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ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES AND THE WAY-OUT (ETHICAL-THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES)

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ABSTRACT

Almost on daily basis, there is evidence of wanton destruction of the environment, overexploitation of natural resources, unconscious elimination of creation, and extinction of animal and plant species. Many people also suffer as a result of pollution and other activities erupting and interfering with the atmosphere. Factors like sicknesses, hardship, crises, insecurity and conflicts, loss of loved ones, and challenges of all sorts are some major disadvantages of ecocide faced in today's society. The causes of ecocide however include ignorance, poverty, and selfishness amongst others. These, therefore, call for concerted efforts in adopting lifestyles and practices that would help the environment and the creations God has freely given to humanity. The researcher believes that Christianity and other religions, the government, institutions, corporations, and companies have parts to play in the sustenance and development of nature and the maintenance of the integrity of creation in the present dispensation. Recommendations are proffered on how to preserve, conserve and possibly restore the present environments and creations to the level that brings glory to God, and also, peace and joy to mankind.

KEYWORDS

Environment; Ethics; Cosmology; Ecology; Creation



ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

This study will consider the current environmental issues, principles, problems and prospects, the role of Christianity and guidelines on dealing with ecocide. More so, the concept of eco-theology, new constructive approach to nature and how the integrity of creation could be maintained amongst others are discussed.

Global warming, global climate change, deforestation, pollution, resources degradation, the threat of extinction of plants and animals are few of the issues from which our planet is suffering. Environmental ethics are key features of environmental studies that establish the relationship between humans and the earth (Web, s.a). Various acts of humans actually lead to environmental pollution (Web3, s.a); the need for food, shelter and technological developments amongst others are resulting in resource depletion and environmental destruction today.

Other environmental issues include overpopulation, industrial and household waste, acid rain, ozone layer depletion, urban sprawl, and genetic engineering (Web4, s.a). These environmental issues have taken a toll on our environment and we've already started seeing some disastrous effects in the form of humans' health challenges, rise in sea level, depletion of non-renewable resources, melting of glaciers, extinction of species, polluted landfills, toxic dust, decreasing soil fertility, rise in air and water pollution and many more. To avoid continuous deterioration of resources, certain guiding principles must be observed.

2. ETHICAL APPROACHES TO ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGES

Over the years and centuries, environmental ethics has suffered some problems of misunderstanding and proper application. The environment must be handled in the following ways:

1. Natural resources and wildlife must be safeguarded.
2. The earth's capacity to produce renewable resources must be maintained.
3. Nonrenewable resources must be shared and not exhausted.
4. Pollution must not exceed the environment's capacity to clean itself.
5. Oceanic pollution must be prevented.
6. Development should improve the environment.
7. Developing countries need assistance and reasonable prices for exports to carry out environmental management.
8. Environment policy must not hamper development.
9. Developing countries should be assisted to develop environmental safeguards.
10. Integrated development planning is needed.
11. Rational planning should resolve conflicts between environment and development.
12. Human settlements must be planned to eliminate environmental problems. Governments should develop good population policies.
13. National institutions must plan development of states' natural resources.
14. Science and technology must be used to improve the environment.
15. Environmental education is essential.
16. Environmental research must be promoted, particularly in developing countries.
17. States may exploit their resources, but must not endanger others.
18. Compensation is due to states and individuals thus endangered.
19. Each nation must establish its own standards of environmental care.
20. There must be cooperation on international issues.
21. International organizations should help to improve the environment.
22. Weapons of mass destruction must be eliminated.
23. The rights and integrity of the future generations must be the concern of every nation (Nash, 1991).

These in place will eliminate the environmental challenges face today, while the prospects of environmental ethics are sustained and developed.

Adequate sustainability and development of environment and the resources therein for the benefits of the present and next generations are of great necessity. These actions could be taken through:

Environmental and moral education

The wheels of environmental ethics must be activated and propelled through the promotion of *environmental and moral education*. The purpose of environmental education is to promote environmental literacy to gain an

understanding of the environment surrounding us including the functional properties of ecosystems, and the moral insights into the relationships between man and nature.

