



**JNANADEEPA**

PJRS ISSN P-0972-3331

22/1 Jan-June 2018: 149-158

Cite as: Parappally, Jacob. (2018). The Trinitarian and Christological Dimensions of Ecology in *Laudato Si'* (Version 1.0). Jnanadeepa: Pune Journal of Religious Studies, Jan 2018(22/1), 149–158. <http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4067463>

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4067463

Stable URL:

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4067463>

Jnanadeepa: Pune Journal of Religious Studies

---

# The Trinitarian and Christological Dimensions of Ecology in *Laudato Si'*

**Jacob Parappally MSFS**

*Professor, Systematic Theology, Tejas Vidya Peeth,  
Bengaluru*

**Abstract:** The foundational Christian experience of God as Trinity in and through Jesus Christ, the Logos, refers immediately to the revelation of the inter-relationship between God, humans and the entire creation. Based on this faith-experience Pope Francis develops further the understanding of the essential relationship of humans and its implications for human's relationship with nature in his encyclical, *Laudato Si'*. Human's responsibility to preserve, nurture nature and develop a contemplative attitude towards nature flow from the very essence of humans as communion since as all humans are created in the image and likeness of God, the Trinity or Absolute Communion. So there is a Trinitarian dimension to ecology. The cosmic Christology of Paul expressed in Col 1:15-17 summarizes the biblical revelation about the relationship of the creation with God revealed through Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the Alpha and the Omega of creation, the beginning and the end and indeed, the meaning of the universe. In Jesus Christ God reveals not only what humans are and what they can become but also what the world is. The world too has its origin and end in Christ. The Logos Christology of John further emphasizes that the revelation of the hominization of the Word is also the revelation of the meaning of the entire cosmos. The encyclical, *Laudato Si'*, of Pope Francis ends with the hymns to the Holy Trinity and to Jesus Christ, re-affirming that our right relationship God cannot be separated from our right relationship with nature.

*Keywords: Environment, Triune God, Ecology, Christ, Religion, God's Presence.*

## **Introduction**

What has the Trinity to do with ecology? The same question can be raised about the relation between Jesus Christ and the ecological issues of our times. What has Jesus Christ to do with ecology? Everything! This may surprise us because in the past the Christian faith has very systematically separated itself from the concerns of the environment or ecology. Living in the midst of people who worship nature in general and the forces of nature like winds, fire, thunder, etc., as gods, Christianity insulated itself from any form of pantheism which says that everything is god. Pantheism grew in the primitive societies and pantheistic ideas were integrated into the belief systems of the people of the Greco-Roman and Mediterranean world as well as of the eastern religions. The God-experience of the Old Testament times as articulated in the bible challenged the worship of the powers of the nature as gods and secularized them as created by God through his word. However, the attraction to pantheism was a real temptation even to those who had faith in One God. The other extreme of considering nature as mere objects to be conquered, subordinated and manipulated to satisfy human greed has brought in irreparable damage to nature and eco-system causing danger to all living creatures including humans. A deeper understanding of the inter-relationship between humans and the entire creation based on the foundational Christian experience of God as Trinity and Jesus Christ, the Logos or, God became human as the link between God and the world gives us a comprehensive, integral and liberative vision of the entire creation. In fact, Pope Francis, in his encyclical, *Laudato si* has already attempted to show the relation between God and creation especially in the last two prayers found in the encyclical.

What is environment? Environment is the external surroundings in which we humans, animals and plants live and it affects the development of everyone and everything that lives and grows in that

environment. Ecology tries to study by analyzing and understanding the complex net-work of relationships and interdependencies in a given environment. It all boils down to how to the understanding of relationships among living beings and their relation to non-living or *a-biotic* realities in the entire creation. In fact, religion is all about relationships: relationship with oneself, God, others and creation.

