



THE DISPUTED PLACE OF HUMANS IN ECOLOGICAL TALKS

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Abstract

The attempts to formulate practices of deep ecology very often raise the question of human factor. The Nature-human binary remains as an unresolved issue in the discussion. Lyn White Jr accused Christianity of being complicit in the exploitation environment in history. On the other hand, Christianity upholds the concept of human ecology always. The later developments in the Christian thought clarify its defence of the age old notion of human ecology. The human ecology and natural ecology are the two sides of the same reality and one cannot be safeguarded at the cost of the other.

Keywords: Anthropocentrism, deep ecology, human ecology, shallow ecology.

The independent status of Nature has been widely admitted with greater realization since the second half of the twentieth century. It marked a complete break from the age old thought of human validation for Nature with its contingent status of existence. The contribution of Norwegian thinker Arne Naess played a pivotal role in imparting this new realization.

Naess introduced the concept of "deep ecology" in the Third World Future Research Conference in 1972. Since then, it has become the yardstick to evaluate the intensity and genuineness of strategies of ecological conservation. Deep ecology treats Nature with its diversity as complete in itself. It's worth is not defined from outside but from inside. It refers to a "strong sense of the intrinsic value of every living being and its right to live and blossom—values that are independent of usefulness" (Naess, 103). Alan Drengson in the "Introduction" of *Ecology of Wisdom* puts the same in other words: deep ecology admits the "inherent value of ecological and cultural diversity and of all living beings" (25).

Lyn White Jr. treats the traditional thought of contingency related to the status of ecology as part of the Judeo-Christian theology. He unleashes his criticism against the Christian anthropocentrism in his essay "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis". According to White, the anthropocentric mentality was the contribution of the Latin West, whereas the Greek East upheld the significance of nature as the revelation of divine mentality.

To White, Christianity of the West upholds anthropocentrism: "Especially in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen" (1205). It uprooted the paganism and instituted its revelatory doctrines. Paganism which practised animism and pantheism found the presence of spirits behind every being in the nature. The tree has its spirit that guards it from intruders; the mountain is protected by its guardian spirit; the rivers, streams, plateaus and every other being has this spiritual presence that encircled them.

With the arrival of Christianity, the pagan worship of nature was abandoned. It places humankind with a unique identity incomparable to other beings of the Nature. The whole Nature is interpreted as anthropocentric. White says, "Christianity in absolute contrast to ancient paganism and Asia's religions (except, perhaps, Zoroastrianism), 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" (1205). It thereby followed by an indifferent attitude towards Nature.

The arguments made by White can be extended to the gospels too. A selective reading of the gospels enables one to find out antagonist references to beings in the nature. In the gospel according to St Matthew, Jesus says, "Do not give dogs what is holy; and do not throw your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under foot and turn to attack you" (7.6). Here the words "dogs" and "swine" are used with abominable sense apparently. But St Augustine of the West when interprets the text highlights its implied sense. He says, "For although the holy thing itself cannot be shattered or destroyed but remains intact and unharmed, what must be considered is the desire of those who resist the truth with the utmost violence and bitterness. They do everything in their power to destroy what is holy, as if its destruction were possible" (Simonetti 148).

On the other hand, there are evident ecological readings of divine revelation in the East as it is stated by White. St Ephrem is the epitome of this ecological perspective. He writes: In his book *Moses / Described the creation of the natural world, / So that both Nature and Scripture / Might bear witness to the Creator; / Nature, through man's use of it, / Scripture, through his reading of it (Hymns on Paradise, 5:2).*

Ephrem treats Nature as a witness to the Creator and thus it has the same validity of the Scripture. Still the verse "Nature, through man's use of it" needs to be interpreted, for it does not refer to an exploitative use, but to the day to day living of the humanity in the nature around them. Here it

demands a reverential attitude to the Nature, for it bears the imprints of divine revelation.

What is implicit in the West may be explicit in the East. The selective reading of the gospels overlooking its entire message makes it tougher to gain the accurate sense of the verses. In the above reference to dogs and swine regarding holy things from the gospel (Matt. 7.6) developed the concept of *disciplina arcani*, the secret teaching, in the patristic period of Christianity. Thus it means that, every nuance of the mystery need not be exposed to everyone. Only the deserving should be taught them. It means that the verse is not taken literally in the Christian tradition, but its implicit sense is being exposed. .