Responsibilities to nonhumans

So far, the interest of assessing the environmental ethics has been on the well-being of the present and future generations. Yet, aside from considering the impacts/benefits on human beings from environmental degradation/conservation, which is concentrating on *anthropocentric concerns*, there are also *non-anthropocentric concerns* involved in the domain of environmental ethics. The latter concerns are “about nonhuman lives (Nash, 1989:13, 180). This non-human lives must be taken into consideration very seriously.

3. THE DOCTRINE OF COSMOLOGY

Cosmology is the study of the universe; its birth, evolution (nature), and ultimate fate. The doctrine of cosmology is a doctrine that relates to the physical world which we live. The word “*kosmos*” is the Greek word that means “world”. Thus, cosmology is the study of the physical world God created (McCain, 2004:105).

God is the Creator of all things: Genesis 1:1 says, “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth”。“...Through Him all things were made; without Him nothing was made that has been made” (John 1:1-3).

Actually, *everything God created belongs to God*. Since God is the Creator of everything, then God is the Owner of all things. Psalms 24:1 confirms this, “the earth is the Lord’s and everything in it, the world and all who live in it”. *This means that the environment belong to God. The rivers and the oceans, the fields and the mountains and even the air belong to God*. It further means that the natural resources we use every day do not belong to us. The Owner (God) is allowing us to use them as stewards.

God has given to humanity the responsibility of caring for the earth: Human beings are stewards of God’s creation. The Bible says in Genesis 1:26 “Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.’” God gave humanity the responsibility of being the ruler of the earth under God’s sovereign supervision.

According to McCain (2004:107), there are implications to the responsibility God gave to man. These include:

- a) **Man must obey God:** As God’s servant man must obey what God says – to rule over and take care of the world. Failing to do this is outright disobedience.
- b) **Man must take care of God’s assets:** It is the steward’s responsibility to take care and even improve upon his/her master’s assets as much as possible. Human beings are God’s stewards and so we must take care of God’s costly creation.
- c) **Men are God’s companions:** Men and women have special responsibility of working with God in the sustenance of His good works on earth and so we must do.
- d) **Human beings are spoke-persons for God on earth:** God uses people like us to speak His mind about this earth and those therein. It is wrong if human beings disregard this responsibility.
- e) **Humans are God’s representatives:** Those who believe in God and in the Lord Jesus Christ are Christ’s ambassadors (2 Cor. 5:20). Ambassadors look out for the interests of the person or government they are representing. This we (Christians, human beings) must do.

The Earth has been given to human beings for their habitation: Aside the responsibilities, God also gave to humans the earth as their habitation. Of course, there is only one earth, where all humans dwell. As such, the natural resources of the earth are to be jointly and equally shared by all people on the earth including the future generations.

The principles of cosmology; which are obviously part of the roles that humans should play for God’s creations form the next discussion.

4. PRINCIPLES OF COSMOLOGY

The principles state the responsibilities that humans should adhere to, for the continual existence of the earth and the resources therein. These are:

- i. The principle of preservation
- ii. The principle of restoration
- iii. The principle of conservation

i. THE PRINCIPLE OF PRESERVATION

The word “preserve” means to keep something in a functional and workable order (OALD, 1989). It means to protect or keep safe from danger or harm (NCCDEL, 1985). This is the principle of keeping things beautiful and functional. God gave up every creature to man to rule over (Gen. 1:26). Man is really in-charge of everything as an ambassador of God, but not to the detriment of creatures, rather, to also protect and preserve them.

ii. THE PRINCIPLE OF RESTORATION AND RENEWAL

To restore means to return something to its original form or condition. This is the principle of returning natural things to their original conditions. God is a renewing God. The cycles of yearly seasons illustrate that God is a God of renewal. The earth gets old looking dirty, smelling and dry but at a certain time God sends rain and the earth is renewed, refreshed and wet for growth and productivity. He expects humans to renew the resources He has given.

