



Ecological and Environmental Issues: A Study of Religious Perspective

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Abstract

The field of environmental ethics, an emerging branch of philosophy, emerged most significantly in the 1960s from an increasing awareness of global environmental condition. It emerged as a reaction to the perception of growing environmental crisis. Specific ideas occur frequently in the western philosophies of Aristotle, Hume, Spinoza and the humanists. Contribution from the non-western cultures and religions are based on different metaphysical understandings. Spiritual ecology and its contributors contend that there are spiritual elements at the root of environmental issues. They suggest that there is a critical need to recognize and address the spiritual dynamics at the root of environmental degradation. "Religion and ecology" is an emerging area of academics that embraces multiple disciplines including Anthropology, Sociology, Geography, History, and Environmental Sciences. Religions are often thought to primarily focus on God-Human relations but they also emphasize the importance of social and ethical relations between humans. Religions with the passage of time have acknowledged the importance of environmental issues. The alignment of the passage of human life with natural systems constitutes a profound dynamism of religious energy expressed in cosmological myths, symbols and rituals. The present paper will provide brief insights into major world religions and their texts regarding the ecological and environmental issues and remedies provided thereof.

Key Words: Religion – Environmental Ethics – Ecology

Introduction

Since 1960s, there has been growing scholarly interest in the relationships between human religions, cultures and environments. The subject has acquired the interest of not only religious scholars but also of the philosophers pioneering the field of environmental ethics. 'Religion and Ecology', as a field of study, has generated a large body of scholarship since 1990s. Scholars have tried to conceptualize religion as a system of meaning that can provide answers to central questions about behaviour(s), social order(s) and human motivation.

Many religions have viewed the degradation of the natural environment as a moral failing and positively link ecological awareness with the notion of stewardship, a sacred obligation to safeguard and preserve the earth. "Dominionism", the belief that mankind had a duty to "fill and subdue the earth" and "turn the wilderness into a garden," has been brought into the public sphere by American evangelicals. Thomas E. Lovejoy of George Mason University has aptly remarked:

"¹The almost unimaginable environmental challenge humanity faces- a daunting Gordian knot of science, plus ethical and moral values –demands way forward. Those will be found at the intersection of science and religion ecology and religion lights the path forward."

Religion Defined

Literally speaking, religion is a principle of unification and harmonization (Latin: Religions: re= back; ligare = bind). Religion has been conceived as having faith in ultimate union of man and God, the finite and The Infinite. The Hegelian philosophers, defining the religion, emphasize the rational elements in the religion. According to Mc- Taggart, "Religion is clearly as state of mind... It may be described as an emotion resting on a conviction of harmony between ourselves and the universe at large." The Moralist Mathew Arnold defined religion as, "nothing but morality touched with emotion." Hoffding defines religion as "the faith in the conservation of values." Sri Arubindo refers to the religion as the formulation of will, imagination and intuition to generate the consciousness of life. Robert lee Patterson defines religion as, "the belief between what is judged to be highest part in our nature and the total environment."

The essence of all religions is the attainment of self-happiness, human well-being and peace. In our age of scientific and technological advancement, everything is measured in terms of pragmatic results and quick remedies; religion is hardly in possession of the art of self-enquiry. Our contemporary society faces an alarming debasement of environmental balance and degradation of ecological niche. Climatic changes, floods, droughts, irregular rains, crop failures, extinction of certain species, scarcity of resources, pollution, global warming, ozone depletion, etc. are just a few issues to which religion cannot afford to remain indifferent.

Religion and Ethics

The relationship between religion and ethics has occupied an important place in the discourses of thinkers. There may be morality without religion, but there has not been a religion without morality. All the great religions like Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Jainism and Hinduism have made a very fundamental use of ethical objectivity.

¹ [ecology and religion order form.pdf \(yale.edu\)](https://www.yale.edu/ecoandreligion/orderform.pdf) Retrieved on 15 November 2022

Religion, as an encounter with something in the high orders of existence and morality, as a complete (personal, social and ecological) code of conduct are interconnected. They constitute the spiritual endeavors of man. Ole Preben Ruis in “**Methodology in sociology of Religion**” (2011) says religion is, “a world view, and ideology, an organization, an attitude, a set of values, as moods and motivations, or as an ethical disposition.”

