

A COSMIC KINSHIP: TOWARDS THE SACRAMENTALITY OF THE ECOSYSTEM

Chukwunonso Obiora, SJ

Society of Jesus

North-West Africa Province

skylimitcc@yahoo.com

Abstract

The global environmental change has become a hot-button issue. Ample studies show that our ecological footprint is unsettling the equilibrium of the ecosystem. Through the ecosystem, humans experience God's unfathomable graciousness and providence for our own flourishing and wellbeing. Supposedly, with their intelligence, humans are meant to compensate this God's graciousness with the responsibility of caring, maintaining and safeguarding our common home – the Earth. The recognition of our finitude as creatures shows our limitedness and self-insufficiency, and hence, we need other creatures in the ecosystem for existence. This means that creation is in a constant interaction with humanity and, as a result, interconnected and interdependent. Consequently, the ecosystem forms an organic unit that creates a web of relationship which interconnects all creation. Thus, there is a kinship among all creatures, even as some cultures admits totemism. Therefore, the degradation and over-exploitation of the ecosystem by human activities dislocates the sacredness of totemism and negates the cosmic kinship and sacramentality of all creation. Hence, creation contains an

aspect of God – the creator and source of all things.

Keywords: Ecosystem, Interconnectivity, Creatures, Kinship, Sacramentality, Sacred, Totem.

Introduction

We live in a graced world. Our world, the Earth, as a result, is one of the most beautiful planets in the universe. Not only that it sustains life of human, animal and plants but also serves as the common home for all these creatures and more. As it stands, we do not know any other planet that supports life, except the Earth. Like a single unit, just as the fingers form a hand, so do the individual creatures in our cosmic reality, the Earth, constitute a whole. We are all radically interconnected and share mutual dependency with one another for survival.

But recently, the Earth or the entire ecosystem is growing increasingly endangered, and urgent action is needed. The Scripture speaks about human relationship with and responsibility to the Earth's ecosystem, our common home, yet humanity continues to plunder, deface and grapple largely with the earth-keeping. The human's current lavish lifestyle is becoming endemic to the ecosystem such that the future looks blurred and unsustainable.

The human-induced emissions of greenhouse gases produce intense stress and anxiety on the entire creatures on the Earth ecosystem. If science by itself fails to motivate the kind of expansive change needed to make a significant impact on the eco-crisis, then Christianity bears substantial responsibility for this moment of crisis such that the re-interpretation of some scriptural passage can engender possible solution to human

intervention.

Importantly, the ecosystem represents a system of signs which derives and discovers its full intrinsic meaning and telos in the creator as the common origin of all beings. Thus, God created human beings in a way that “they cannot live, develop and find fulfilment except in the sincere gift of self to others”¹ – in love with the rest of creation.

This paper seeks to explore the interconnectivity and interdependency of all creation, how it gives rise to cosmic kinship of the ecosystem and the plausibility of human extinction if the anthropogenic mutilation of the rest of creation lingers. Herein, the ecosystem and the environment are used interchangeably to refer to the mutual relationship existing between nature and the human society which lives in it.

Eco-Crisis and Christianity

Human beings as part of creation operate within ecosystems. Their unfriendly or anti-ecological activities cumulatively affect the whole globe such that the climate is also affected. The ecological crisis has been attributed as a direct result of human exploitation of the entire ecosystem as if humans are separable from the ecosystem. We use methods of production and consumption that destabilizes the survival and equilibrium of the environmental species in our ecological niche. We need our ecological niche for survival just like our lungs need oxygen.

Burning of fossil fuel, nuclear plant explosion, throwaway culture and many more generates incredible amount of

¹Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti: Encyclical Letter on Fraternity and Social Friendship* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2020), 22.

pollution which belabours the Earth by creating precarious ecological crisis globally. The rise in temperature has become extremely unbearable causing the melting of the glaciers and the increase of sea levels. This makes the entire ecosystem exposed and vulnerable to floods in one part of the earth's hemisphere whereas the other hemisphere is challenged by unprecedented drought as a result of human activities.