Our physical bodies will eventually grow old and die but God is a God of renewal. He will surely resurrect our physical bodies sometime in the future (McCain, 2004:111).

Renewal means to make something better or as it was before – that is also to restore a worn-out object to its or his original state. Humans are obligated to restore all of the natural things that have been perverted, abused and polluted. Our society is polluted, depreciated and degraded. We must do our best to bring in some forms of renewal and restoration to the physical structures.

iii. THE PRINCIPLE OF CONSERVATION

To conserve means to secure, fortify and ensure that something last and also meet the test of time for fuller use today and in the future. The earth is not only to be preserved in its original condition, but the resources God has lavished upon the earth are to be used carefully and judiciously. But sadly, humans unconsciously and ignorantly vandalize, destroy or misuse them today not thinking about tomorrow and the next generation.

A call is made on all humans to preserve, restore and conserve the physical environment and the natural resources God has given to us for our welfare and that of the upcoming generations. This call is indeed urgent and demanding.

The next line of discussion lays emphasis on the evil of destroying God’s creation as we perhaps see day by day in our society.

5. THE ROLE OF RELIGIONS

Creation was not a single completed act of God as believed by the deists and professed in the 18th and 19th centuries. A very influential motif in the doctrine is that of the providence of God. Even biblically, cases abound where God works in His creation after the initial creative works as recorded in Genesis 1 and 2. He restored His creation after the flood, the dove returned to Noah with a green olive twig (Gen. 6-9). This was the sign of the greening of the earth once more.

According to Anderson (1984: 10), this was a sign that the earth became a permanent habitat for humans and non-humans owing to God’s pledge to maintain the constancy of the natural order. God has created everything and still maintains His creation. If God allows the earth and all things therein under the total control of man for maintenance, preservation and restoration, the earth and all creatures will be disrupted, deteriorated and perhaps elusive within few days or weeks.

All religions therefore, must preach against indiscriminate destruction of God’s creations including humans, plant species, animal species, fish species and the ecosystem in general. It is noticeable that Christians have endeavored to uphold the cultural mandate, whereas, believers of other religions like Muslims and Traditionalists don’t care about it. By maintaining environmental ethics, we will live to enjoy the things God has freely given to mankind.

Actually, the concept ‘cultural mandate’, as embodied in the full Biblical context entails that humankind has the privilege to utilize creation for his own good, but that he has the responsibility to take good care of everything God has created. Humankind has to rule in harmony and not in hostility (Douma, 1998:40).

A theocentric approach to nature is the new worldview which rejects domination of creation and replaces it with the alternative value system that Ruether requested in her critique on the concept of the domination of nature in classical Christianity (Ruether, 1985:535).

6. GUIDELINES ON DEALING WITH THE ENVIRONMENT

i). Educators – Parents, teachers and colleagues

This aspect has to do with people teaching and educating others to know the importance of ecological respect. These people include the teachers, parents and fellow colleagues.

ii). Companies – Corporations and firms

Production companies, employers of labor, developers, board members and stakeholders can also exercise important roles with regard to the protection of ecosystems. Huge corporations have harmed the environment in many ways through their mining, harvesting, manufacturing, delivery and disposal. They are the major consumers of energy and other resources, which are especially crucial in the developing world where governments are not really fulfilling their duties/roles in protecting the environment and their natural resources (Vorster, 2004:263).

iii). Religious Organizations – Churches and Mosque

Religious bodies such as Churches, Mosques, Christian Association of Nigeria, Muslim Council of Nigeria and traditional councils are important moral decision makers. It is fair to say that these bodies have the capacity to raise an awareness of the environmental situation we face. This is true, as is the case in many other fields in ethics. Religious organizations can contribute to the general awareness of the destructive effects of ecocide.

7. THE NEED FOR ECOTHEOLOGY

Ecology focuses on the peaceful co-existence of all beings in the universe. It stresses on connectivity, mutuality and cordial relationship of all creatures (Eco, s.a).

