



Think Piece

Christian and African Perspectives on Stewardship of Creation

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Introduction

Genesis 1: 24 & 25 read thus:

Then God said, let the earth bring forth living creatures after their kind: cattle and creeping things and beasts of the earth after their kind; and it was so. God made the beasts of the earth after their kind, and the cattle after their kind, and everything that creeps on the ground after its kind; and God saw that it was good.

According to Christianity and African religious systems and cultures, God created everything: heaven and earth, and all living and innate creatures. As the aforementioned verses from the bible say, 'God saw that it was good'. Thereafter, God created human beings to be the chief stewards of the entire creation. Then:

... the LORD God took the human being and put him/her into the Garden of Eden to cultivate it and keep it. (Genesis 2: 15)

So, the two main issues that will be in my mind as I explore the Christian principles as well as the African perspectives on the stewardship of creation are:

- The entire beautiful (or good) creation belongs to God;
- Human beings are the stewards of creation – their duty is to 'cultivate and to keep it'.

Christians and Environmental Justice

Christians have often been blamed for the neglect of the environment. For example, according to Lynn White Jr:

Christianity, in absolute contrast to ancient paganism and Asia's religions (except, perhaps, Zoroastrianism), not only established dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends ... By destroying pagan animism, Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings

of natural objects ... Hence we shall continue to have a worsening ecological crisis until we reject the Christian axiom that nature has no reason for existence save to serve man. (White, 1967)

White's (1967) criticism is based on interpretation of Genesis 1: 28, where God is by and large understood as saying that human beings are the only important species on earth, so they must have 'dominion' or should exploit everything else on earth. Indeed many critiques, such as White (1967) are not entirely false. For example, the Umthatha Mission Congress of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA) in 2004 did not do justice to the issues pertaining to the environment. As a result, the MCSA's 'fifth' pillar of mission (Environmental Justice) was an afterthought – and many people in the MCSA still know and preach only about four mission pillars (imperatives). Generally, very few preachers say anything (preach) on the importance of the environment to Christians.

However, there are many Christian (and non-Christian) men and women who have dedicated their lives to ensure that the earth we have inherited is passed on to the next generations as beautiful to the eyes of God as it was when he created it many, many years ago. Certainly, all of us have a role to play – no matter how small.

Ethical Issues and Creation (Environment)

There are many ethical issues pertaining to the environment if we are to somehow balance the needs of human beings and environmental conservation. Indeed, by harming the earth today, we will exert pressure on future generations. Herman Daley (cited by Conradie & Field, 2001: 5) correctly pointed out that future generations will inherit the earth with 'less arable land, more people, fewer species of living things, a legacy of poisonous waste, and much beauty irrevocably lost'. So, for the well-being of our planet and all its residents, present and future, we all have to find a balance.

It is indeed difficult to find a balance on environmental affairs. Barbara Ward and Rene Dubos have pointed out that:

There exists a SINGLE unified system from one end of the cosmos to the other. Yet, this unified stuff of existence only twists itself into the incredible variety of material things; it can also produce living patterns of ever-greater complexity. Remove the green cover from the soil of Central Africa and it becomes a brick-hard, everlasting laterites. Cut down the forests; overgraze the grass, and productive land turns to desert. Overload the waters with sewage or nutrients and algae consume its oxygen, fish die and produce stinking gas as they decompose. If (hu)man (beings) continue to let their behaviour be dominated by separation, antagonism and greed; they will destroy the delicate balance of their planetary environment. And there would be no more life (for everyone). (Ward & Dubos, 1972: 83–87)

Arri Santas concurs with Ward and Dubos (1972):

There is always a flow of material in and out of the membranes of the organism as it reconstructs and replenishes itself with the stuff of the outside world. In so doing they recreate themselves and their environment. Secondly, the organism is part of what constitutes its environment – it is a member of the ecosystem. Thirdly, an organism is part of its own environment in so far as its activities determine future states of those surroundings in which it acts, so that its present environment is a function of its past activities and its future is function of the present. (Santas, 1996: 77)

So, the primary role of human beings, I strongly believe, is to maintain the ‘delicate balance’ which existed for millions of years in the ecosystem. Without a doubt, as Meister Eckhardt (cited by Conradie & Field, 2001: 73) said, ‘one creature sustains one another, one enriches the other and that is why all creatures are interdependent’. This delicate balance should also, I believe, be maintained between stewardship of creation and social justice issues, as Cora Tucker (1987) alludes:

People don’t get all the connections. They say the environment is over here, the civil rights group is over there, the women’s group is over there, and the other groups are here. Actually, all of them are one group, and the issues we fight become null and void if we have no clean water to drink, no clean air to breathe, and nothing to eat.