The Historian, Lynn White Jr., blames Christianity as the root cause of the earth's ecological crisis. He asserts that this Western Christianity is "the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen."² This overemphasis on anthropocentrism gives humans the impetus to exploit the earth in a mood of indifference to the integrity of creation. White argues that within Christian theology, creation has no intrinsic value except to serve humans. Thus, for White, Christian arrogance towards the Earth is hugely responsible for the contemporary ecological crisis.

According to White, the emphasis is that the interpretation of Genesis 1:26 can provide a justification for exploitation of the rest of creation irrespective of its consequences. In Genesis, when God considers the creation of humans, God says, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth" (Gen 1:26). It is the interpretation of the term "dominion" of humanity over the rest of creation that makes Christians culprit of the attitude that denigrates the importance of nature. His point is not that Christianity inevitably leads to

² Lynn White Jr., "The Historical Root of Ecological Crisis" *Science* 155, no. 3767 (Mar. 1967): 1203-1207, <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.155.3767.1203>

an arrogant disregard towards nature. Rather, he argues that historically, Christianity has permitted a blatant disregard for the environment.

However, somehow, I believe White missed the theological point contained in the creation stories of Genesis. It is a grave misunderstanding for critics like him to accent that this narrative of origins is interpreted in this particular manner by Christians. At the end of Genesis 1, “God saw everything that had been made and indeed, it was very good” (Gen 1:31). We cannot take the rest of the ecosystem as an inert reality that may be exploited for our own gain as if they do not have an intrinsic value. Rather, the creation narrative shows the special relationship that humans have with God, to mean that humans are the perfection of creation and acts as stewards, or caretakers, of the Earth. Put differently, human stewardship of creation is a central theme in the Genesis narrative of creation especially in Genesis 2:15, “... settled in the garden of Eden to cultivate and care for it”.

In addition, Richard Clifford clarifies the uniqueness of God-human relationship in the creation narrative, thus, “humans are created in such a way that their very existence is intended to be their relationship to God.”³ Humans are God’s counterpart as well as oriented towards God. Hence, we are entrusted with the management and safeguarding of the rest of creation with which we are functionally and ontologically linked with. This God-human relationship also entails that the ecosystem cannot be perceived as an object to be exploited by humans, but rather, a companion for humanity – a single family from a single source.

³Richard J. Clifford, “The Hebrew Scriptures and The Theology of Creation” *Theological Studies* 46, (Sept. 1985): 507-523, <https://doi.org/10.1177/004056398504600303>.

Pope Francis in his encyclical letter, *Laudato si'*, urges every person living on this planet to protect the Earth, our “Common Home”. He advances that the Earth is God’s gift to us which is full of beauty and wonder, and we must shut down all anthropogenic activities inimical to Earths’ sustainability. In other words, Earth’s resources have made humans advance at an unimaginable rate, but we have mistreated the Earth as if its resources are unlimited.

The pope advocates for the care of our Common Home. He urges Christians, and some other believers as well, to care for nature and for the most vulnerable of their brothers and sisters. The pope maintains that the simple fact of being human entails that people should care for the environment of which they are a part. In this case, Christians in their turn should “realize that their responsibility within creation, and their duty towards nature and the Creator, are an essential part of their faith.”³ The latter point dismisses the critique of White that Christianity permits disregard of the earthly ecosystem.

Also, in response to White and other critics, the dominion which is bestowed on humans is “nothing except the power and authority to care for, to nurture and to develop the whole world.”⁴ This development is not in detriment to the rest of creation. We must understand that what makes us “truly human is the distinctive ability to acknowledge, appreciate and delight in the reality of all other creation as the other, and to care for them.”⁵ The dominion over creation does not mean lording it over them, but as God’s representatives to sustain, respect and lovingly care for them.

³ Pope Francis, *Laudato si'*: Encyclical Letter on Care for Our Common Home (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015), 46.

⁴ John R. Sachs, *The Christian Vision of Humanity: Basic Christian Anthropology* (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1991), 17.

⁵ Sachs, 17..

