

Cite as: Doss, Mohan. (2006). Ecological Concerns: An Indian Christian Response (Version 1.0). Jnanadeepa: Pune Journal of Religious Studies, Jan-June 2006 (9/1), 85-100.
<http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4266676>

Ecological Concerns: An Indian Christian Response

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Abstract:

The objective of this paper is to reflect on an Indian Christian response to the ecological crisis that threatens to obliterate life from the face of the earth. This paper, in the first part, briefly sketches the ecological crisis and the causes of this ecological crisis, and in the second part it reflects on the Christian religious resources and on the Indian religious experience for insights to respond to the ecological crisis. The final part of this paper offers three ecological imperatives to value and preserve creation that is threatened by human greed. The ecological imperatives – eco-consciousness, eco-spirituality and the call to be stewards of creation – demand that we make concerted and urgent efforts in different spheres of life. Jesus, the incarnate Word and the Risen Lord, inspires us to follow his footprints to live in harmony with the human and cosmic community, because “all things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.”

Keywords:

Ecological crisis, Indian Christianity, Nature, harmony (rta), ecological consciousness, eco-spirituality.

Introduction

The Earth is the womb of all life. Mother earth enables life to grow, provides nourishment, and sustains life. Human life is inconceivable without mother earth. Hence, humans can no longer perceive themselves as predators of nature, and planet earth can no longer be treated as an object to be dominated and exploited for humans' comfort. It is an undeniable fact today that the destiny of humanity is closely knit together with the very existence of mother earth. Indeed, humans are created to be stewards and protectors of nature and are called to cherish the inter-relatedness of everything in nature and to read with greater sensitivity the signs of the earth and take care of God's creation with greater responsibility ("to till it and keep it" Gen 2:15).

'Ecology' the familiar word of today came into currency in Germany in 1866 to denote the then emerging discipline, "science of habitat", or science of the natural environment of home. The phrase 'natural environment of home' includes everything in nature that affects "people's lives, the life of animals, plants, air and water and anything that is associated with created beings".¹ The Christian vocation is not otherworldly but closely related to this *habitat*, to this world, because as St. John says, this is the world that "God so loved that he gave his only Son" (Jn 3:16). The Christian vocation consists, contrary to the popular conception, not of perceiving the world merely as a temporary stop on the journey to heaven, but as a 'living space' (Gen 1:1-25) to live one's commitment, to protect the integrity of creation and to change the situations that threaten life, the gift of God (Gen 2:7). Therefore, ecology and ecological concerns are significant dimensions of Christian vocation and commitment.

The objective of this paper is to reflect on the Indian Christian response to the ecological crisis that threatens to obliterate life from the face of the earth today. This paper, in the first part, briefly sketches the ecological crisis and the causes of this ecological crisis, and in the second part it reflects on the Christian religious resources and the Indian religious experience for insights to respond to the ecological crisis. The final part of this paper offers three ecological imperatives to value and preserve creation, that is threatened by human greed.

1.1 The Ecological Crisis

The ecological crisis is a complex and multifaceted one that threatens life in the world. The collapse of ecological equilibrium comes not merely from one direction but is spearheaded by multi-dimensional ways and methods. The ecological crisis was initially perceived as an aggregation of local phenomena that attracted global attention. For instance, the oil spill off the shore of Santa Barbara, Mercury pollution in Miamata Bay, acid precipitation somewhere in the European continent, the gas tragedy in Bhopal or the disaster in Chernobyl etc. But today the ecological crisis has direct deleterious effects on a global level. It has to do not merely with the individual shrubs, grubs or oil spill or gas leakage in a far off place. The ecological issues have taken on a global dimension and refer to the disappearance of species, the degradation of ecosystems, air and water pollution and soil erosion.²

According to UNO, nearly 35,000 children die daily due to diseases caused by contaminated water and food. It is estimated that every tick of a second adds one football field to the deforested area in the tropical rain forests and every year an area of the size of Austria. Flora and fauna are extinguished at the rate of almost seventeen species every day. The great swings in weather conditions, flooding and other natural calamities are also consequences of the dramatic warming effect upon the world, caused by the gases emitted by the industrial cities of the world.³