Wenz discusses how differently environmental justice issues may affect the wealthy and the poor (2007: 57–84). However, judging by the number of plant and animal species which have become extinct – all of us, rich or poor, are not doing well. Among other things, the ever expanding human population is not doing us any favours (Kirk, 1999: 165). Thus, for us to find the balance – ‘something (somebody) has to give; family size, standard of living or the biosphere’s survival. Of these alternatives, stable family size with modest affluence seems the most humane solution’ (Ward & Dubos, 1972: 177). Talks have been going on for far too long – now, practical steps hinged on Christian and African perspectives have to be taken.

Biblical and Theological Principles and Creation

God’s creation is good. However, it is true that the ‘people have devalued the earth’ (Warmback, 2001: 80). When it comes to economic development, we have been neglecting the impact of human activities on the environment. Indeed, our behaviour is in contrast with what we read in Psalm 148: 1–13. A picture of vibrant ecosystem praising the Lord comes to my mind every time when I read this Psalm. Having said that, the understanding of the passage in Genesis 1 (about dominion) and the idea that our time on earth is transitory, are often used to implicate Christian perspectives in the environmental degradation of our times. Thus, I agree with White when he said we need to ‘rethink our axioms’ (White, 1967: 1204).

The Bible has many passages which clearly show that God wants human beings to live in harmony with the environment. In Deuteronomy 20: 19–20, humans are restricted from cutting down fruit trees. In Leviticus 25, we read about the preservation of land. And in Deuteronomy 25: 4, we read about the law which forbids the killing of birds. In the New Testament, we also get a picture of how Jesus loved the environment. For example, in Matthew 6: 28–30, he says God will clothe his beloved like he ‘clothes the grass in the fields’.

This harmonious relationship between the environment and humans beings was also explored by many early church fathers (and mothers). For example, Irenaeus (185 to 254 CE), taught that ‘the creation as a whole is part of the divine plan of renewal. God tends and nourishes his creation’ (Kinsley, 1995: 119). Although Irenaeus tended to emphasise the centrality of human beings in the creation, he taught that ‘the majority of creatures after the Fall continue to remain obedient to God’s will – nature then, retains its goodness’ (ibid.) And, Augustine (354–430 CE) believed that ‘every creature has an ‘existence fitting it’, and although we, from our limited perspective, may not understand the place of a given being, or may even be repelled by it – in its way that being glorifies the Creator’ (ibid.: 120). However, Augustine never considered creation (environment) as ‘divine in itself’, but he thought (and taught) that ‘it testifies to the divine in its every facet and is suffused with the divine in its daily expressions’. More importantly, Saint Francis of Assisi (1182–1226) and his work, remain the most powerful testimony of how the early Church loved nature. In one of his poems (songs) he says:

(Lord) be praised...
 Especially for Sir Brother Sun.
 How handsome he is!
 (Lord) be praised...
 For Sister Moon and the Stars,
 (Lord) be praised...
 For our Sister, Mother Earth...
 Who nourishes and governs us!
 And who produces various fruits,
 with many-coloured flowers and herbs.

More recently, in 1991, the heads of many religious denominations (mainly from North America) at the ‘Summit on Environment’ pledged to:

- ‘Take initiatives in interpreting and communicating theological foundations for the leadership of creation in which we find the principles for environmental actions’;
- ‘Encourage and exemplify habits of sound and sustainable house-holding – in land use, investment decisions, energy conservation, purchasing of products and waste disposal’;
- ‘Witness firsthand and call public attention to the effect of environmental degradation on vulnerable peoples and ecosystems’; and
- ‘Prepare educational materials for congregations; provide technical support for religious publishers already producing such materials, and share *sermonical* and liturgical materials about ecology’.

More importantly, they pledged ‘to the children of the world, to take full measure of what this moment in history requires of us’ (Gottlieb, 1996: 636–630). However, about 20 years later, very few church leaders (in the world and particularly in southern Africa) as well as faith-based organisations, have lived up to the aforementioned New York Declaration. Among these few faith-based organisations, the work of the Western Cape Provincial Council of Churches (WCPC) and Diakonia Council of Churches (DCC), which is based in Durban, South Africa, needs to be commended. In 2005 and 2007, the DCC conducted successfully the ‘Environmental Justice’ and ‘Economic Justice’ seasons, respectively. These programmes made many faith-based organisations and churches aware of issues such as: the Basic Income Grant; the *Oikos* Journey (inclusive economy and shared prosperity); genetically modified foods; vegetable gardens; and climate change, among others. These issues, which the church is called upon to respond, continue to affect many poor people of God, especially those who live in Africa and depend mainly on their indigenous belief systems and solely on what Mother Earth has to give. Therefore, the Christian response is not likely to have meaning for many of our people until it is ‘cooked in African Pots’ (Abrahams, 2007:7).

