

Anthropocentrism; Root of Ecological Crisis: The Theological Lineage

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the critical examination of Semitic religions; Christianity, Judaism and Islam; in relation to environmental ethics. It is the historian Lynn White, who, for first time put the blame on Christianity for current ecological crisis such as pollution, deforestation, global warming and depletion of natural resources. This paper will be historical and critical exposition of the three Semitic religions. It will be the comparative analysis of the these three in relation to ecology. If the problem lies in the religion, the solution to it is also to be found in some other religion. Though all the three religions are not ecologically viable yet Islam attempted to move a bit closer to an ecological concerned thought.

KEYWORDS: Creation, Domination, Ecocentrism, Hierarchy of Beings and Nature.

The urgent need for protection and conservation of nature is very much evident these days. In order to provide the solution to the current ecological crisis, we need to first look at the immediate cause of such a problem. The root of this crisis lies in an approach which places human at the centre of the universe, which is termed as anthropocentrism. This paper traces the theological base of this perspective, which lies in the Christianity.

As an anthropocentric perspective, we shall propose that Genesis advocates anthropocentric view of nature. Regarding the man and nature relationship, it seems clear that the role of Genesis is problematic. But the case in Christianity is not much clear. In fact, among the environmentally concerned thinkers, there is an intense and longer debate over the role of Christianity concerning the contemporary ecological crisis.

For instance, let's take a note of the order of the creation mentioned in the first chapter of Genesis. It is said that the humanity is formed after the sixth day, after light and darkness, water and land, plants and animal had been formed before it. Human beings are result of the final act of the Creator. What does this suggest about human place in the universe? Many Jewish thinkers stated that God created human at the end to make him the emperor of this gifts which are made solely for his purpose. The entire natural world was formed first to help human sustenance and for the purpose of enjoyment of human race.

The other ecology concerned Jewish scholars offered a very different response. They argue that first man on Earth (Adam) was created at last of the whole creation because so that human beings should not grow too arrogant by the thought that they were created first in the whole pattern of creation, if that would had been the case. They should always be grounded on the thought that even the basic non-living were created before him thus he should not take pride in his superior status as conscious being.¹ As far as both the

¹ Ibid, Brakhot 68b.

thinkers are concerned, they both agree that humankind is nevertheless a divine afterthought.

For some scholars like Lynn White and Glacken, it is quite clear that Christianity inherited Genesis' theory of creation along with its dominion teaching has led to the development of exploitative attitudes about nature and causes ecological crisis. According to another group of scholars like Attfield and Passmore, Christianity contains material that portrays man as a steward rather than despot.

With the reference of the problem of ecological crisis, we observe that the relationship between man and nature is different from one religion to another. In the case of Genesis, the relationship between the man and nature is problematic. Genesis advocates an anthropocentric view of nature. In Genesis's scheme of thought man is the centre of the universe. God created nature for man's use and purpose. Genesis, in essence, gives more emphasis on man over nature and constructs a dualism of man and nature.

“God created man in his own image, in the image of God created in him; male and female created he them. And God blessed them, and god said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over fish of the sea, and over fowl of the air, and over every living thing moveth upon the earth.”²

According to the Genesis theory of creation, God first created the universe. After its creation, He created man as a replica of His own image. He ordered the man to rule the universe as they wish because it is made for him so that he can enjoy. The major point of contestation between the Judeo-Christian value system and the various secular systems is the competing view in regard to the answers to this question that whether nature is created for man or man is merely a part of nature? Or, does the natural environment have any significance in itself, independent of man in the sense of man's appreciation of it or to use it for his good?

The Judeo-Christian responses to this question is clear. They believed that nature has been created solely for man's use, independent of or separate from him, it has no meaning. It is meaningless just as dolphins are adorable because for human beings they are, they find them adorable., independent of that valuing there is no purpose of their existence. They are just same as a piece of stone, an organism or anything. Human appreciation and valuing gives meaning to these sentient and non-sentient beings.

The critics find this biblical notion about nature ecologically unacceptable. They argued that there are three line of thinking which is ecologically disastrous in Bible, which are need to be reframed or reinterpreted understanding the urgency of it now. They are: that man shall act as a lord over the other creation; that everything was created solely for man by God and therefore has no intrinsic value in itself; and that nature or the creation is not sacred, to be preserved or protected from the irrational action of man.

²*The Holy Bible*, The Bible (Genesis 1:27-8), p. 1.