While speaking on the challenges to society in our times, Pope John Paul II rightly stated that human beings have “without hesitation devastated wooded plains and valleys, polluted waters, disfigured the earth’s habitat, made the air unbreathable, disturbed the hydro-geological and atmospheric systems, turned luxuriant areas into deserts, and undertaken forms of unrestricted industrialization, degrading that ‘flowerbed’ – to use an image from Dante Alighieri – which is the earth our dwelling place”.⁴

Modern India, dubbed by the mechanistic understanding of the world, motivated by the myth of endless growth and ever-increasing profit and accompanied by a ruthless model of development, could not reduce the velocity of exploitation of the natural resources that

progressively grew beyond proportion in all dimensions of life. Consequently, the ecological crisis in India is seriously felt in the air that is polluted by the chemical ingredients of industrial chimneys and the smokestacks of automobiles on the road. Raindrops that bring about new life from the earth have turned into acid-drops due to the presence of carbon dioxide and chemical ingredients in the atmosphere which cause the destruction of vegetation. The emergence of concrete jungles and sky-scrapers in the cities and towns with unimaginable speed and rhythm and the gigantic machines employed for their construction leave not only the whole atmosphere polluted but also produce a never-ending noise pollution. The results of all these pollutions are severe illness, serious diseases and untimely deaths of fellow human beings. The dumping of waste materials of our unplanned urbanization and industrialization pollutes water in the rivers and streams and fills it with poisonous chemical particles. This in turn affects not only the health of the people but also the marine life and vegetation. Any study of the deforestation in India and the use of pesticides in the agricultural sector provides evidence of the ecological ruin caused in the name of industrial development, urbanization and green revolution.⁵

The Statement of the Indian Theological Association in 1999 described the Indian situation of the ecological crisis in the following way:

In India the ecological crisis is aggravated by factors such as erratic economic development and liberalization, a market economy, bureaucratic corruption, lack of enlightened political leadership, and the debt-trap. The population problem, casteism, massive illiteracy and poverty in the rural sectors, and appalling state of the slums in the cities add to the problem of environmental pollution. In this critical situation everybody's life and every form of life stand on the brink of disaster and even extinction.⁶

1.2 The Causes of the Ecological Crisis

The ecological crisis faced by the global community in our times is caused not merely by certain socio-economic and political

structures that operate in our societies but also by the presence of powerful motives and attitudes that orient and regulate the lives of individuals and communities.⁷ Some of these could be described as follows:

1.2.1 Understanding nature from the Newtonian Perspective

Human beings are seen as the centre of the universe and nature is perceived as something to be quantified and conquered and not as something to be respected. The mechanical world-view, a consequence of the Newtonian perception of the world, encouraged the use of technology and science to ruthlessly exploit the natural resources and glorified an industrial ethic of maximum profit, exploitation of raw materials, cut-throat competition and treatment of human beings merely as a work-force. Thus the mechanical understanding of the world distanced humans from their habitat and destroyed the inherent harmony that exists between all living beings and human society.

1.2.2 Glamour of Consumerism

The secret of the success of today's market economy is its ability to carry on the insight of the industrial revolution, namely conversion of wants into needs. The fast track market economy has even succeeded in creating new needs, new status symbols and convincingly preaches the failure of the diminishing marginal returns theory in the realm of immediate satisfaction of needs. It is in this context what John Paul II said becomes very relevant: "Modern society will find no solution to the ecological problem unless it takes a serious look at its lifestyle".⁸

1.2.3 Selfishness

Selfishness is the root cause of the ecological crisis that the global community faces today. It is primarily selfishness of a company, community or a nation that gears its activities towards greater profit and power without any concern for the lives of others. As long as one's action does not affect oneself, anything seems to be acceptable, even if it has dire consequences in a far off place or in another society

or for future generations. In fact, it is selfishness that makes people blind to the needs of others in the present or in the future and goes about exploiting all resources both renewable and non-renewable.

