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Ethical Challenges from Ecology

George Therukkattil MCBS

Chair of Christianity, University of Mysore, Karnataka

Abstract:

Faced with the alarming environmental crisis, we need an ethics of universal compassion, one that seeks harmony, respect and concern for all creatures, not merely one promotes the advantage of the human race but one that aims at the good which conserves and promotes all creatures, the supreme good being earthly and cosmic integrity. We are mutual custodians. We are mothers, not masters, of creation. We need an ethics of partnership. No more stewardship, but servants of and partners with Nature who care for creation, who commit themselves to join in solidarity with indigenous communities struggling for their cultures, their right to land and sea, with peasants and farmers seeking land reforms. It is in doing so that we reflect God's creative and sustaining and compassionate love. It is an ethics of communion, not domination, that propels *cosmogenesis*. Such an ethics links together the issues of justice, peace and ecology. An act of covenanting for preserving the gift of the earth's atmosphere and for nurturing and sustaining the world's life; for combating the causes of the destructive changes to the atmosphere which threaten to disrupt the earth's climate and create widespread suffering and for building a culture that can live in harmony with the integrity of creation.

Keywords:

Ethics, ecology, universal compassion, nature, rights, eco-sensitivity, global world order.

A French diplomat, undergoing a routine medical check after serving three years in Kolkata, was asked how many packs of cigarettes he smoked a day. When he protested that he had never smoked in his life, his doctor couldn't believe him: three years of breathing Kolkata's air had given him lungs resembling a habitual smoker's. The state of environment health of India is deplorable. The dismal picture, coupled with corrupt enforcement of environmental regulations, reflects the sad state of the Indian ecology in the first years of the 21st century. Ecology is the problem of problems, and indeed the question of questions that makes relative all other questions.

Ecological crisis

India today is home to many of the world's most polluted cities. Factories belch forth noxious black clouds; effluents pour untreated into rivers; sewage systems reek and overflow. Despite the tree-huggers of the *Chipko Andolan*, deforestation and over-cultivation take their own environmental toll of rural India. As a result of unchecked pollution, respiratory illnesses, cardiovascular diseases and lung ailments are rife in India. The total health costs for the country resulting from illnesses caused by pollution are estimated at some 4.5 per cent of India's gross domestic product. In other words, about half of our country's annual economic growth is being wiped out by pollution, and development is taking place largely at the expense of the environment.

Not only in India is the situation so. The ecological issue takes the same form in many Third World countries. Land is being eroded very rapidly due to over-grazing or the stripping away of the tropical forests. The desert is advancing in many semi-arid places. The cutting down of the trees means that firewood is hard to come by – and the search for fuel leads to further stripping of the land and further erosion and desertification. The resultant change in the climate forces peasants – mainly women – to walk miles carrying the water they need in their homes. The poverty of the people and of the land causes peasants to put ever greater demands on the Earth – this in turn leads before long to greater poverty.

Quite recently these problems have been greatly increased by the fact that the more industrialized countries have been trying to lessen their own ecological problems by exporting some of them to the Third World. Toxic industrial waste, and even radioactive materials, have been dumped in poorer countries by unscrupulous Multi-National Companies. Governments in these countries may not have the technological expertise available to them to monitor the waste material, or officials maybe bribed to allow dangerous dumping to take place.

Even more risky is the development of nuclear energy in some Third world countries. First world scientists and governments often express alarm about this proliferation. There may well be an element of colonialism or even racism in such alarm. But the fact is that the use of nuclear power is inherently dangerous and the more widely it is used the greater the danger. And in some of the newly developing countries the controls on the way it is used may be even less stringent than in Western countries. In many places people have to live with the constant threat of an industrial or transport accident which could poison whole towns or tracts of the countryside or large stretches of rivers or beaches. If such an accident should involve nuclear material the danger is almost unlimited.