For some people, of course, integrated perspective of the world offers humans a better way of relating with the ecosystem. However, anthropogenic climate change as an indirect human effect poses challenges to the wildlife. The rapidity of this changes undulates the adaptability of plants and animals leading to future crisis, and eventually they collapse. Also, this change and direct human effects do not act independently but synergistically reinforcing each other's effects. This means that whatever action that humans create that affects the environment automatically creates a feedback that affects humanity, and it disrupts the integrated cosmic view. It is indicative of the interconnectivity and interdependency of all creation, humans inclusive.

It is difficult to cut the kernel of the ecological crisis with a paper knife without facing the consequences. Thus, human-induced eco-crisis has caused widespread suffering and death, particularly among the poor and marginalized who are least able to cope with rapid changes. We apparently resist the grace to see the aesthetic value that lies in the ecosystem in all its forms. Hyun-Chul Cho opines: "We must replace the dualistic way of seeing the world, which splits the world into humanity and nature, by an ecological way of viewing the world, which grasps a reality primarily in the light of relationship."⁶ If we acknowledge that the glory of God is in man and woman fully alive, then we need to care for our Common Home if we wish to actualize the fullness of our wellbeing. Then, rethinking and reimagining new ways of production and consumption which are ecologically sustainable should be our noble venture.

Thus, the action of maltreating the Earth is global and cannot

⁶Hyun-Chul Cho, *An Ecological Vision of the World: Toward a Christian Ecological Theology for Our Age* (Rome: Gregorian University Press, 2004), 156.

be restricted only to a particular religion, race or nationality. It is the action of humans all over the world, and the consequences has no borders and has collateral damage. It affects both high and low, but the poor are mostly afflicted. By disturbing the ecological balance, we upset God's plan, we delay his purpose of making a habitable place in which humans, his chosen creatures, may flourish.

Cosmic Sacredness and Anthropocentric Eco-Desecration

Genesis 1:31 makes us understand that after the completion of the work of creation, God evaluated his work and was pleased with it because it was in perfect conformity with his divine wisdom – everything created was very good. Hence, creation is graced. Richard Lennan observes that “if all that exist is graced, then each of us is all interconnected to all that exist⁷” which then includes: plants, animals, water, soil and air just to mention a few. As humans then, we encounter, interact and are in communion with God, and the rest of creation. It means then that every person and everything counts, the ecosystem inclusive, because of God who has graced creation.

However, human beings chose to adopt features that encourages the desecration of the ecosystem in the name of capitalism. Capitalism encourages consumerism in order to maximize profit. Capitalistic society does not care whose ox is God's in its attempt to amass wealth to the detriment of creation. It is difficult to propose an alternative viewpoint in an excessively profit-oriented society. We cannot deny the level of profiteering that pervades our society today. After all, some of us gain from the socio-economic structure of the ailing and broken world. A world broken by unquenchable appetite for destruction of the ecosystem through excessive exploitation of

⁷Richard Lennan, Recorded Lecture on Graced Humanity, September 7, 2020.

its natural resources.

The health effects and deplorable condition of creation due to over exploitation of the Earth has not served as deterrent to our capitalistic society. This capitalistic society apparently prefers the instrumental value of nature more than its intrinsic value. Treating the ecosystem harshly and abusing nonhuman nature leads to the fragmentation of reality. In this fragmentation, human relationship with the ecosystem has become “I” and “It” instead of “I” and “Thou”. Rather than understanding the interdependency of all things, the ecosystem is perceived as a physical reservoir of raw materials to be used exploitatively for profiteering only – “an insensate order, as a cold body of facts, as a mere ‘given’, as an object of utility, as raw material to be hammered into useful shape.”⁸

This discourse earlier mentioned that humanity is functionally and ontologically connected with other nonhuman realities in the ecosystem because no creature is self-sufficient, thus, interdependency. But recent global technological mindset admits only the functional dimension of this interdependency, and it desecrates and flagellates the ecosystem. Consequently, interdependency amongst creation which would have been the binding factor of all things in the ecosystem is thwarted. We must not forget that just as fish is dependent on water for survival so also is humanity dependent on oxygen from the environment. There is mutual interdependency, and so, each entity in the ecosystem needs the other, and together they all form a whole organic unit. Consequently, any undue anthropogenic maltreatment of the ecosystem affects us all.