It is all but impossible to overcome the present ecological crisis created by the exploitative, destructive and ruthless use of technology unless structural changes in the society go hand in hand with attitudinal changes in all walks of life. For it is becoming more explicit today that the roots of the ecological disaster “lie in the attitudes, values, perceptions, and basic worldview that we humans of the industrial-technological global society have come to hold”.⁹

2.0 Indian Christian Perspective

2.1 Old Testament Perspective

The story of creation in the book of *Genesis* states that Yahweh first and foremost created space for living beings (Gen 1:1-26). It is a powerful proclamation that “every life needs its corresponding living space. Vital power and energy are not enough by themselves”.¹⁰ The living space, as described in Genesis, is given to human beings not merely to be taken care of, but as a space for their dwelling and growth. Therefore, “anyone who destroys the living spaces of other living things, destroys these things themselves, by destroying their chances for living”.¹¹ The creation story in Genesis also states that human beings are created in the image and likeness of God, in other words, as the very representatives of God. It is more appropriate today to interpret the ‘dominion’ (*rdh*) that is implied in the creation account of Genesis as the responsibility of a good shepherd to take care of creation.¹²

The Psalms present among other things a perspective that God’s creation reveals the greatness of the Creator and invites human beings to praise God for the wonder of creation.¹³ Yahweh’s promise of a new heaven and a new earth in Isaiah (Is 65:17-25), Yahweh’s assertion of His sovereignty over the creation in Jeremiah (Jer 2:2), the assurance of new life through His word and spirit in Ezekiel (Ezk 37:14), the purpose of all of creation in Daniel (Dn 3:57-90) and Yahweh’s promise of abundance of blessings (Joel 2: 19a, 21-24; and of pouring out His Spirit on creation in Joel (Joel 2:28-29)

emphasize God's all-comprehensive salvific concern that includes everything in creation and affirms that His blessings are very much for this world and for our existence here and now.

2.2 New Testament Perspective

Jesus, as we find him in the pages of the Gospels, is a child, friend and lover of nature. Nature was an open book that inspired and taught him.¹⁴ The following lines concisely picture the intimate relatedness of Jesus' life with nature:

The star proclaimed his advent. Jordan revealed to him his identity. The desert with its mysteries strengthened him for his mission. His wisdom and teaching were very much rooted in nature. In the free birds he saw Divine Providence and in the wayside flowers Divine aesthetics. The seeds, the trees and plants growing in the field were for him the symbols of the reign of God. Water was for him the symbol of the Spirit, the gift to God's people. Nature was with him in his suffering and mourned his death.¹⁵

Jesus' miracles, when read with an ecological sensitivity, challenge us to be committed to the integrity of creation and to our responsibility to our fellow human beings. The nature miracles offer a clarion call to trust in divine providence amidst natural calamities. The feeding miracles confront us with the urgency of sharing the fruits of the earth with the last, least and lost of the society today. The exorcism miracles remind us that the restoration of cosmic harmony is a significant dimension of the salvific plan of God. Jesus' healing miracles proclaim powerfully that the mission of Jesus to bring the fullness of life to suffering humanity is an expression of God's concern for life in abundance among His creation. The resuscitation miracles teach us that the final words in God's reign are not death and passivity but rather renewal, new creation and new life.¹⁶ Jesus' kerygmatic proclamation in the synagogue at Nazareth speaks of his passionate concern for integral liberation that embraces social and ecological justice (Lk 4:18-19). Jesus made use of the symbolism of food to explain the significance of his life and as an expression of his continued presence with humanity.

Some of the basic dimensions of the Christian understanding of nature are highlighted in the Pauline writings. The significance of Christ for creation is shown by stating that everything was “created in him and for him” (Col 1:14) and that the destiny of creation consists in reaching its God-directed and oriented unity in Christ (“God will be all in all” Eph 1:10; 1 Cor 15:28).¹⁷ The Pauline tradition also speaks of a dynamic movement within all of creation as well as of the interrelatedness of humans with all of creation (Rom 8:19-23).¹⁸

2.3 Theological Perspectives on Nature

One can observe two motifs in the Western theological approach to nature. One motif is called the ‘spiritual motif’ and the other the ‘ecological motif’. The trends of spiritual motif are present in the writings of Origen, Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventure and Karl Barth while the ecological motif is perceived in the approaches of Irenaeus, Augustine and Francis of Assisi, the patron saint of ecology. The spiritual motif underlies an attitude that “the end of human existence is thought to lie either in a transcendence of nature or, in modern times, a humanization of nature,” while the ecological motif perceives the end “to lie in community with nature, appreciative of nature’s blessings and cognizant that nature has value apart from its usefulness to humans.”¹⁹