Ecology

Ecology as defined by Cary Institute of Ecosystem Studies is the scientific study of the processes influencing the distribution and abundance of organism, and the interaction between organisms and the transformation and flow of energy and matter. Ecology includes the study of plant and animal populations, communities and ecosystems.

Environmental Ethics

Environmental ethics engages itself with the human being’s ethical relationship with the natural environment. The job of environmental ethics is to outline our moral obligations in the face of rising environmental concerns. Environmental ethics broadly addresses two fundamental questions:

1. What duties do humans have with respect to the environment?
2. Why do humans have any such obligation?

Concerning the latter question, if the answer is simply that we, as human beings, will perish if we do not constrain our action towards nature, then that ethic is ‘anthropocentric’. Anthropocentrism means literally ‘human-centered’ obligations with respect to the environment because we actually owe things to the creatures or entities within the environment themselves.

Greening of Religion

Government corporate interests and non-profits have failed to address the climate change crisis. But religion and its greening religious support to environmental conservation and preservation, has come out to be a hope in the eye of the storm. Increasingly, voices from a variety of religious and spiritual traditions are bringing in the link between religion and climate change to national and international notice.

In response to the resurgence of aggression, intolerant and even violent religious fundamentalism of recent decades, deep questions have been raised about the place of religion in public life. However, religious environmentalism once again shows that religion could be utilized as a savior of the environment positively. This movement shows itself in new forms of theology as theologian Larry Rasmussen puts it:

“²We think God from the standpoint of earth community.” There have been extremely powerful statements by institutional leaders e.g. Pope, Priests, Maulvis, Gurus, etc. There have been thousands of examples of self-consciously religious people participating in environmental activism for at least in part..... Religious reasons. We have seen interpretations of Quran that forbid the dynamite fishing in Tanzania and of the Torah that questions whether or not SUVs are kosher. The world council of churches has challenged the “prevailing economic paradigm” that shapes the global environmental crisis. Buddhist monks have organized against deforestation. Pope has called to return nature to being the “sister of humanity.”

Major World Religious and Environmentalism

The Pew Research Centre’s forum on religion and public life looked at data from churches, mosques, government census records and other sources from around the world in order to gain a picture of what religious life looks like for the 6.9 billion of people who share this planet. According to the sources, “³there are 5.8 billion religiously affiliated adults and children around the globe representing 84% of the 2010 world population.” This includes 2.2 billion Christians, 1.6 billion Muslims, 1 billion Hindus, and 500 million Buddhists. Also an estimated 400 million people practice various folk or traditional religious. So what has this all got to do with climate change? With 8 in 10 of us subscribing to some sort of spiritual perspective, it is worthwhile considering how this might impact the way that we treat our planet.

Here is a brief sketch of how major faith systems view the human attitude towards the environment.

Islam

Islam is a monotheistic religion that stems from the Abrahamic tradition of spirituality. Muslims believe that world was created by God (Allah) which warrants respect, obedience and gratitude towards Him. This includes respect of animals and the environment. In fact, environmental ethics is a big deal in Islam, and is a topic that is becoming increasingly talked about as a result of issues such as global warming, drought in Islamic countries and the global struggle for resources. Quran, the God’s word revealed to Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), is the primary sources of guidance for Muslims in all areas. The Quran contains about 650 references to ecology and conservation within its text Quran says; “And the sky has He raised high, and has devised (for all things) a balance, so that you might never transgress the

² [we think god from the standpoint of earth community - Bing images](#) Retrieved on 10 October 2022

³ [The Global Religious Landscape | Pew Research Center](#) Retrieved on 09 September 2022

balance: weigh, therefore with equity (your deeds), and do not upset the balance” (Surah 55: 7-9 verses).