An African Perspective of Creation

According to Basotho folklore, (human) life began from a damp place (something like a wetland), with many reeds, called *Ntsoanatsatsi* (the place where the sun was born). That is why Basotho refer to the hospital maternity ward as *kalehlakeng* (in the, or the place of, reeds). And in the olden days many Africans used to consider (river) water, especially where there were reeds, to be sacred. These days many African traditions (especially those which have something to do with the environment) such as the *umkhosi wokweshwama* (the ritual of killing of a bull with bare hands) are still rightly interpreted as cruelty to animals. Hence, as many believe, these rituals need to be transformed.

Africans honour nature in many other ways. For example, some often adopt certain animals and use them as clans’ totems. The clan/tribe which uses the *kgomo/nare* (cow/buffalo) as its *seboko* (totem) neither eats beef nor kill cows/buffalos. For example, the same goes for *Bakwena/oNgwenya* (those who venerate crocodiles), *Batshweneng* (those who venerate apes/monkeys), *Bakubung/oMvubu* (those who venerate hippos) and *Batloung/oNdlovu* (those who venerate the elephants, such as myself).

Some clans venerate non-living things such as the sun (*abakwaLanga*) and plants such as wheat (*bahaSelemakoro*) and acacia trees (*bahaLeoka*) trees. This African belief system is also similar to the ‘ordination of trees’ often done in Thailand by Buddhist Monks. In Thai culture, an ordained priest can’t be killed, so the trees are protected (www.sulak-sivaraksa.org). As people intermarry, many tribes become related to each other – resulting in many people not killing the animals venerated by their relatives. As a result, killing elephants and rhinos for their horns (which happen so often these days) hurts many people because is an insult and is foreign to African culture and traditions. So, killing animals as part of hunting (or competing for a ‘trophy’), which some people ‘play’ as sport, is also un-African.

Undeniably, Gabriel Setiloane and John Mbiti contributed significantly in the narration, recording and interpreting African religions. In as far as creation and the environment is concerned, Mbiti said:

The earth is full of created things. Some Africans regard it as a living being, and call it 'mother earth, the goddess earth, or the divinity of the earth'. On the earth itself many things are held in greatest esteem for religious reasons, such as mountains, waterfalls, rocks, some forests and trees, birds, animals and insects. But in African myths of creation, (hu)man (beings) put themselves at the centre of the universe. It is as if the whole world exists for (hu)man (beings') sake. This means both what the world can do for (hu)man (beings), and how (hu)man (beings) can use the world for their own sake.... and endeavour to live in harmony with it. (Mbiti, 1996:172)

It is clear that Mbiti (1992) supported the original, and still widely held, understanding among many Christians that human beings have 'dominion' over the entire creation.

However recent empirical research 'suggests that traditional culture', especially among the Zulus, still 'regard naturally occurring indigenous plant species as more valuable' than invaders (Nemudzudzanyi *et al.*, 2010). Therefore, it is encouraging that some African people still honour God's creation. Many continue to implement the teachings, which were handed to them by their ancestors in dealing with contemporary environmental adversities.

Children should be encouraged to practice the Biblical, theological, ethical and African principles of stewardship of the environment, and to make these principles their lifestyles (or fashion) from a tender age. In fact, 'all of us have a role to play – no matter how small' (Botha *et al.*, 2006). The author of Psalms reminds us :

O Lord, you have always been our home. Before you created the hills or brought the world into being, you were eternally God, and will be God forever you tell us to return to what we were; you change us back to dust. A thousand years to you are like one day; they are like yesterday, already gone, like a short hour in the night. You carry us away like a flood; we last no longer than a dream. We are like weeds that sprout in the morning that grow and burst into bloom, then dry up and die in the evening. (Psalm 90: 1-6 ,Good News Bible)

Conclusion

In conclusion, both the Christian and African perspectives on creation, as argued in this think piece, affirm that human beings and the entire God's creation are interconnected. We belong to each other. So, it is our prime responsibility to take good care of the environment; to recycle and re reuse waste; and more importantly, to discourage companies from manufacturing and supplying non-biodegradable waste such as plastic, which causes so much harm to the earth, which *Modimo le Badimo* love so much.

Editorial note

The text was shortened for publication as a think piece as it opens a conversation on perspectives that Lehlohonolo has explored out of his reading and personal experiences. The publication of think pieces has emerged as a way of bringing emerging and interesting concerns and perspective into scholarly deliberation.

Note on the Contributor

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