The Second Vatican Council has given a clarion call to the faithful to be open “to learn the deepest meaning and the value of all creation”²⁰ and stated that the responsibilities of pastors include their duty to remind the people of “the principles concerning the purpose of creation and the use of temporal things”.²¹ Pope John Paul II continued the spirit and orientation of the Second Vatican Council in many of his writings like “Peace with God the Creator, Peace with all Creation” in 1990 and “*Centesimus Annus*” in 1991. The World Council of Churches came out with an impressive document in 1994 “Sign of Peril, Test of Faith: Accelerated Climate Change”. Bishops’ Conferences in various parts of the world and the churches of different denominations have made efforts to bring greater awareness and sensitivity to urgent ecological concerns.²²

2.4 Indian Religious Experience

The cultures and life-style of the indigenous people in India bear testimony to a continuous life process that binds together human beings and nature, animals and gods. Their perception of nature, their relatedness to nature and to one another, their religio-social and cultural expressions reveal a symbiotic relationship with nature and a holistic vision of life. The Indian religious experiences of nature synthesized in different faith traditions powerfully bring out the interrelatedness of humans with the whole of creation. Vedic wisdom perceived “the earth as the mother and the streams of water as the life-giving veins, the sky as the father and the air as the life-giving *prana*, sun as the source of life energy and fire as the supreme purifier (*Att. Veda* 12.1-63; *Rig Veda* 10.198.1, 4.40.5, 3.62.10)” and the life-enhancing and protecting energies in nature as “gods (*deva*), through which the Light of the One shines”.²³ The Upanishads remind us of the one *Atman* in which all beings find their interrelatedness (*Tait. Up.* 3.1; *Isa. Up.* 1.1), while the *Bhagavad G’ita* speaks of the nobility of a deep commitment towards the welfare of all beings (12,4; 3, 9-13). Benevolence and respect for all beings is the quintessence and the ethical-force of the traditions of Buddhism and Jainism.²⁴ Thus various Indian religious traditions perceive the earth as a life-giving mother and protecting father, manifest the Indian religious psyche as one that “has an innate perception of the universal symbiosis: all beings are bound together in the one evolutionary process of life” and reveal the identity of a human being as a person “with a spiritual consciousness of the universal harmony (*rta*) and a sense of responsibility towards the well-being of all (*dharma*).”²⁵