As with regard to man “subduing and conquering nature,” is one of the revolutionary ideas of the Old Testament that made Western medical and other scientific progress possible. People of all ancient civilizations believed that it is the nature that ruled man. The Book of Genesis came a step forward to teach the opposite of this by stating that it is man who is to rule the nature.

This revolutionary idea of ruling and conquering nature, helped man to develop cures for nature’s diseases like cancer, tumors, etc. Human should conquer cancer, it is not the cancer that will conquer humans, it is only the task of rational beings, not irrational gods of nature, to do so. The similar values in Judeo-Christian thought which acted as the primary reason for the development of science and modern medicine in the West.

In the medieval period this thesis of domination got revised. In the revised version it is stated that we need to have minimal concern for nonhumans because they are too God’s creation. But this concern is not levied on them for their own sake but for the sake of humans. This implies that value is entirely placed on the vertical axis by God. The world around us; whether living or non-living; is significant only to the extent that it affects our spiritual condition, and best exists only as a resource to aid us during the earthy part of our career. In the thirteenth century, St. Thomas Aquinas wrote:

The very condition of the rational creature, in that it has dominion over its action, requires that the care of providence should be bestowed on it for its own sake; whereas the dominion of other things that have no dominion over their actions shows that they are cared for, not for their own sake, but as being directed to other things....by divine providence they are intended for man’s use in the natural order.³

It is the historian Lynn White, who, first time put the blame on Christianity for current ecological crisis, in his historical essay entitled ‘The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis’. He argues that Christianity is the world’s most anthropocentric religion because it offers a man-centric explanation of the world where man and nature are two different entities. Man is the centre of universe and nature is made up for man’s use.

He suggests that Christianity inherits the Genesis’s ‘theory of creation that says that man is separate from and is superior to the rest of nature because God created man after His own image, “man’s body is made of clay, he is not simply part of nature; he is made in God’s image.”⁴ Likewise, God established man’s dominance over nature in ethical realm as well. He debarred nature from the realm of intrinsic value. In the words of White:

Christianity inherited from Judaism...a striking story of creation...Man named all the animals, thus establishing his dominance over them. God planned all of this explicitly for man’s benefit and rule: no item in the physical creation had any purpose save to serve man’s purposes.⁵

³ Aquinas, T., (1928), *Summa Contra Gentiles*, translated by the English Dominican Fathers, Book 3, pt. 2, chapter 112.

⁴ White, L., (1967), “The roots of Our Ecological Crisis”, *Science*, p.1203-07.

⁵ *Ibid*, p.1203-07.

Further, White argues that “The Christian dogma of creation...first clause of all the Creeds”⁶ created a duality between man and nature in the world as a whole and among the Christians. It developed an exploitative attitude in humans towards the nature. He mentioned, “Christianity... not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God’s will that man exploit nature for his proper ends.”⁷

For White, we often come across evidences of attempt of technological mastery of nature during the Christian Middle Age. The incipient of such exploitative tendencies are not the people who undertook such discovery or innovation but the future generation which is yet to be born. Just for the sake of short term benefits such innovations are undertaken or their implications on the future is not considered or taken into account. White concludes these outlooks and approaches “bears a huge burden of guilt for environmental degradation.”⁸

He perceived a deep correlation between Christianity, science and technology and ecological crisis. He argues that though current ecological crisis is the result of science and technological development but this development has its ideological roots in Christianity concept of man and nature and their relationship with each other. In the words of white:

The present increasing disruption of ecological environment is the product of a dynamic technology and science which are originating in the Western medieval world...their growth cannot be understood historically apart from distinctive attitudes towards nature which are deeply grounded in Christian dogma.⁹

Therefore, he proposed two solutions of ecological crisis: (i) ecological problems will not be solved until and unless we fully reject the Christian axiom that is ecologically dangerous to be followed i.e., nature has no reason for existence except to serve the man. There is need to substitute this vale and adopt new set of values in place of it. (ii) it is the time for us to realize that we can no more rely on science and technology for providing the solutions to the ecological problems because they are the outcome of Christian attitudes. In fact, they are the original contributor to these problems.