The term ‘religion’, according to many is derived from the Latin word, *religare* which means ‘to bind together’. Therefore, any religion that divides and separates people from people, people from the Absolute or God and people from the entire creation is a not a religion and even if it has a semblance of a religion. For the Cosmic religions like Hinduism and many of the ancient religions of the Near East relationship with the world and all in it was easy as it was an essential part of their religion. But they perverted it according to Paul. He says, “Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man or birds or animals or reptiles” (Rom 1:22). While Cosmic religions have a predilection for everything in nature and believe it as divinized supported by a cyclic view of time derived from the course of nature, the Judeo-Christian tradition believes that everything is created by God and it has beginning and an end. Therefore, this religious tradition has a linear view of time which emphasizes history. When the cosmic religious traditions went to the extreme of making the organic and inorganic things and powers of nature as gods, the prophetic religious traditions went to the extreme of absolutely separating the entire cosmos or creation from God emphasizing God’s transcendence neglecting the immanence of God. However, the biblical experience of God and the world as articulated in the different books of the bible, Jesus’ own relation to creation, the teachings of the Fathers of the Church, the Magisterium and the recent Popes present an integral and balanced understanding of the relation between God, human beings and the created world.

Nowhere in the Bible it is unambiguously stated that God is absolutely separated from the world though God is supreme creator, ruler, controller, protector and provider of the needs of the world. God is related to the world as its creator. This relationship between God and the world need to be affirmed in order to understand

the mysteries of creation, incarnation and resurrection and the sacraments and God's presence in human communion. We have to say, God is distinct from the creation but not separate from the creation. They are not one and they are not two either! This is not a philosophical or theological puzzle but the meaning of our existence and the existence of the world founded on the Trinitarian and Christic experience of God. This faith-experience can lead us to an understanding of our integral and liberating relationship with God and the creation and to develop a responsible attitude towards our environment and eco-system.

In this paper I am attempting to show how our Christian experience of God as Trinity and our relationship with God in Jesus Christ is the foundation of our right relationship with the entire creation and the demands it makes to care for the creation as well as to respond to the ecological crisis we face today based on the Encyclical *Laudato Si* by Pope Francis.

## **1. The Trinitarian Dimension of Ecology**

It is the Christian experience of God that God is a communion of three Persons, the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit. Church's experience of God as Trinity from its originary experience of Jesus Christ as Lord and God after his resurrection, the experience of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and the experience of the apostles that Jesus called God as Abba, Father. They expressed this faith-experience by baptizing those who believed in the name of the Father and Son and the Holy Spirit, confessed the Triune God in their creeds and prayers etc. It is this foundational faith that has entered into the Christian understanding of humans and the world in their relation to the Trinitarian God. The later theological reflections on the Trinitarian God would explain that humans are created in the image and likeness of God, but God the Trinity. So every human being is an image of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Every human being has a Father dimension, that is transcendence, the Son dimension that is transience, and the Spirit-dimension that is immanence. Therefore, all humans are by nature communitarian as they are the images of the Trinity or the Absolute communion. They are inter-

related and inter-connected as persons. What is the relation of the rest of the creation other than humans with the Trinity?

According to the Christian tradition the vestige or dress of the Trinity is in the creation (*vestigia trinitatis in creatura*).<sup>1</sup> John Paul II says, St. Augustine wrote: “It is necessary that we, viewing the Creator through the works of his hands, raise up our minds to the contemplation of the Trinity, of which creation bears the mark in a certain and due proportion”.<sup>2</sup>

Pope Francis has expressed the similar understanding of the relation between the Triune God and the creation in the Christian prayer in union with the creation in his encyclical *Laudato si*. “Triune Lord, wondrous community of infinite love, teaches us to contemplate you in the beauty of the universe, for all things speak of you. Awaken our praise and thankfulness for every being that you have made. Give us the grace to feel profoundly joined to everything that is.”<sup>3</sup> The relation between the Trinity and the creation is not mere presence of God in the creation or creation revealing the beauty and grandeur of the Trinity. It is more than a mere reflection but a deeper relationship that can be explained only in relation through the Son who became human and thus became a part of creation.

