it. It would in no way mean exercising dominion over them, even the least. The higher quality brain as well as the spiritual character the humans are gifted with is oriented to an attitude of accountable caring. When the creation is responsibly taken care of, the duty to the Creator is well-accounted for, as well.

2.4. Checking the Unsocial tendencies

The intelligence and free will of man are like a double-edged sword. They have both positive and negative directions. At instances of human frailty, the humans applied them for selfish motives and as a result landed up in sin²³. No wonder, ‘the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time’²⁴. Checking the unsocial inclinations is man’s constant duty, in order to maintain the harmony in social life. Everyone has a right to one’s due. For example, the Book of Deuteronomy orders, ‘do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain’²⁵. It means, all human beings, even the ox, have the right to reap a reward for his or her efforts. Just profit is due for all those who toil for the same. Checking the unsocial inclinations is inevitable for fostering the right social environment.

2.5. Maintaining the original harmony of creation

Having created the world, ‘God saw all that he had made and it was very good’²⁶. ‘Very good’ refers to the ideal state. As per the original idea of the Creator, all the components of creation were in perfect harmony with each other and with the Creator. When the basic needs of anyone are not met, harmony gets disrupted. God’s creation has resources enough for the use of all. As Mahatma Gandhi observes, ‘the world has enough for everyone's need, but not enough for everyone's greed’. Consuming, using and accumulating more than one legitimately needs are not fair. Exploiting these resources at the expense of one’s fellowmen is unjust, as well. Notably, not complying with the design of the Creator disturbed the balance of the creation. But, man has the fundamental duty to constantly strive for maintaining the original harmony of the creation.

3. IMPLICATIONS OF STEWARDSHIP

3.1 Trustworthy caretaking

Stewardship of nature would mean being a ‘caretaker’. It means also ‘foreman’²⁷. The word denotes the qualities of being ‘trusted’ and ‘faithful’²⁸, too. It implies ‘manager’²⁹ as well. The word refers to a ‘person who is put in charge of taking care of something that does not belong to him or her’. As per Webster’s Dictionary, a steward is ‘one who is employed in a large household or estate to manage domestic concerns’. As the steward of nature, man is appointed by God to manage the ‘domestic environmental concerns’ of our planet earth that is the home of all living beings. The criterion for judging the quality of the steward is ‘whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much’³⁰. Man as the steward on earth is the representative of God and he requires a character that is worthy of God.

3.2. Intelligent, wise and responsible ways

Stewardship according to the Bible would mean ‘being a partner’ with God in managing the creation. It involves the general characteristics and responsibilities of being faithful, wise and

responsible. Meeting daily needs and not abusing or wasting what he or she has been put in charge of managing has to be concern of the steward. He has to maintain moderation in everything, be capable of solving problems and to follow the wishes and instructions of owner, relating to managing the household or the estate³¹. The steward is held accountable to the master. Therefore, actions in line with proper management are rewarded with 'true riches' (spiritual riches). Actions that are improper are punished with something being taken away³².

3.3. Respecting the elements of nature

Christian environmental ethics requires man the steward to keep in mind that all of creation ultimately belongs to God and is valuable to God independent of human use. Therefore, man has to respect and even love elements of nature out of regard and love for his or her Creator. The Godly love, respect and care for nature in no way means worshipping any item of the nature. For example, one who is manager of a farm, forest, park or natural area would not deliberately kill plants and animals under his or her care without good reason. Using the items of nature in a non-wasteful, purposeful and diligent manner is oriented to sustain the original functions of the elements of nature and the natural systems.

3.4. Discernment for transforming the nature

The creative design of God involves a time stipulated for everything. The book of Ecclesiastes states, 'there is a time for everything and a season for every activity under heaven: a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time uproot, a time to kill and a time to heal, a time to tear down and a time to build,...a time to keep and a time to throw away'³³. A sense of discretion only can facilitate man for discerning that auspicious time. Having a grip over that time is transformative and that is necessary to carry out the God-given role as caretakers of nature. Such a responsible way has to be nurtured in view of sustainable ways in the environment. Such an understanding of stewardship guards against selfish or careless exploitation of the resources of the world.