Further, some of the ecological abuses of the Third world are affecting the world as a whole. The most obvious example is the wholesale cutting down of the tropical rain-forests. The Amazonian rainforest is being destroyed at double the rate of all previous estimates. Satellite images show that an average of 15,500 sq km of forest is being cut down by selective logging each year. This is besides a similar amount clear-cut annually for cattle grazing or farming. Selective logging negatively impacts many plants and animals and increases erosion and fires. Additionally, up to 25 per cent more carbon dioxide is released to the atmosphere each year from the decomposition that loggers leave behind. About 400 million tones of carbon enter the atmosphere every year because of traditional deforestation in the Amazon and an additional 100 million tones of carbon occurs through selective logging. When a tree trunk is removed, the crown, wood debris and vines are left behind to

decompose, releasing carbon dioxide gas into the atmosphere. A thinned canopy also makes the forest more dry and prone to fire.

Many reputable scientists believe that the loss of oxygen produced by these forests, and the smoke from their burning, are bringing about a 'greenhouse effect' which will raise the average temperature all over the world. This, they say, will in turn lead to the melting of huge amounts of ice at the North and South poles. The resultant rise in the water level of the oceans may cause much of Bangladesh and other heavily-populated low-lying areas to be totally engulfed by the sea.

World peace is threatened not only by the arms race, regional conflicts and continued injustices among peoples and nations, but also by lack of due respect for nature, by the plundering of natural resources. There is a relationship between ecological problems and structural poverty. Unjust land distribution means that farms are so small that the soil becomes exhausted. In search of new land, the farmers cut down forests in an uncontrolled way. This destruction of the natural heritage is also caused by the need of heavily indebted countries to increase their exports in order to pay off their debts. Ecology and nuclear threat were major concerns of the West. On the other hand, unjust international economic relationships and structures and forced underdevelopment are more pressing issues of the Third World. Problems relating to injustice, lack of peace, and the degradation of the environment are all linked together and interrelated. Issues of Justice, peace and ecology are related. The root cause of the different threats to life is an unjust world economic order. This in turn is linked to the misuse of science and technology to gain power over nature and over others. Ultimately the ecological crisis is a set of attitudes, goals and values – an ethical crisis. It is an integral and crucial part of the justice agenda. A good deal of modern so-called development is really a matter of the plundering by a relatively small number of people of resources which had been available for the benefit of all - and of future generations. It is an unbalanced, unjust, and ecologically exploitative development that favours a minority at the expense of many others.

Response of Christian Ethics to Ecological Crisis

In the Christian perspective, Creation is God's gift and humans along with other components of the earth community live out their lives as a gift or loan from God. Creation is something sacred and our attitude towards it should be one of reverence and responsibility. Contrary to an earlier Christian instrumental attitude, which explored and exploited creation, the Christian ethics today sees that the usual Scriptural basis to prove the syllogism: 'Imago Dei': *therefore* human dignity does not follow. This syllogism in Gen. 1:26-31 is a narration of the rescue operation on the pattern of Exodus. God's likeness in humans here is attributed to their collective co-responsibility in God's liberative responsibility to the whole of Creation. Hence 'imago Dei' is not so much our dignity as our responsibility⁰ and 'rule over' means here 'to take charge'.¹ "It is not in terms of rights that the book of Genesis describes the first violation of inter-human justice, but as spurning to be one's brother's (and sister's) keeper (Gen.4:9)."² Besides, if rights are derived from human dignity, argues Aloysius Pieris, how could infra-human creatures have any rights? It is the covenant model that we are co-responsible for the whole of creation that meets this challenge.³ Therefore, we have to take up the challenge of healing our planet. A more caring and reverential attitude towards creation is necessary.

The new Christian ethics today approaches the earth as our home, and as a sanctuary which needs to be treated with responsibility, care and reverence. The earth discloses the lineaments of divine revelation. "Human and other forms of life are dependent upon forces we do not create and cannot fully control, forces that bring us into being and sustain us and life around us, but forces that also limit and destroy us and determine the destiny of the cosmos. This dependence – a matter of fact, no matter how it is interpreted – evokes a sense of the sublime, or for some of us a sense of the divine".⁴ Creation exists for God and we should relate to all things in a manner appropriate to their relation to God.⁵ This new understanding of God-experience is crucial for an altered ecological consciousness. "There is an urgent need to connect or reconnect all things by means of a powerful Center.... This Center makes us suffer when it breaks apart, which we perceive as an unjust attack against the earth, its ecosystem, its

flora and fauna, and particularly against its poor and oppressed, both men and women”.⁶