Both our present science and our technology are so tintured with orthodox Christian arrogance toward nature that no solution for our ecologic crisis can be expected from them alone. Since the roots of our trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essential religious, whether we call it or not.¹⁰

White’s views have attracted considerable criticisms. In “Man’s Responsibility for Nature”, John Passmore suggests that the counterproductive attempt to dominate nature “man as despot” owes more to the exploitation of the nature has proved tenacious¹¹. White saw no good reason to deviate from his original observations and his views,

⁶ Ibid, p.1203-07.

⁷ Ibid, p. 1203-07.

⁸ Ibid, p. 1203-07.

⁹ White, L., (1967), “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis”, *Science*, p. 1203-1207.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 1203-07.

¹¹ Passmore, J., (1974), *Man’s Responsibility for Nature*, p. 25-30.

continue to attract adherents. His strong and coherent historical link between the Christian doctrine of domination and the Western attitude toward nature has been widely used in literature on environmental degradation and its causes to blame the Biblical thought in for the current situation. He claims that Bible appoints man as a steward of nature. However Greek and modern western thinking changed the Bible's position of stewardship into the despotism.

Critics of western civilization are to this extent justified in their historical diagnosis: There is a strong Western tradition that man is free to deal with nature as he pleases, since it exists only for his sake. But they are incorrect in tracing the attitude back to Genesis...it is only as a result of Greek influence that Christian theology was led to think of nature as nothing but a system of resources, man's relationship with which are in no respect subject to moral censure.¹²

Passmore presents two traditional views that deny man to be a despot in his relation to nature. In the first view, man is seen as a steward, a farmmanager, who is actively working as God's deputy and is responsible for the care of the world. The second view sees man as co-operating with nature with an aim to perfect it, which is not only useful to man but also to nature.

The first non-despotic tradition- the stewardship tradition dates back to the post-Platonic philosophers of the Roman Empire. They believed that God has sent man to earth to administer earthly things, to take care for nature as in God's property. His responsibility is to look after the welfare of what he governs or take care of. Passmore supports the second view that the pruner shows his skill by bringing to light the potentialities of the nature on which he operates.

Attfield echoes with Passmore that Christianity gives more emphasis on the caring of nature rather than exploitation. He thinks that there is a theological perspective in Christian thought that is sympathetic to the environment. He mentioned:

There is much more evidence than is usually acknowledged for other, more beneficent Christian attitudes to the environment and to non-human nature. Christian teachings about nature have been diverse and contradictory, but they have, he says, not typically been exploitative.¹³

In addition, Attfield also raises appoint that critics of Bible have ignored the caring aspect of it and to prove the exploitation thesis they use Bible selectively and concludes that it is anti-ecological. On the other hand, since Bible is written in ancient Hebrew, a translation problem is common. In fact, due to the translation difficulties its critics misinterpret the position of Bible of man as a steward of nature to despot. In the words of Attfield:

Adverse interpretations of Christian attitudes of nature came from exaggeration and selective use of evidence. In fact, all interpretation of Bible is open to

¹² Ibid, p. 27.

¹³ Pepper, D., (1984), *The Roots of Modern Environmentalism*, p. 152.

question because of translation difficulties, especially the Old Testament written in ancient Hebrew.¹⁴

Christianity contains material that portrays man as a steward rather than despot. For example, for them Psalm 104 and 148 can be considered supportive to the theory that man is steward rather than a ruler and exploiter. These Psalms praises the God for his creation and gives the idea that God creates this entire earth in a systematic manner where everything is unique and have its own importance.

thou didst set the earth on its foundations, so that it should never be shaken thou dost cause the grass to grow for the cattle and plants for man to cultivate, that he may bring forth food from the earth¹⁵

Furthermore, Psalm 148:9:10:11:13 praise God for his beautiful and systematic creation.

Mountains and all hills, fruits, trees and al cedars! Beasts and all cattle, creeping things and flying birds! Kings of the earth and all peoples, princes and rulers of the earth! Let them praise the name of the Lord, for his name alone exalted; his glory ids above earth and heaven.¹⁶

Taking these Psalms as sufficient and necessary grounds to support his arguments, Attfield concludes that:

These Psalms admire God's handiwork, express his care for various creatures, and suggest that human domination of nature means ruling it in a way consistent with being responsible to god for his realm. Similarly, the New Testament, in the gospels of Mathew and Luke, also witnesses God's care for animals and plants.¹⁷

In contrast to stewardship thesis, some ecocentric claims that Christianity as it inherits the theory of creation offers a man centric explanation of world and believes in the philosophy of anthropocentrism. That is why it produces despotic tendency among the people. Later, this despotism proved to be an essential feature of modern western European thought. At the same time, it is a consensus among ecocentric that despotic view advocated by the Christianity is mainly responsible for current ecological crisis.