⁸Pope Francis, *Laudato si'*, 86.

Hence, an ecological or eco-systemic paradigm, which perceives the entire world as one and in constant interaction because of the interdependency and interconnectivity of all creation, will keep the organic unity of the ecosystem intact. Michael Himes and Kenneth Himes writing as regards environmental theology observe as follows: “The nonhuman world has been given to human beings for our good, to be used responsibly for our self-development, to answer to our purposes and thus to fulfil God’s purpose in creating it”⁹ So, the intrinsic value of the ecosystem never ceases to unveil the presence of the Creator seemingly hidden within.

Desecrating the sacred, our Common Home, will always affect the flourishing of humanity. Leonardo Boff observes that denying the sense of the sacred will always jeopardize the aptitude of achieving a conducive ecosystem. Hence, he posits: “Without the sacred, affirming the dignity of Earth and the need to set limits on our desire to exploit its potentialities remains empty rhetoric.”¹⁰ The intended sacred here means the transcendental aura that entrances us and leaves us in wonder and amazement. It is a kind of experience that captures the depth of the teleological identity of the ecosystem that looks forward beyond the physicality of the ecosystem.

If humans become conscious of this sacredness, we may rediscover how creation is permeated and imbued by God. How he fills the ecosystem and communicates his own being within it, and so, animates it. In this light, Bernard Cooke states thus, “In itself the gift of being constitutes a very profound

⁹Michael J. Himes and Kenneth R. Himes, “The Sacrament of Creation: Toward an Environmental Theology” *Commonweal*,

January 26, 1990, <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/sacrament-creation-toward-environmental-theology> (accessed:

November 5, 2020).

¹⁰Leonardo Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor* (New York: Orbis Books, 1997),115.

relationship, because it implies community in life.¹¹” In maintaining the sacredness of the communal existence of all things we perceive the divine. It is the communion in the sacredness of the ecosystem that I refer to sacramentality of the ecosystem because the ecosystem, as a sacred reality, becomes an avenue through which God’s immanence is revealed to humanity.

In his seminal work, *What is Not Sacred? African Spirituality*, Laurenti Magesa emphasizes that the sacred cannot be individualized as to concern only humans, but should be understood in its communal context. This implies that the entire ecosystem, which is the community of all things, is an integral part of what is sacred. Thus, the community is really what is sacred because the individual things (human and nonhuman) in the ecosystem derive their genuine sacredness from the community. He observes, “Since humanity cannot exist without and apart from the universe, this must include the sacredness of the universe.¹²” The universe which serves as the community is also heir of sacredness.

Albeit, humanity serves as the intelligible consciousness of the ecosystem, one essence of this sacredness of the community is to maintain a cosmic balance of both human and nonhuman entities in creation. African spirituality understands this sacredness in communal sense, and so observes some rites, rituals, gestures, places, animals, trees and many other things¹³ within an ecosystem community as sacred. In view of this sacredness of ecosystem as a community, Teilhard de Chardin

¹¹Leonardo Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor* (New York: Orbis Books, 1997),115.

¹²Bernard J. Cooke, *Christian Sacraments and Christian Personality*, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965), 55

¹³Laurenti Magesa, *What is Not Sacred? African Spirituality* (Nairobi: Action Publishers, 2014), 176

points out that creation shares with humanity as part of what is sanctified since humanity is interconnected with creation in the ecosystem. This is why any anthropogenic desecration of the environment in one part of the world, ripples all over the world and affects everything.

Cosmic Kinship: Unity in Diversity

The grandeur life of Francis of Assisi portrays a lived relationship with the rest of creation. It implies that nothing on the Earth's ecosystem occur by chance. All things in this ecosystem and in history are related and unified in the heart of God. As a result, Francis loves all creation such that he refers to them as his brothers and sisters. In *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis remarks "St. Francis response to the world around him was so much more than intellectual appreciation or economic calculus, for to him each and every creature was a sister united to him by bonds of affection.¹⁴" His outstanding fraternal care and sensitivity to creation due to his perception of God in them initiates the foundation for cosmic kinship.