Ecologists championed:

1. The idea of divine immanence in the whole cosmos;
2. A relational and ecological understanding of God, humans, and the created world rather than a hierarchical understanding;
3. A radically reinterpreted view of human dominion over nature in terms of partnership with nature; and
4. A commitment to justice for all creatures, not just humans, highlighting the needs of the impoverished masses and endangered species around the globe (Encyclopedia5, s.a).

Ecology is the approach needed to tackle the issue of disregard, degradation and destruction of nature and the environment in which we live (Encyclopedia, s.a). Religions and especially at the foremost, must have clear vision and proper discernment about the God-given nature and environment. These are of course the royal, priestly and prophetic tasks of ecology.

Humans must rise to the level where other God’s creatures are duly regarded; for without them even the human lives will be unbearable.

8. SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

SUMMARY

This article mirrored the knitty-gritty of environmental issues and the need to maintain an ethical standard as important as it is in the present day society. The principles of environmental ethics are duly discussed. The necessity of building environmental ethics today is unimagined coupled with the fact that the environment is deteriorating as a result of incessant farming, exploration and indiscriminate destruction of ecosystem. How to tackle the present environmental ethical issues are enunciated. The necessity of environmental sustainability and development are incorporated.

Cosmology and its principles are also deeply discussed. The destruction of God's creation – ecocide, which is so rampant in today's society, has been touched. Due guidelines on dealing with ecocide alongside the concept of eco-theology are mentioned. Anew constructive approach to nature and environment and the recognition of the integrity of creation have been emphasized. It is grounded up with the role of religion and indeed Christianity in reversing the trend and establishing a relationship between humankind, creation and the environment in the light of the Scripture.

CONCLUSION

The cosmological and ecological issues in past and in present etiology are clear pointers to the needs to salvage the present-day society from ecocide and environmental degradation and perhaps too, natural resources and species' extinction. It is sad that people often resist or take lightly an acknowledgement of the cosmological and ecological crises. This actually constitutes to the spread and deepening of these felony.

People tend to make light of it - not talking of the strains on the environment and the regrettable side-effects of modern technologies. However, the ecological crisis can be solved by technological means if well harnessed.

Time is really now where environmental ethicists, especially Christian ethicists must make credible marks in the human rights debates with regards to cosmological and ecological crises in our present-day world. It is not out of place however, for other religions to join the cue in this matter of humans' friendly relationship with other creations.

More so, the study is strongly of the opinion that human beings as the most sensible of all God's creatures must do everything, in the context of Christ-kind of leadership to rule, dominate, manage, take care, preserve, restore, conserve and ensure the continual existence of creatures created by God in the face of the earth for the good of mankind.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In today's society it is very pertinent that religions have clear vision and proper discernment about God-given nature and environment.

Christianity and other religions/religious bodies should have constructive contributions in the collaborative, multi-disciplinary efforts in public forums to address escalating ecological concerns. There must be practical task of exercising responsibility regarding earth-keeping at the micro and macro levels.

Christians should not shy away from making a contribution to the common good even if they are the only voice making such move.

True worshippers should see the world in a new light, in the light of the Light of the world and as God's beloved creation.

Christians need to transform the world according to the core identity and characteristics of the Triune God, namely: love, mercy and just.

There is need to read and reinterpret biblical texts with an ecological hermeneutics mindset.

There must be Christian witness and theological reflection on the story of God's work of creation.

Humans must do justice to God's work of creation and salvation. Christianity, aside other religions must witness on the story of God's creative and salvation works.

All human beings must allow the Scripture to speak into our classic faith, revealing the wonders of the natural world more fully and our true place in it.

God's call for humans to "have dominion" needs to be reframed from a political context into an agricultural stewardship and godly rulership.

Christians indeed have great parts to play in the maintenance and sustenance of creation in the present day society. This can be realizable by creating a new perspective of understanding about the relationship of humans and other God-made creatures. This understanding will go a long way establishing the peace (shalom), well-fare, well-being, wholeness, integration and harmony Jesus left with humans at His departure to heaven (John 14:27). This task is quite before us and is accomplishable by the grace of God.

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