Besides, the new Christian ethics emphasizes our faith in the Universe sharing and participating in the resurrection of all flesh. There is a future for the stars, for the mountains, for plants, for animals and for people. Christian faith is adamant about this. This assurance of a general resurrection enabled the early Christians to speak of the cosmic Christ and of the Spirit’s dwelling in the energy of the universe and of life. The omnipresence of Christ and the Spirit is a favorite theme of St Francis of Assisi, who saw all created things and beings, from the sun and the moon to birds and snails, as sacraments of God and as brothers and sisters. Teilhard de Chardin updated this experience in the context of modern cosmology and tried to identify the emergence of consciousness as the unequivocal sign of God’s presence in the movement of matter toward ever greater complexity.

The ecological crisis has led us to think about a new spirituality that is oriented to the earth, especially to the segments of living and non-living that are oppressed. It calls for “a spirituality that demands a prophetic commitment, born not of simple indignation, but of a mystic experience of unity with the divine and with all things. Such a commitment will be indispensable in inaugurating or at least reinforcing a new civilizing paradigm that is more spiritual, compassionate, tender, and fraternal. This spirituality will help to guarantee a promising future for planet Earth and for all tribes that inhabit it”.⁷ Eco-protection measures the depth of our spirituality. Ethics degenerates into codified precepts and mechanical behaviour if it does not express a form of spirituality of integrity or mysticism. The Spirit sleeps in stone, dreams in flowers, awakens in animals, knows he is awake in men and feels awake in women. Such a vision can sustain an ecological mysticism.

A New Global World order and New Global Ethic

Humans have survived the fury of two world wars, but they will not survive the fury of the war they are waging against nature. The approaching eco-disaster is visible even to those whose vision is imperfect. Therefore, before it is too late, we must return to sanity.

The other name of this sanity is the conduct of life in consonance with the laws of ecology. But it would not be enough to have only ethical values to ensure a harmonious relationship between humans and nature at the community level. The new ethical order has to find another form of centrality. This should be eco-centric and should seek the equilibrium of the earthly community. For the sake of equilibrium human beings must impose limits on their own desires. Only an ecological ethics established on the basis of respect for otherness, on the acceptance of diversity, on solidarity and on the valuation of uniqueness, will help people to dethrone the dominant utilitarian paradigm that is so serious a threat to life and peace among all creatures in nature. We have to have a code of conduct for this purpose at the global level and also a global code of environmental ethics to guide the behaviour of the global society.

The world has become a global village. Ecological issues concern today the whole world. So what we need most of all is a new global order and a new global ethic on whose fundamentals we can all agree. Ecological questions have to do with reaching a new level of globalization, of world awareness and consciousness, where there is universal understanding of the importance of the earth as a whole, the welfare of nature and of humankind, the interdependency of all and of the apocalyptic catastrophe menacing all creatures. Ecology presents a global interest, a question of life and death for humankind and the planetary system. The word 'globalization' so often used has primarily negative associations, since the process of globalization is all too often only criticized for its excessive and harmful effects, whether those of global market capitalism, industrialist militarism or excessive consumerism. Yet it is perhaps too often forgotten, especially among critical ethicists, that the consciousness of the *global*, of one planet as one world, also has important positive features in terms of a greater sense of belonging together, and has produced the remarkable growth of a new sense of global responsibility which tries to address global problems through concerted efforts, through a growing consensus and the search for a shared ethic grounded in the same intentions and spirit. "No human life together without a world ethic for the nations; no peace among the nations without peace among religions, no peace among religions without dialogue among religions".⁸

We have realized that changing our world means that we have to develop our commitment and will to change our ways. Only then can we create a new global order animated by a different and new ethics. On the one hand people need to develop a greater spirit of caring for the earth and on the other hand this new ethics cannot develop in full without a change in the awareness of our connection with and dependence on the earth and its products. What is required is an ecological ethics to effect a transformation of values that in turn leads to action to heal the planet. A planetary, ecological vision together with a commitment to a culture of non-violence and peace also undergirds the principles of *The Earth Charter* approved by UNESCO.