One of them, Glacken says that it was the Judeo-Christian thesis of man and nature relationship that supplied the raw material for western European thought so that it can form an antagonistic relationship between man and nature. In the words of Glacken:

Western European thought is dominantly Judeo-Christian in its origin and content; in its early development, much of it as concerned with linking the two creations, of humanity and earth. Within earth, man has a divine mission to control the whole creation. To achieve this, it is God intention that mankind

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 152.

¹⁵ *The Holy Bible*, Psalm (104:5, 148:14), p. 471.

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 492.

¹⁷ Pepper, D., (1984), *The Roots of Modern Environmentalism*, p. 155.

multiply itself, spread over the earth, and make it domination over the creation secure.¹⁸

It is very much evident that anthropocentrism holds the view that the non-human world can be attributed value depending only on its usage to man, whether directly or indirectly it serves human interests. The ecological crisis what we are facing presently is due to the ambiguity that lies in the phrase “human interest” i.e. between what is in our interest and what we take an interest in.

In this context anthropocentric comes clear of the blame by arguing that claim that ecological problems are the outcome of ethical wrong-headedness. The mistake lies not in thinking that what matters is only human interests directly, but it lies rather in being ill-informed and short-sighted about categorization of interests and not them exactly what they really are.

But if we take the interests of us and the future generations and get clear understating about the ways in which the health of the natural environment improves the quality of human lives, we will have all the arguments in hand which demands caring about the health of the natural world. But these arguments are again based on anthropo concerns not irrespective of them.

The Quran brings out an element of accountability in our act by stating that God is the holds ultimate power for dominion over the creation. All things of the world will return to Him and are thus each is accountable to Him for their actions. In the Quran and in the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad, preserved in a literary form known as Hadith provides an authentic account of Islamic principles which can be used for establishing a theological perspective to the ecological ethics for protection and conservation of the natural world.

In parallel fashion to humankind’s stewardship of the earth, this privilege entails a moral responsibility on the part of humans as to how to relate to the nature or deal with it. The other living species too are considered by the Quran to be “peoples or communities”¹⁹. The creation along with its diversity and complexity, is thought of as a vast cosmos of signs of God’s power, wisdom, benevolence, love, majesty and beneficence. The whole creation praises God in their own unique ways, by existing as it is (it’s very being).

With Him are the keys (to the treasures) of the Unseen that no one knows but He. He knows whatever there is on the earth and in the sea. Not a leaf falls but with His knowledge: there is not a grain in the earth’s shadows, not a thing, freshly green or withered, but it is (inscribed) in a clear record.²⁰

As far as Quranis concerned, the creation of the universe is a greater reality than the creation of humankind by God, but the human had been given a privilege to occupy an upper position even higher than the angels as steward or care-taker of God’s creation on the earth. They share an origin in the common substance, water, with all the animals on the earth, they all at once will return to the earth from which they are born.

¹⁸ Glacken, C., (1987), *Trace on the Rhodian Shore*, p. 151.

¹⁹ Quran (Oxford’s World Classic Edition, 2004), Translated by M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, Sura 6:38.

²⁰ Ibid, Sura 6:59.

Islamic philosophy though provides for subservient of earth to humankind yet it states that it should not be administered or exploited irresponsibly by them. There exists a strong sense of earth's goodness and purity, as prescribed in certain rituals of Islam such as clean dust can be used for ablutions before prayer, if clean water is not available. The Prophet Muhammad said that: "The earth has been created for me as a mosque and as a means of purification."²¹ There is an element of sacredness of the earth which is considered as a fit place in performing service to God, whether they are formal ceremonies or daily life rituals.

Islamic scholars envision heaven as a beautiful natural garden and the life on earth is just a rehearsal ground as to how to have prepare oneself to that eternal life in heaven after judgment day. The love and care for the natural environment must be seen as an appropriate training for the afterlife which exists in an environment that is beautiful, perfect, peaceful, and pious, in the company of God and the angels.

There is an element of interrelatedness and interconnected of man and nature as found in Islam when they argue that every act of god has a purpose of it. "Do you not observe that God sends down rain from the sky, so that in the morning the earth becomes green?"²². The color green has special status and place in Islam due to what it symbolizes; profound sense of the value of nature as God's perfect and most fruitful gift to humankind. This principle of peace with nature provides a charter for green movements worldwide that could become the great exertion in the form of "green jihad" appropriate for addressing solutions to the global ecological crisis.