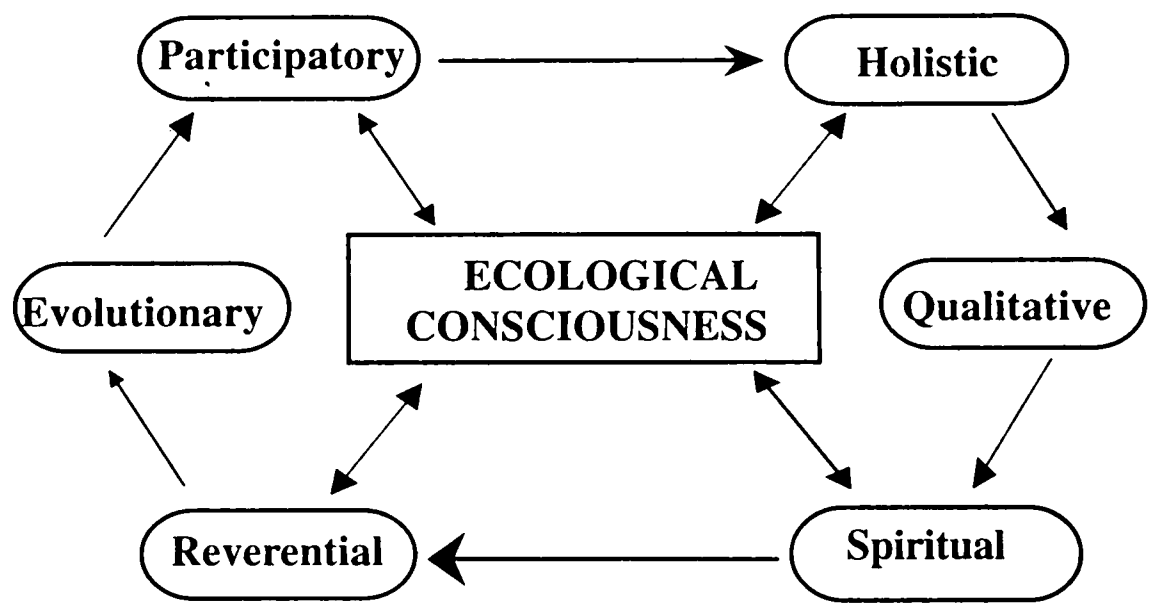
3.0 Ecological Imperatives

In the light of the reflections on the ecological crisis, its causes and on the Indian Christian religious resources, the following three ecological imperatives seem to be very relevant today.

3.1 Eco-consciousness

In the world of today the technosphere controls the biosphere and the psychosphere. Consequently, the values and directives of

the technosphere dictate terms and exploit other spheres. The emergence of ecological consciousness among humans is a necessity to safeguard the universe of the human community. Ecological consciousness challenges the rationality of the mechanical perception of the world and emphasizes economic equity and the significance of large complexes with their supportive components, namely, human persons and ecological habits. Henryk Skolimowski mentions six characteristics that enable us to describe the nature and scope of ecological consciousness. These six characteristics, according to Skolimowski, support each other; are supported by each other and serve to define each other. The interrelatedness of these characteristics in the emergence of ecological consciousness is presented through the following diagram²⁶:



Ecological consciousness, as the diagram shows, seeks a synthesis that orientates us to the spiritual and seeks social amelioration and justice for all. In its efforts to bring about a synthesis it reaffirms the wholeness and unity of creation and also the role of humans without threatening anything and also without celebrating the aggressive and exploitative tendency of human beings. Various ecological movements like the ‘Chipko movement’, the ‘appiko movement’, the fishermen’s movement, movements against the Teri Dam and Narmada Valley, ‘Mitti Bachao Abhiyan’ and other similar

movements and organizations are expressions of injustice committed against people motivated by ecological consciousness.²⁷ These movements are, indeed, protests registered by the victims of the great atrocities committed against human habitats. They try to replace hierarchical exploitation and domination of all kinds with fully participative forms of a “humanity-in-nature”, where freedom and individuality are not considered as opposites of nature and social coherence.²⁸ The ecological consciousness that emerges in and through these movements takes seriously human persons with their legitimate, complementary and participative relationship with the environment. It emphasizes the necessity of being in communion with nature. “It changes one’s attitude from plundering, robbing, exploiting to a preserving, cherishing and protecting attitude for after all one does not rob from his/her own home (*OIKOS*).”²⁹

Ecological consciousness acknowledges the truth of Christian revelation, present also in other religious traditions, that the whole of creation is but an expression of God’s love, and seeks to emphasize the harmony and communion in God’s creation. Therefore, the humans’ attitude to nature can be neither one of subjugation nor of dominion and aggressive exploitation but rather one of harmony. Ecological consciousness moulds us to hear the silent cry of Nature at the pain of the dismantling and disintegration of the components of nature by human greed and selfishness and enables us to be sensitive to the harmony that exists in the universe of a human community.

3.2 Eco-spirituality

Eco-spirituality is a contemplative attitude that makes one open and docile to God’s presence in every human being, in every event and in everything. God, the creator, sustainer and Lord of all creation, is present in all things, events and persons. Eco-spirituality enables one to experience God more and more in everything, because everything comes into being out of His abundance of love, belongs to Him (Wis 12:21) and depends on Him (Ps 104:27). Humans, who are created in the image of God, are called to love and take care of everything and realize that they and the world are interdependent and interrelated. The spiritual awareness that emerges from an intense

awareness of this interrelatedness will have the power to make people respect and transform the world. Eco-spirituality will “oblige people to move against the current of irreverence in contemporary society. Just as reverence is born in moments of quiet wonder allowing us to ponder the beautiful and to experience the presence of God there, so irreverence is a consequence of hasty skimming the surface of life and failing to find any richness of depth in it”.³⁰