A Socio-economically Just Ecological Ethics

Poverty is our main environmental problem. The problem of poverty is one of the principal problems of environment. It is impossible to develop an adequate respect for Nature without taking into account the way in which she adversely affects important creatures, such as marginalized and impoverished human beings. This situation of social injustice includes an element of ecological injustice, and vice versa. The discussion therefore should focus its attention on economically just concerns and address the justice issue.

. It is a well-known fact that the resources of the world are distributed unevenly. The industrialized nations in the Northern hemisphere consume a disproportionate high share of resources and contribute by their lifestyle to the destruction of the ecological equilibrium in the South. Many low lying areas of Bangladesh are being subsumed under water not by the fault of people in Bangladesh, but by the impact of the economic activities of the people in the Northern hemisphere, in particular the burning of fossil fuels for space heating, transportation industry and electricity production, which cause global warming and the resultant rising of the sea level. The industrialized nations, almost all located in the Northern hemisphere, are responsible for 80 percent of the pollution of the earth (the United States alone 23 percent). And the solutions suggested in the societies here are shortsighted, i.e., conservationism and environmentalism, without critically scrutinizing the actual

model of society and the paradigms of development and consumption that are the main causes of the worldwide ecological crisis, especially the bad health and premature death of the poor. It is a product of the Northern hemisphere. The people in this region have despoiled nature in their countries and have robbed the colonized people of the entire world, and after all that are now claiming a safe ambience and ecological reserve for themselves. While the main nations in the Northern hemisphere are responsible for the global ecological crisis, they are also the countries that are unwilling to take the main responsibility for correcting the destructive process. Instead, they seek to impose the burden of helping nature to recover on countries in the Southern hemisphere.

Population growth is often labelled 'environmental problem' but it has been shown that it is not so much the number of people, but what they consume, what part of the 'ecoscope' they use, that is crucial. Significant is the issue of the Northern hemisphere's over-consumption. Thus a more important factor to consider when population pressure and environment are linked is the overexploitation of resources to satisfy the greed of the people of the Northern hemisphere. Depletion of natural resources and increasing environmental toxicity are the by-products of the Northern hemisphere, i.e., the lifestyle of affluent societies toward land and control over resources so that more and more people have to cope with less and less fertile land and other resources. Thus both poverty and excessive wealth are detrimental to the environment.

So, when we analyze deeper, we find that the ecological crisis is mainly due to the spirit of competition and rivalry that is characteristic of the capitalist market economy. Capitalism has removed all the moral barriers that used to keep the growth of production and consumption within ecologically acceptable limits. Under capitalist conditions the selfless *homo collectivicus* of the organic community is permanently ousted by *homo economicus* whose sole motivation is self-interest. Accordingly, the image of a fertile and abundant nature gives way to that of a poor and 'stingy' Nature characterized by the new notion of 'scarcity'. While scarcity is generally perceived as a natural fact it is actually socially and economically induced. Apparent scarcity is merely the result of the artificially generated

need for an ever swelling stream of consumer goods of increasingly doubtful usefulness.⁹

There is thus a connection between the emergence of the concept of scarcity and the emergence of a particular brand of equality. Organic societies are characterized by an 'equality of unequals'. They are composed of a great variety of individuals and groups that fit together like the pieces of a mosaic, in a 'unity-in diversity'. To indicate that this unity is not uniform or homogeneous but rather multiform and heterogeneous, we speak of 'wholeness' instead of 'oneness'.

In modern societies, the 'equality of unequals' is replaced by an 'inequality of equals'. Here people are each others' equals in name only whereas in fact they differ greatly in terms of income and status. Modern societies apply a uniform standard by which people can be compared and, consequently, ranked. Thus modern equality produced hierarchical relationships that would be unthinkable in organic societies. It turns cooperative creatures who respect each other's limits into rivals mercilessly fighting each other in the battle over scarce resources.¹⁰ To stop this dead-end struggle, we must learn once again to experience 'otherness', 'not hierarchically on a 'scale of one to ten' with a continual emphasis on 'inferior' and 'superior', but ecologically, as variety that enhances the unity of phenomena, enriches wholeness and more closely resembles a food-web than a pyramid'¹¹