The Trinity is the source and model of the entire creation. The Trinity is the source because everything is created by the Triune God. Irenaeus of Lyons says that God has created the world with his two hands, the Logos and the Pneuma or the Word and the Spirit. The stamp of the Trinitarian God can be discovered in the creation. According to John Paul II, “It is a truth of faith that the world has its beginning in the creator, who is the Triune God. Although the work of creation is attributed especially to God the Father-this we profess in the creeds of the faith (“I believe in God the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth”)-it is also a truth of faith that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are the unique and indivisible “principle” of creation.<sup>4</sup> The Trinity is the model of creation because everything in the world are distinct and are inter-related, both living and non-living. Everything in this universe is unique. The marvelous plurality of everything that exists, every

plant and every animal , every bird in the sky and every fish in the sea reveal the plurality and distinctiveness of everything that exists.

How can we explain the meaning of this plurality? They are all modeled after their maker, the Triune God. In the absolute communion of the Trinity one person is not the other. The Father is not the Son or the Spirit. The same could be said of the Son and the Spirit. Yet there is only One God. The unity in the diversity of the creation is modeled after the Trinity. What Tertullian says the Trinity explains the difference and communion among them. He says that in the Trinity there is difference without division, there is distinction without separation. Such a great plurality and unity we can find in the creation. Therefore, any contemplation of the creation leads us to the contemplation of the eternal communion of the Father, the Son and the Spirit. Therefore, everything in the creation must be approached with a contemplative attitude not with a pragmatic attitude. If we have a contemplative attitude to Nature or Creation everything in the universe becomes a symbol or a sacrament for us, raising our minds to God and filling our hearts with love and thankfulness to God like the Psalmist who sang, “when I see the heavens, the work of your hand...(Ps 8).

At the conclusion of his general audience speaking about the creation John Paul II said, “Creation is the work of the Triune God. The world “created” in the Word-Son, is “restored” together with the Son to the Father, through that Uncreated Gift, the Holy Spirit, consubstantial with both. In this way the world is created in that Love, which is the Spirit of the Father and of the Son. This universe embraced by eternal Love begins to exist in the instant chosen by the Trinity as the beginning of time.”<sup>5</sup>

The ecological crisis today is created by our pragmatic attitude towards creation. We relate to the things in the universe for their usefulness. How a thing is useful to us is our concern. So the world as a sacrament is manipulated, used and abused for the selfish greed of humans. Thus we not only disfigure the creation but also disfigure the Triune God who created the world. Therefore it is a tremendous responsibility placed on to treat the things of creation with certain reverence due to it because everything in the universe is reflecting the glory of God.

## 2. Christological Dimensions of Ecology

It is easier for us to understand how Jesus Christ is related to the entire creation. We have not only the witness of the Gospel but also the Fathers of the Church and the teaching of the Magisterium about the Christic dimension of the creation because everything created ‘through him’ and ‘for him’ (Col 1:15f). John would say, the Word was God and the world was made through him (Jn 1:10). In fact, all things were made through him and without him nothing was made (Jn 1:3). The Letter to the Hebrews affirms the same when it says that God through the Son “also created the world” (Heb 1:2). It is true that everything created through the Son but is he related to the universe only as its creator? It would have been a relation between the creator and the creature if the Word or the Logos had not become human. The incarnation or the hominization of the Word made the entire creation a new creation. After the incarnation the universe or the cosmos is no more the same. Every mighty star to the tiniest atom, every non-living and the living being was transformed by humanity’s unity with divinity. The world has become sacred. The world has become a sacrament.

Paul expresses this intimate union of the Logos with the creation in the Christological hymn in Colossians. “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together” (Co 1:15-16). This hymn summarizes the biblical revelation about the relationship of the creation with God revealed through Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the Alpha and the Omega of creation, the beginning and the end and indeed, the meaning of the universe. In Jesus Christ God reveals not only what humans are and what they can become but also what the world is. The world too has its origin and end in Christ. When one encounters Jesus Christ as the beginning and the end or source and final destiny of one’s life, she or he will find meaning in life. The hominization of the Word, or God becoming human and thus becoming a part of this worldly reality gives meaning also to this universe. John expresses this revelation by synthesizing the Greek philosophical