Thus, the concept of global trusteeship is expounded in Islam. The whole of nature is considered as creation of god (cosmic creation). Humans are bestowed with an accountability, they are answerable in the court of God on the day of judgment. All things will return to the God. Humans are not dominant, but God has domination over the nature.

The charges that religion is responsible for our environmental problem usually depend on interpretations of early passages of Genesis involving the claim that God intended man to have dominion over the earth. It can be argued that Genesis caused human beings to begin the transformation of nature according to their will that has continued to the present day with disastrous consequences.

Passmore stated the weakness of this accusation that Genesis was written long after this transformation began and thus hardly be the initial cause.²³ At most Genesis merely states the relationship of man with nature, commonly accepted at the time when it was written and probably predated the Old Testament by many years.

It can still be argued that man has used Genesis as a justification for their modification of the earth in order to "salve his conscience".²⁴ While this interpretation

²¹ Ibid, Sura 24:56.

²² Ibid, Sura 22:63.

²³ Passmore, J., (1974), *Man's Responsibility for Nature*, p. 7n.

²⁴ Ibid, p. 7n.

may place religion as the heart of the present problem caused by human impact on the environment, yet it is very difficult to defend.

It is hard to imagine that human beings at the dawn of civilization could have perceived the damaging influence of their actions so clearly when their descendants have only begun to achieve a dim understating of relationships involved in the past hundred years. It is probably more reasonable to speculate that early humans were more concerned with salving their fear of nature than their guilt and that Genesis served less as a justification of their actions which are destructive to nature.

Genesis did not become environmentally troublesome until the late Middle age, when church philosophers interpreted it in accordance with the writings of Aristotle. The association of his philosophical thought with the passages of Genesis transformed them into philosophical ideas rather than religious doctrines.

In the following section, using the preceding sketch in mind, we shall be dealing Greek philosophy focusing mainly on Protagoras and Aristotle, that is, how they approached the natural phenomena in the way that (1) prevented them in the developing ethics which of an ecological viable, (2) advocated the view that does not encourage the aesthetic appreciation of nature and (3) promoted a conception of reality that made is unthinkable to have an idea of nature preservation or care for nature and its nonhuman content.

Our scheme of arguments above runs in two ways; firstly, we critically examine the position of Genesis of Old Testament and New Testament of Christianity over the man and nature relationship on one hand. Secondly, the claim of Lynn White and Glacken that Christianity is widely a man-centered religion of the world because it established the domination of man over nature. People action depends on what principles they believe or in other words there is a direct link between religious attitude of a person or a society and their behavior towards nature.

In this regard, we can summarize that White rightly charges Genesis and Christianity for their anthropocentric view of man and nature since both of these present men as Supreme Being of the world which got the power from the God side itself to use nature as it likes because God made nature especially for their purpose. At the same, we also acknowledged the weight of defensive criticism of those environmentally concerned Christians who argue for a stewardship thesis about the man and nature. As a final remark, we state that it can be debatable whether Christianity is anthropocentric or not but it is certain that it is not ecocentric.

Regarding the second point, we accepted that White is on mistake when he tries to draw a logical connection between the religiosity and human behaviors. In fact, he could have not realized the force of other various kinds of historical changes that took place from time to time and influenced men's thinking and their behavior towards nature.

That is why we recognize the worth of Passmore and Attfield argue that they are right when they say that only religion does not direct the human behavior but some other social, economic and political factors play an important role in formulation of human attitudes and thinking and direct the anti-ecological activities of humans.

From the above account, it can be concluded that the foundation of anthropocentrism is grounded both on religious and secular principles. It would not be fair to say that roots of anthropocentrism lie exclusively in the Semitic religious tradition. The modern scientific world-view has contributed significantly in the thinking that nature does not have any intrinsic value. Nature has value, has significance, only if it is amenable to human manipulation and control. From this perspective, nature is of value only if it can be harnessed in the service of human values.

Thus, the modern scientific view of nature almost converges with that anthropocentrism that theology establishes where nature exists for mankind's advantage and use. Human counts exclusively; its aspirations, its desires and its interests are of utmost importance. Their cruelty towards the nature, plants and animals are justified unless in return it harms them directly or indirectly.

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