Holistic Eco-Ethics

Humanity and environment are not two discrete phenomena. They constitute an integrated life-cycle system and hence have implications for each other. Eco-ethics is the means to strengthen the bonds between the two. A new eco-ethics demands that everyone goes beyond his/her personal, regional, and national interest to consider the earth as his/her home and take care of it. Hence, each nation following its private agenda is surely not the way to save the planet. Instead each nation has to cooperate in the global agenda for justice, peace and harmony. We have to develop an interdisciplinary understanding of things, a holistic approach to focus on wholes that are more than the sum of the parts. The pioneer of this holistic

approach is Alfred North Whitehead. According to him materialist mechanism was based on a one-eyed rationality and was therefore handicapped by a superficial perception of nature. As an alternative to materialistic mechanism, Whitehead advanced his own doctrine of 'organic mechanism'. Organisms are characterized by the intimate relationship between parts and the whole. Subordinate organs are fully subservient to the organism which must maintain its stability within a continuously changing environment.

Holistic ecology as practice and theory comprises and relates all existents one to another and with the environment in the perspective of the infinitely small elementary particles. "We began to think of the universe as a collection of objects rather than as a communion of subjects so that we no longer hear the voice of the rivers, the mountains, and the sea. The trees and meadows are no longer intimate modes of spirit presence. This sense of the sacred dimension of the universe has to be recovered." ¹² Our development model has to be replaced with a more broad holistic vision that takes the ecological aspect into account and a new holistic ethic that sees the universe as a communion, a cosmic consciousness, with our existential milieu as a Thou to commune with, rather than as 'it' to bring under our dominion, and a new value system, which goes beyond anthropocentrism.

This brings in the question of the model of development. What kind of development model is to be envisaged? We are wedded to the idea of a development not in the holistic sense but in the narrow, materialistic sense. Naturally our approach to development is through exploitation, degrading people and the environment. This attempt to drive the devil of technology out of nature with the help of the Beelzebub of human intervention reflects the profoundly ambivalent character of nature development. This ambivalence is already evident in the very expression 'nature development'. Nature development can be seen and described as an implicit form of cultural politics, which manages to engage certain social groups while at the same time threatening to sideline other groups to the point where their interests and needs can no longer be voiced in politics.

We need an ethics of sustainable development – sustainability education – a culture of tolerance, non-violence and peace. We need

an ethical and spiritual education for sustainable living. The concept of sustainability is suggested as the goal. But sustainability should not be reduced to merely a strategy of development but it should incorporate a vision of alternate consciousness and lifestyle. An alternate lifestyle based on a prudent use of natural resources and a redirection of our social and economic structures is urgently required. It presupposes a renewed relationship between humans and nature. A participatory society that assumes responsibility for one another and for the earth alone is sustainable.

Again, the ecological crisis raises some fundamental questions to our value-system and lifestyle especially to the modernist totalizing ideology of development. Our thinking and ethic is totally anthropocentric. The world of non-humans rarely comes to our consciousness. Liberation is understood as a process by which humans and humans alone are rescued from the material world. If we are to prevent the environmental crisis from ending in catastrophe, environmental ethicists agree, we must convert to non-anthropocentrism and judge life-forms on their intrinsic value instead of their instrumental value. We have to overcome our dominant way of thinking, which is too analytic and not synthetic enough. We have to decide to what extent this or that science has to be developed which leads to the degradation of the environment, or this or that model of development is an instrument by which nature is plundered. We have to face the problem beginning from the fate of the most threatened persons and creatures. We have to think of such appropriate technological devices as filtration of noxious gases, noise reduction and decontamination of rivers and lakes. Such projects have to be studied and advanced, so that technology that has devastated nature can also contribute to its healing. It is not enough to attack the consequences and ignore the cause. That is tantamount to grinding down the wolf's teeth without changing his wolfish nature. We lack a fundamental vision of a model of society that would promote a sustainable kind of ecological development.