term Logos which means word, reason or meaning and the Hebrew term *dabar* or word. In the Hellenistic or Greek world-view logos is the beginning and the end of the world or the meaning of the world and for the Hebrews *dabar* Yahweh or God's word is God's presence and action in history. Therefore, when John combines these two world-views to reveal who Jesus is, he uses the term Logos which means that Jesus Christ is the meaning of the universe and God's presence and action in history. According to Athanasius, a great Father of the Church before incarnation the Logos was the governing principle of the universe from outside but after the incarnation he is the governing principle of the universe from within the universe. So we can legitimately affirm that everything living and non-living has its beginning and end in Christ, indeed, its meaning is Christ. In other words, there is no-thing outside the reality of Christ. After the incarnation or hominization of the word, everything and everyone is a Christophany, a manifestation of Christ in its own unique way.

The incarnated Son of God or Jesus the human lived a life in right relationship with the entire creation. He did not run away from the world considering it evil. Everything created by the Father who makes the sun shine and rain fall on everyone without any discrimination was found to be revealing his Father's care and love. Pope Francis affirms this in his encyclical *Laudato Si'*. He says: "Jesus lived in full harmony with creation, and others were amazed: 'What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?'" (*Mt* 8:27). His appearance was not that of an ascetic set apart from the world, nor of an enemy to the pleasant things of life. Of himself he said: "The Son of Man came eating and drinking and they say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard!'" (*Mt* 11:19). <sup>6</sup> Further he says, "He [Jesus] was far removed from philosophies which despised the body, matter and the things of the world. Such unhealthy dualisms, nonetheless, left a mark on certain Christian thinkers in the course of history and disfigured the Gospel. Jesus worked with his hands, in daily contact with the matter created by God, to which he gave form by his craftsmanship. <sup>7</sup> What a harmonious relationship with the creation!

In the during the apostolic times when the NT was taking shape and during the post-apostolic times heretical schools like that of the



Gnostics and Docetics taught that matter was evil and the spirit was good. They would not accept that God became truly human because God cannot assume evil matter. Docetics said Jesus appeared to be human but not really human. The Fathers of the Church like Ignatius of Antioch, Irenaeus and others fought against such heresies and affirmed that whatever God has created was good and God became truly human. However, their heretical doctrine had a negative influence on the Christian understanding of the world and on the Christian spirituality. The slogan of some spiritual masters was “*fuga mundi*” or run away from this world. The Christian vocation is not to run away from the world but remain in it with a contemplative attitude and transform it with a prophetic commitment empowered by the Holy Spirit who makes everything new.

In the resurrection of Christ, the humanity of Christ is glorified and through the glorified body of Christ the entire creation is transformed and glorified. Therefore, the material reality can be transformed to become the medium of God’s presence. The sacraments, especially the Eucharist, which we celebrate is a celebration not only of our communion with God and one another but also our communion with the entire universe. In a single piece of bread we use at the Eucharistic celebration the entire universe is at work, the sun, the earth, water, the wheat plant, the seed, the farmer, the baker and finally those who receive it. The universe plays its role in the miracle of the Eucharist, along with Christ, the priest and the community.

## Conclusion

It is the Son of God who made this creation new with his incarnation and resurrection and it is the Holy Spirit guides the creation to its final destiny as willed by the Father. I would like to conclude my paper with the prayer of Pope Francis presented at the conclusion of the his encyclical *Laudato Si’*, “Son of God, Jesus, through you all things were made. You were formed in the womb of Mary our Mother, you became part of this earth, and you gazed upon this world with human eyes. Today you are alive in every creature in your risen glory. Praise be to you!

## Notes

- 1 *De Trinitate*, VI, 10, 12
- 2 John Paul II, *Creation is the Work of the Trinity*, General Audience, 5 March, 1986 *Laudato si*, No.98
- 3 Pope Francis, *Laudato si*', No. 246
- 4 John Paul II, *Creation is the Work of the Trinity*, General Audience, 5 March, 1986
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 *Laudato si*', No.98
- 7 *Laudato si*', No.98

Article received: Apr 24, 2017

Article approved: Oct 32, 2017

No of words: 3472