3.5. Dimensions of stewardship

Caretaking of nature has various dimensions. Farmers, foresters or fishermen who manage and harvest the land and waters of the earth in a productive and sustainable manner are good stewards. Biologists, botanists, ecologists or other environmental scientists, who study nature and develop scientific solutions to problems and challenges related to managing nature in the respective areas, are good stewards, too. Toxicologists or other human health specialists, who study the effects of environmental pollutants on people and suggest strategies for effective waste management and pollution control, are responsible stewards, as well. All those who contribute to the protection and maintenance of health and quality of life add to the varied areas of stewardship, evidently so.

4. THE FUNDAMENTAL ETHICS OF LIFE

4.1. Faith the right orientation of life

Jesus gives a criterion for scanning the life-focus of man in life through towering and imperative stipulations. 'Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But, store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, where thieves do not break in and steal. For, where your treasure is, there your heart will be also'³⁴. The wrong focus is disorientation in life and placing any item of the creation at the centre of one's faith is a derailment in life. In fact, it is one's faith that provides one with the right ethical orientation of life.

4.2. The right moral basis

The humanities, the social sciences and the physical and biological sciences have to provide man with a 'moral basis' for interacting with the nature. That, in its turn, will facilitate solving environmental issues and problems. Bible proposes a moral perspective that guides the destiny of human behaviour in all its details. Human actions proceed from his attitudes that are grounded in the heart, mind and spirit of the individual. The substance and quality of the moral fibre of man determines all that is expressed in the human behaviour. It would mean, first and foremost, ensuring the singular place of the Creator. Developing a thoughtful, respectful and creative attitude to all living beings and the whole creation is the extension of the above moral stance. Strengthening the ethical perception of life is the keynote answer to the environmental concerns.

4.2. The hierarchy of God, people and nature

The account of the creation story contains the idea of a hierarchy of God, people and nature. The statements 'God created the heaven and the earth' and 'God created man in his own image'³⁵ establish the dominion and control of God over the creation as the giver of life. Therefore, people and nature have to submit to God's plans and ways. The command to 'rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground'³⁶ refers to the fact that people have a certain dominion over nature. This three-layer idea needs to be understood in its right sense and it maintains a balance among the components of the reality.

4.3. Sharing the created nature with the creation

In spite of the fact that man is endowed with a higher intelligence and wisdom, in line with the character of the Creator, he is ordained to share his life with the rest of the creation. This would require him to creatively interact with the diverse elements of nature, such as plants and animals, and live together harmoniously with them. People and the nature share a common heritage and bond with plants, animals and other elements of nature as fellow creations of God. As the plants and animals serve a supportive system to man, man should extend a responsible behaviour with them.

4.4. Christian Ethics for the Environment

The 'God-given role of caretaking' or managing the elements of nature and natural systems is a foundational ethical imperative. Agricultural, horticultural and cultural approach to the creation is the core duty that emerges from this mandate. This three-dimensional duty takes care of the life-supportive, aesthetic and value-based provisions of human life. Cultivating the land to grow food crops and wood trees, developing gardens and parks, lakes and rivers for recreational as well as sanitary purposes, promoting ecosystems for fish and wildlife habitat, moderating the global climate, managing waste and pollution, regulating emissions of waste by-products from point sources of plants and nonpoint sources of automobiles, etc are some of the details of the environmental ethics.

4.5. The covenantal renewal of the creation by God

The Book of Genesis has a characteristic episode that narrates the covenantal scheme of renewing the creation by God. When selfishness and crime increased in the human conduct, God decided to destroy the creation by flood. He selected a pair each of every species of the creation and entered into a covenant with Noah, who was a just man³⁷. It was a covenantal renewal of the entire creation. The 'rainbow', which is a living symbol of beauty and harmony, is God's sign and reminder of His covenant with Noah and with all the living creatures on earth³⁸. This covenant was definitively renewed in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, as a living and classic symbol of ethical reminder for abiding by the environmental code of conduct, at all times.

4.6. Combating corrupt environmental behaviour

Wherever the environment is degraded, it has to be repaired and wherever it is damaged, the damage level has to be mitigated. This requires education for enlightened views and diligent administration for effective management in the field. The moral basis is an advantageous position to chalk out thoughtful solutions to the problems and issues regarding the natural resources and the environment. Paul instructs, 'Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind'³⁹. He continues, presenting Christ as the symbol of the new creation, 'if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come'⁴⁰. One's faith has to motivate one in being part of the process of redeeming and renewing nature here and now.