White sheds light on the linear concept of time upheld in Christian teachings (1205), which in fact sets it free from many other accusations. The Church treats its time as eschatological era where it waits for the second coming of Jesus. It is the sole event that it awaits for. The early centuries of Christianity understood the end of the time as something immanent. This promotes its interpretation of the gospels only in the perspective of salvation of the soul alone. Topics like Nature and ecology might not be a topic of contemplation then.

The dignity of humankind is central to the teachings of Christianity. It comes from the belief that humans are created in the image of God (White 1205). But it does not intend to make a Nature-human binary. What Christianity exposes is the Nature-human bond. One cannot be separated from the other. We cannot deal with neither Nature nor human alone. Both have an organic bond. It is explicit in the current teachings of the Church. Pope Benedict XVI on the 40th World Day of Peace, says:

"Alongside the ecology of nature, there exists what can be called a "human" ecology, which in turn demands a "social" ecology. All this means that humanity, if it truly desires peace, must be increasingly conscious of the links between natural ecology, or respect for nature, and human ecology. Experience shows that the disregard for the environment always harms human coexistence, and vice versa. It

becomes more and more evident that there is an inseparable link between peace with creation and peace among men" ("The Human Person, the Heart of Peace" par. 8).

Christian disposition regarding Nature can be summarised as this: As you treat the environment so you treat the humankind. The natural ecology and human ecology are both sides of the same coin; they are inseparable realities. "Our duties towards the environment are linked to our duties towards the human person, considered in himself and in relation to others. It would be wrong to uphold one set of duties while trampling on the other" (*Caritas in Veritate* par. 51§3).

The concept of human ecology has not echoed enough in the discussions regarding the natural ecology. It may be a topic that has been brought to attention by Christianity than ecologists. But it remains as a undeniable fact that the human ecology is as sensitive as natural ecology. You can adopt a shallow or deep attitude towards this human ecology. If you are shallow about human ecology, your cries for a deep ecology lack proper foundation. Only a deep human ecology can promote a deep natural ecology.

In deep human ecology, human life has value in itself. It has intrinsic and inherent dignity in every stage and in every culture. A racist cannot be an ecologist. Same is the case of a violator of human life whether it is in embryonic stage or in deathbed. Thus there is an intrinsic relation between deep human ecology and deep natural ecology. To Christianity, both human and natural ecologies are intrinsically related, and therefore it is logically deduced that violence against humanity brings damage to ecology:

"If there is a lack of respect for the right to life and to a natural death, if human conception, gestation and birth are made artificial, if human embryos are sacrificed to research, the conscience of society ends up losing the concept of human ecology and, along with it, that of environmental ecology. It is contradictory to insist that future generations respect the natural environment when our educational systems

and laws do not help them to respect themselves" (*Caritas in Veritate* par. 51§3).

White has based the human-nature relationship for defining our attitude towards ecology. He says, "What we do about ecology depends on our ideas of the man-nature relationship" (1206). Here we see a point of convergence between Christian teaching and that of White. Christianity which defends human ecology demands a correction within humanity where violation often occurs. Only the one who is sensitive to humankind can be genuinely sensitive towards natural ecology.

Nature "is a wondrous work of the Creator, containing a "grammar" which sets forth ends and criteria for its wise use, not its reckless exploitation" (*Caritas in Veritate* par. 48§2). The "grammar" here indicates the revelatory dimension of the nature. Nature cannot be treated as an end product. It is dynamic and is organically related to humanity. Nature reveals the grammar of the wondrous works of the Creator. The basic concept of Christianity regarding revelation is that it is progressively understood. The Catechism of the Catholic Church says: "Yet even if Revelation is already complete, it has not been made completely explicit; it remains for Christian faith gradually to grasp its full significance... (par. 66). Thus the mystery dimension of Nature is retained in Christianity.

Once the mystery and revelatory aspects of the Nature are admitted, all the ventures for the cause of the ecology get its depth. "The Church has a responsibility towards creation and she must assert this responsibility in the public sphere" (*Caritas in Veritate* par. 51§2). The dimension of human ecology which is intrinsically related to the natural ecology contributes to the deep levels of protection and preservation of the dignity of both realities. The problem of Nature-human binary should be overpowered by the increased consciousness of Nature-human bonding. Thus the factor of human ecology increases the validity of the clarion calls to save the natural ecology.

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