Eco-spirituality, that emerges from the awareness of the immanent presence of God, takes us to the deeper and cosmic dimensions of the Christian sacraments. For instance, the symbolism of water in the celebration of the sacrament of baptism also reminds the Christian community of its responsibility to ensure that water is not polluted. Consequently, the sacrament of baptism, a sacrament of initiation into the Christian community, will also be an initiation into the wider cosmic community. In this way, responsibility to keep water clean in one’s locality, responsible use of water and water-saving projects would actually form part of our Christian commitment.³¹ The symbols used in the celebration of the sacraments like water, light, oil, bread, wine, incense, wax, human touch and voice are not only means to open us to the presence of God during the sacramental action but also means of promoting heightened ecological awareness. The symbols used in the celebration of the Christian sacraments “take into account both the transcendence and the immanence of God, while being particularly drawn to the presence of God within each living creature and within all material reality”.³²

The Word that was in the beginning with God (Jn 1:1) manifests in and through the incarnation the capacity of nature, human nature, to reveal the divine and thereby strengthens the bond between God, humans and the world. This bond has been, contrary to the popular understanding, further strengthened through the Risen Christ, who renews all creation through the power of His Spirit and continues to be the centre of human and cosmic history (Col 3:11).

3.3. Called to be Stewards of Creation

New insights and new interpretations that emerge in the present times in different religious traditions and sources emphasize greatly the significance of the interdependence of all creatures in the world

and perceive the world as a single cosmic community and the world as a gift from God and a possession of God. Although human beings are placed at the apex of creation, they are integral to creation and have the responsibility to take care of creation. This underlines a shift from a human-centred perspective to an earth-centred perspective that will respect the earth and her resources, perceive human beings as self-conscious component members or parts of the cosmos, and human destiny as irrevocably integrated with the world. In fact, “humans are neither the centre of the world, nor its master. Rather all are called to be servants and co-creators with God of the world, and always deeply appreciating the beauty and integrity of created things”.³³ In short, humans are created to be stewards and caretakers of God’s creation and to share in the creative and sustaining power of God, the Creator and to live as the ‘image’ of God. Caring for mother earth is not an option, a choice one may be called to make, but it is the call and urgent responsibility of human beings. Hence, the very vocation of human beings as stewards and nurturers calls for a conscious living with greater sensitivity and responsibility to nature.

Human beings’ concrete living of this vocation to be stewards of God’s creation is to a large extent determined by the relationship among human beings themselves. Pope John Paul II rightly emphasized this dimension of ecological concern in saying that what is at stake today “is not only *physical* ecology that is concerned to safeguard the habitat of the various living beings, but also a *human* ecology which makes the existence of creatures more dignified, by protecting the fundamental good of life in all its manifestations and by preparing for future generations an environment more in conformity with the Creator’s plan”.³⁴ Unless the relationship among human beings is guided by the values of the Gospel, our efforts to solve the grave consequences of the present ecological crisis will remain cosmetic solutions giving rise only to other forms of exploitation of nature and human beings. The children’s perception of cosmic spirituality at the Rio Earth Summit included also the following lines: “Ecology is not only trees and animals and rivers. It is also hunger and homelessness. We should help our brothers and sisters who have been abandoned in the streets”.³⁵

Conclusion

Life is a precious gift of inestimable value that God has given us. This gift of life can be nourished and lived meaningfully only through respecting the interrelatedness and interdependence of the world and humans. Values are better sustained and communicated when they are translated into decisions, deeds and projects. Values enfolded in deeds have the power to give orientation to and transform society. The ecological imperatives – eco-consciousness, eco-spirituality and call to be stewards of creation – demand that we make concerted and urgent efforts in different spheres of life.³⁶ These efforts would include encouraging people to participate in the ecological movements at local, national and global levels, empowering the younger generation to understand the significance of growing as stewards of God's creation, a serious reflection on the consumerist life-style and its consequences for our environment, docility to learn from the victims of the ecological crisis how to respect human dignity and to live as people of indomitable courage and hope, and celebrating meaningfully and effectively our eco-dependent existence through liturgical, cultural and secular symbols, rituals and events. Jesus, the incarnate Word and the Risen Lord, inspires us to follow his footprints to live in harmony with the human and cosmic community, because "all things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being" (Jn 1:4).

Notes

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