4.7. Noble approach to the creation

Problems and issues related to the environment are fundamentally related to the basic ethics of life. How does one look at the nature and all that it contains? What is the first thought that comes to the mind when one sees rivers, trees, flowers, fruits, etc. If the consumerist mind of man has the upper hand, it is a proof that there is something fundamentally wrong with the ethical stance of life. No doubt, the natural resources of the earth serve a life-support. The aesthetic view that values everything on its own merit is a sound principle in life. The view that recognizes the fundamental dignity of every item of creation is still a higher value in ethics.

5. ADDRESSING ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS

5.1. Ecological consciousness

The word 'ecology' derives from the Greek roots 'eco' meaning 'house' and 'logy' meaning 'study' or 'science'. Therefore, the word 'ecology' would mean 'house study' or 'study/science of the house'. More often than otherwise, people are accustomed to entertain a very narrow idea of one's dwelling. The word 'house' here refers to the planet earth and its natural systems that provide life-support on a large level. From this angle, our house or home is not just a place, where there is a small house made out of brick, wood and stone. It is the entire earth, the nature, the creation, where we have our being. It includes our neighbourhoods, villages, towns, cities, landscapes and the rest of the natural environment. The human consciousness of ecology has to broaden to such a larger and heavenly home, which the Creator has provided the humans and others with.

5.2. Ecologically sound physical dwellings

The physical dwellings in which the humans live require life-support systems, as well. These artificial life-support systems cover the areas of air, water, temperature, waste disposal, and the like. Regulation of oxygen and carbon dioxide levels is required for the supply of healthy air to breathe. Provision of safe and secure drinking water and clean water for general use needs to be made. Heating and cooling mechanism has to be utilized for keeping indoor temperature levels conducive to human life. Device for human waste disposal management is vital for preventing potential germ-production and illness.

5.3. Larger environmental duties

Man has an inalienable duty to take care of forests, deserts, oceans, lakes and rivers for promoting and maintaining the natural life-support systems designed by the Creator. The planet earth has various chemical cycles. The cycle of oxygen-carbon dioxide by the plants supply breathable air and liveable global temperatures. The hydrologic cycle provides water for drinking and other purposes. The chemical cycles contribute to the mineral resources of coal, oil, natural gas, electricity, etc. These cycles support also renewable resources, such as trees and fish and wildlife that are used for consumptive and recreational purposes. A sustainable policy and a creative approach have to follow these life-support systems of the nature.

5.4. Innovative and scientific measures

The Christian ethics have motivated scientists to research into the human behaviour in relation to the environment. They highlighted various lessons from the crimes the humans have committed towards the environment and the nature. For example, they have documented the natural ability of wetlands to filter chemicals out of water that are potentially harmful to human health. They have also proved that the excessive use of the natural system threatens the continued ability of a particular natural system to assimilate and treat wastes. The Book of Leviticus narrates how ‘the fields are to lie fallow every seventh year in order to ensure the continued fertility of the soil’, ‘to guard against overtaxing its resources’, ‘the land is to have a year of rest’ and ‘yields during the Sabbath year is enough for you’⁴¹.

5.4. Diverse approaches to strengthening the eco-system

Experts of social, economic, political and other sciences need to invent measures to address problems related to natural resources and the environment. Philosophers, religionists and scriptural specialists have to develop perspectives on the worth and purposes of people and nature. Teachers of educational institutions have to guide research and public service activities as well as spread information regarding environmental perspectives and concerns. People in administration have to caution the public with reference to the consequences of public and private behaviour that is insensitive and harmful to the physical and social environment. Legislative bodies at different levels have to make laws that would ensure right behaviour or the people in their respective area of operation.

5.5. Restoring the original harmony of creation

The Book of Isaiah presents the original and ideal harmony of the creation, where ‘the wolf will live with the lamb’, ‘the leopard will lie down with the goat’, ‘the calf and the lion and the yearling will lie together’, ‘a little child will lead them’, ‘the cow will feed with the bear’, ‘their young will lie down together’, ‘the lion will eat a straw like the ox’, ‘the infant will play near the hole of the cobra’, ‘the young child will put his hand into the viper’s nest’, ‘they will neither harm nor destroy’, ‘on my holy mountain’, ‘for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea’. The restoration of this original state will be done thus -- ‘the shoot from the stump of Jesse’, ‘from his roots a branch will bear fruit’ and ‘the spirit of the Lord will rest on him’⁴². Again, the plentiful state is pictured as ‘the open pastures are becoming green’, ‘the trees are bearing their fruit’; and ‘you will have plenty to eat until you are full’⁴³.