Eco-politics

Politics has to do with power and control of the common good. Unfortunately we live in a society where there are two classes: those

who have power and those who do not have. Whatever class we belong to at one moment our want discovers a limit in solidarity with others, which persuades it to renounce things for the sake of others' right to live and enjoy nature. How do we satisfy our wants? Do we do so in solidarity, respecting natural cycles? Those who have power do not set limits and want others to satisfy their wants. They hold power and control politics in order to satisfy their wants and desires. The price paid for this is the aggressive use of the ecosystem - atmospheric pollution, destruction of nature and so forth. Thus there is today a form of socio-economic and political violence directed against peoples, nations, and classes; the consequences are ruined relationships, hunger, disease, and death and ecological crime against the most complex beings in nature. It is important to emphasize that the progress of eco-politics which is based on a new model of society has to aim at the social fabric, integrating all divisions on the horizon of a vast cosmic community. There is need therefore to have an eco-politics that safeguards all appropriate aspects of social ecology rather than mere sporadic interventions which essentially benefit only the powerful.

Eco-technology

In the modern society, whether socialist or liberal bourgeois, economics is the science of limitless growth or, in more technological terms, of the unlimited expansion of productive forces. The axis on which a modern society turns is its economy, seen as the whole set of powers and tools for creating wealth: this means nature and other humans beings are exploited. The model of unlimited growth is possessed by a demon: it is constructed on the basis of the exploitation of the working classes, on the underdevelopment of the dependent nations, and on the rape of nature. "Idolatry of technology, of consumer goods, of human control and corporate power is at the heart of the collective and individual sins which constitute the environmental crisis"¹³

Scientists are discovering that the technology developed by other scientists poses serious threats to the health of the people and to the life of the earth itself. The scientific achievements that released humankind from the claws of poverty, hunger and disease have now

become the most lethal weapons threatening very human survival. We are thus faced today with the ethical dilemma: the more we depend on technology, the more we are thrown into the environmental crisis – the more we produce, the more factories we build, the more we are subject to new dangers of ecological catastrophe. Therefore, more science and more technology are not going to get us out of this dilemma. Not even super computers are capable of detecting and foreseeing and foretelling the changes in the climate. Hence there is need for an eco-technology.

Larry Rasmussen in his admirable volume: *Earth community, Earth Ethics*, draws our attention to three revolutions that have drastically changed the Human-Nature relationship. They are agricultural, (especially the intensive form of cultivation for large scale production) industrial and informational. The crucial factor in these revolutions is the technology used. The nature of technology has an impact on the character of the work humans do. The pressure on environment also varies according to the kind of technology that is used. Perhaps the industrial revolution has brought about a situation where the earth's resources are exploited and manipulated to such an extent that the life of the earth itself is in great peril. "To earth, industrialization looks more and more like a succession of more complex and environmentally disruptive and damaging ways to meet the needs and wants of one particular, inordinately aggressive species"¹⁴ The industrial culture is based on a particular mind-set or an assumption that aggressive domination over nature is the absolute right of the human species and the earth has limitless resources for human use. Science and technology are tools for further exploitation. We need not repeat the discussion on the ecological damage, in most cases irreparable, of the industrial revolution. The industrial paradigm for development has led to environmental degradation, resource depletion, loss of meaningful work role, inequitable distribution and ineffective control of technology.

Further, technology paved the way for the rule of Multi-National Corporations. The world's money, technology and markets are controlled and managed by gigantic global Corporations, which overrule all local interests and local culture to give way to the larger global good that free-market exchange creates. A common consumer

culture today unifies all people in a shared quest for material gratification. There is perfect global competition among workers and localities to offer their services to investors at the most advantageous terms. Corporations are free to act solely on the basis of profitability without regard to national or local consequences. Relations, both individual and corporate, are defined entirely by the market. And, there are no loyalties to place and community.

Information Technology and Cyber Culture

What kind of information do we need? It is not so much information of the kind information technology manipulates, as it is the choices that ethics poses. What understanding do we lack in order to live with the earth and with one another, on terms enhancing for life in its many guises? No doubt achievements brought about by the new technology are remarkable. The cyber culture has ushered in a new world. It is a change in the human condition, where most people do not earn their daily bread by the sweat of their brow. It is a society in which not everybody does the same work. Its culture creates borderless networks and for this reason loyalty to localities and community is not a virtue to be jealously safeguarded. A global culture that cuts across all barriers is in the making and we still do not see the full impact of it.