We see the importance of keeping nature “in balance,” an action that in turn respects the will of Allah. In 2015, World Islamic leaders called on people of all faiths to address the global climate crisis, asking, “What will the future generations say of us, who leave them a degraded planet as our legacy?” Yet again in Surah No. 40, verse No. 57, Quran says; “The creation of the heavens and earth is greater than the creation of mankind, but most of the people do not know.” Here the creation of environment (heavens and earth) is being assigned a “greater” importance than man.

Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) himself has enjoined upon the Muslims for the judicious use of all resources and for friendly attitude towards the members of the environment. According to Quran man has been ascribed the role of “vice-regent” on the earth; entrusted with a unique responsibility to look after the world. His mission is to preserve and enhance the created world.

With respect to the humankind’s stewardship the privilege entails a profound responsibility. Other living species are also considered by the Quran to be “communities” (Ummah) (surah: 6, verse: 38) All living beings share their origin in the common substance (water) (Surah: 24 verse: 45). The earth is mentioned about 453 times in the Quran, whereas sky and heavens are mentioned only about 320 times. There is a strong sense of goodness and purity of the earth. Clean dust may be used for ablutions (tayammum) before prayer in absence of water. Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) said, “The earth has been created for me as a mosque and as a means of purification.” Prophet Muhammad said, “When doomsday comes, if someone has a palm shoot in his hand he should plant it.” A well-known hadith in Al-Musnad says that Allah’s messenger prohibited his followers from wasting water, even when it is found in abundance and when it is used for a holy ritual like ablution (Wudhu). Muhammad frequently reprimanded his followers for neglecting or abusing their animals. He urged his followers to plant trees and provide food to birds and other animals. Summarizing the above discourse, it may be concluded that Islam and its teachings may prove to be a ray of hope in the ongoing environmental crisis.

Christianity and Environment

In the United States, the UK, Australia, Italy and other countries, Christianity has a significant place within the everyday life of many citizens. This religion based on the ideas that an Almighty God sent his son Jesus Christ to save humanity from their sins. Christians believe that God created the world, so by extension the respect of the world shows respect to God. Bible- the Christianity’s holy text says: “You shall not pollute the land in which you live.... You shall not divide the land in which you live,” (Numbers 35:33-34). God does not want to see the world polluted or the resources abused.

In fact, the head of the Catholic Church, Pope Francis, has been nick named “the Green Pope” for his work in highlighting the importance of environmentalism for Christians in the world today. “Respect for the human being and respect for nature are one and the same,” the Pope said in 2015. He also reminded church leaders of the importance of “La Curan Della Casa Commune” (the care of the common home) that is, humanity’s moral obligation to create a planet-strong future.

Hinduism and Environment

This spiritual religion is associated with India and Nepal. It has millions of followers throughout the world. Most of the Hindus believe in the law of karma and re-incarnation. Each successive life depends upon the conduct of the soul in the previous life. It becomes clear how closely the natural world and Hinduism are intertwined. Teachings of Hinduism include the idea that people should use the world unselfishly in order to maintain the natural balance and to repay God for the gifts He has given. Bhagwat Gita, the most sacred scripture of Hinduism, says: “For, so sustained by sacrifices the Gods will give you the food of your desire. Whoso enjoys their gift, yet gives nothing, and is a thief, not more nor less.” Ahimsa (non-violence and respect for life) is another key concept within many versions of Hinduism, which prevents a Hindu from causing any harm to any creature. This is the reason why many Hindus are vegetarians, an inherently low-carbon diet.

Buddhism

It teaches a way of life through Dharma (literally meaning the nature of all things or truth underlying existence), and provides a blueprint for others to reach enlightenment also. Prominent figure within Buddhism, the Dalai Lama, is often cited as a contemporary environmental leader for his wisdom and teachings on the relationship between humanity and our planet. He is quoted to have said: “Because we all share this planet earth, we have to learn to live in peace and harmony with each other and with nature. This is not just a dream, but a necessity.”

Conclusion

Given that all the faith systems discussed above have plenty to say when it comes to caring for our planet, it is obvious that religion has the strength to lead when it comes to sustainability of environment. There is a hope that the faith systems will be able to work within their communities (and in convergence) to highlight the importance of combating the environmental and ecological threats, and offer a moral authority and ethical guidelines to sustain the ecological balance.

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