5.5. Christian stalwarts of environmental insights

Francis of Assisi, the saint of nature, rejected wealth and power to live in harmony with nature. He celebrated nature as vision of God. His prayers and meditations on the beauty of creation as well as his practical concern for God’s creation are famous. Hildegard of Bingen, a student of nature and leader of a monastic community, investigated and made use of the healing qualities of nature. She stressed on the need to respect nature and to learn from it. Her writings, music and art reflect a profound sense of oneness with creation and an immense reverence for the work of the Creator. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, renowned for his reflections in the fields of science, philosophy and religion, proposed that matter is impregnated with purposeful energy that constantly evolves towards a greater complexity. He also propounded that matter is the indispensable pre-condition for spirit and is the basic building block of life. These and other specialists have contributed immensely to Christian environmental ethics.

5.6. Christian environmental campaigns

Pope John Paul II made a statement on ecological awareness, namely ‘Peace with God the Creator, Peace with all of Creation’, in his message for peace in 1990. The World Council of Churches released a statement, called ‘The Joint Appeal in Religion and Science: Statement by Religious Leaders at the

World Environment Summit' in 1991. American National Religious Partnership for the Environment published appeals for greater ecological awareness in 1990 and 1995. Evangelical Environmental Network published its Declaration on Creation in 1996. National Council of Churches in Australia (NCCA) declared a statement, namely 'Decade to overcome Violence' in 2001, for overcoming violence against the environment. NCCA also produced a statement on environmental ethics, called 'Sustaining Creation' 2003. Catholic Committee on Justice, Development, Ecology and Peace (BCJDEP) of Australia set up an organisation, called 'Catholic Earth-care Australia'.

5.7. Basic lessons in environmental ethics

India is lagging far behind in both her ecological awareness and environmental ethics. She needs to start almost from the basics. The nature is not to be used for disposing human waste. It spreads pollution and infection. Public toilets need to be kept clean. Throwing waste materials in public places is to be avoided. Measures have to be appropriated that chemical emission from manufacturing plants and automobiles be the most minimum and it is managed with the least harm to human and other living beings. The use of microphone is to be very sparingly done and the volume to be kept just enough to be heard. Prohibition by the Supreme Court regarding the use of microphone at the sacred hours of rest, i.e., between 22 to 06 hours at night, has to be scrupulously honoured. Strictly refraining from pollution and adulteration of air, water, sound, sight and taste construct the basic lessons of life that contribute to a substantial environmental ethics. The agricultural, horticultural and cultural hygiene and aesthetics, along with the above measures for a civilized life, will enhance the wellbeing of human beings and the entire creation.

CONCLUSION

Christian thinking upholds that both humankind and rest of the created world are created by God and that both reflect the glory of God as well as convey the image of God. It highlights that God commanded human beings to live in fruitful relationship with the earth and therefore recognizes that there is a special relationship between humankind and the environment. The diligent and accountable stewardship of the creation by human beings is the rich perspective that makes the Christian teaching on environmental ethics a clear rhetoric and call for action, in view of the environmental wellbeing of the creation.

END NOTES

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5. *Ibid*, Acts 14.15, p.1257
6. *Ibid*, Psalm 24.1, p.624
7. *Ibid*, Psalm 89.11, p.672
8. *Ibid*, Leviticus 25.23, p.141
9. *Ibid*, Mathew 6.26, p.1100
10. *Ibid*, Mathew 6.28-29, p.1100
11. *Ibid*, Mathew 6.30, p.1100
12. *Ibid*, Mathew 6.31-33, p.1100
13. *Ibid*, Mathew 6.26, p.1100
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15. *Ibid*, Romans 1.20, p.1279
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39. Ibid, Romans 12.2, p.1290
40. Ibid, 2 Corinthians 5.17, p.1315-1316
41. Ibid, Leviticus 25.5-6, p.141
42. Ibid, Isaiah 11.1-9, p.784
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