Information as coded, recoded, trans-coded reality carries a certain contempt for being earth-bound at all. It prefers avoiding the messy world of finite, limited, placed, dependent bodies. The earth-bound is denigrated; the abstract and precisely mathematical is elevated. The logic of unlimited growth and control of nature remains the same. Enormous power is now concentrated in humans who have access to the new technology and there is no guarantee that they will use it for the well-being of the earth. In fact, corporations are using the new technology to increase their profit by managing money and market. In split seconds investments can be withdrawn as it happened in some of the South Eastern countries a few years ago.

The Right of Non-human Nature

So far we have dealt with the ecological questions purely in term of their effects on humans. But more and more people are coming to

believe that there are wider issues at stake. Animals and plants share this Earth with us. Do we have an unlimited right to use them and abuse them solely for our own convenience? Does it make sense to speak of animals rights? Should we accept that even the Earth itself has a right to flourish? Do we have an obligation to care for the Earth and its species, even if this imposes limits on the kind of development we may promote?

Eco-crisis today reflects the human failure to look beyond the self, beyond the interests of humans. The classical discussion assumes that reason and awareness alone are the grounds on which the concept of right ought to be constructed (Aristotle and Aquinas). These grounds will naturally exclude not only animals and the plant world but also the new born babies and the mentally disabled and the aged. The intrinsic right of the biotic world should be based on other grounds than rationality.

The perspective that the earth and every form of life have intrinsic value brings in the right of non-human Nature within ecological discourse. The traditional Christian ethics was very anthropocentric, interested only in the welfare of humans. The assumption is that only creatures with consciousness and reason can be aware of their rights. The non-human world exists for humans and they have no innate right. But it is a big mistake to believe that human welfare is possible without the well-being of the rest of the planetary community.

Against this background, the new Christian eco-ethics affirms the intrinsic right of the non-human world to exist. The rights language now used for the non-human world represents a sharp change in our attitude towards it. The non-humans have the intrinsic right to exist, to be free. They do not exist for humans; the anthropocentric world always considers them as objects of our pleasure and exploitation. There is, of course, a difference between human rights and biotic rights in the sense that humans can exercise moral responsibility about the treatment of the non-human world, but not about the flora's and fauna's treatment of one another.¹⁵ While there is a significant difference between animals and humans, the feeling of pain is common to both. Animals are included in the discourse on justice on the basis of sentience, the capacity for

experiencing pain. One may extend this argument to the whole biotic community. A man can have no natural right to abuse and torment a beast, merely because a beast has not the mental powers of a man. Any creature when it reaches the threshold of experiencing and anticipating pain possesses rights. Non-humans do not exist for humans alone.

This brings a new awareness of human responsibility to nature and paves the way for the recognition of the inherent value of the non-human world. Although it was a minority view when it was propounded, it assumes greater significance today when we are seeking a new ethics to ground our commitment to the earth. This new ethical standing of the non-human world will deepen our commitment to it. A wanton destruction of life in the world and a callous disregard of the earth's resources is a violation of their inherent and God-given right. We are then questioning God's Lordship of the earth. Humans are not owners of the earth. They are not even stewards (Isiah 40:12). How can humans who are part of Nature become stewards of Nature? Everything in Nature is to be cared for. Everything in Nature has claims and rights.

Conclusion

We need an ethics of universal compassion, one that seeks harmony, respect, and concern among all creatures, not promoting the advantage of the human race alone – one that aims at the good which conserves and promotes all creatures, the supreme good being earthly and cosmic integrity. We are mutual custodians. We are mothers not masters, of creation. We need an ethics of partnership. No more stewardship, but servants (partners with Nature) who care for creation, who commit themselves to join in solidarity with indigenous communities struggling for their cultures, their right to land and sea, with peasants and farmers seeking land reforms and to have reverence for the ecological space of other living creatures. It is in doing so that we reflect God's creative and sustaining and compassionate love. It is an ethics of communion, not domination, that propels *cosmogenesis*. Such an ethics links together the issues of justice, peace and ecology. An act covenanting for preserving the gift of the earth's atmosphere and for nurturing and sustaining the

world's life; for combating the causes of the destructive changes to the atmosphere which threaten to disrupt the earth's climate and create widespread suffering and for building a culture that can live in harmony with the integrity of creation.

Notes

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