Therefore, cosmic kinship refers to the acknowledgement of the interconnectedness of all things and the presence of the divine in them. Saint Francis is able to identify especially the nexus between humans and the rest of creation which necessarily leads to God. The interior disposition of Saint Francis towards creation may help humanity reclaim the lost sensibility concerning the holistic unity of all things: the experience with God, with Jesus Christ and with the Spirit in creation.

¹⁴Pope Francis, *Laudato si'*, 10.

A deep personal relationship with God marks the focus of the cosmic kinship of Saint Francis. His familiarity with God moved him to perceive the divine in everything around him. He knows that the entire ecosystem, humans inclusive, are penetrated by God. In this cosmic unity, things in the ecosystem become a mystery and agents of salvation. John Haught corroborates the latter statement by highlighting: “The promise residing in the present state of nature is what obliges us to treasure it.¹⁵” The promise in this case lies in salvation through envisioning the glory of God, and the grandeur of creation.

Cosmic kinship provides us with an insight to the vision promised by God. Therefore, if we impede the complete blossoming of the ecosystem, we may strangle God’s promise to us embedded in the ecosystem. Through cosmic kinship we perceive the promise, the sacrament of a glory that is not completely revealed, but with an archetype veiled in creation. Hence, our participation in safeguarding the ecosystem penetrated by God enables us to encounter salvation.

Human beings cannot by themselves reach God directly. We can reach God together with the ecosystem or things in creation. God mediates and communicates himself to us through created realities. In other words, our experience of God is always sacramental. Sacramentality here represents the quality inherent in creation, which is filled with power to open our hearts to the presence of God. With the latter in mind, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin highlights: “To experience the attraction of God in creation, to be utterly sensible of the

¹⁵John F. Haught, *The Promise of Nature: Ecology and Cosmic Purpose* (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), 114.

beauty, the consistency and the final unity of beings, is the highest and the same time the most complete of our passivity of growth¹⁶,” The invisible God who draws humanity towards himself becomes transparent in the ecosystem so that humanity can be divinized. It is sensible then that although all creation may have different attributes, but they are bounded together by their source of origin – unity in diversity.

Human-Creation Cosmic Kinship and its Implication

Kinship refers to that network of culturally and socially defined relationships between individuals who are commonly thought of as having family ties. Kinship makes classification of people and forming of social groups possible because of shared characteristics. It forms an important part of the lives of all humans in all societies, although its exact meanings as regards human-creation relationships are often debated.

In view of the latter, Gordon Kaufman holds that “we will come much closer to articulating the fundamental assumptions about the nature of the human which are widely accepted today if we speak of our interconnectedness and interdependence with all other forms of life...and of our cultural creativity in history, producing a thoroughly cultural form of existence.¹⁷” It means that human beings may be understood as creatures that relate to one another and experience the world within interrelated biological and historical spheres. So, human beings are not distinctive from their biological world, but are rooted in it, and yet a mystery.

¹⁶Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Divine Milieu*, (New York: Harper and Row Publisher, 1960), 131

¹⁷Gordon D. Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 109.

Within a culture, some descent groups may be considered to lead back to deities, animal or plant ancestors called totems. Totem is referred in this context as a non-physical being; a sacred object; a force of nature (land, sea, air) or a symbol that serves as a mark of a group of people, such as a family, clan, lineage, or tribe. Some descent groups claim a common ancestry with their totem. The members of a totem have a sacred duty not to destroy or consume their totem no matter the circumstance. It is a punishable offence if any member of the descent group violates this sacred obligation.

Many a time, festivals are organized by Igbos in Nigeria at which the members of a totem demonstrate in ceremonial dances, the movements, and characteristics of their totems. In other words, totems are seen as companions, relatives, protector or helpers and also ascribed supernatural powers and capabilities. Elsewhere, a kind of respect and veneration is offered to totems because they are family members or deities respectively. This shared or common unity provides a kind of respect and care for all things in the ecosystem.

One benefit of kinship is that it provides an intelligible way of understanding our interdependence in the environment by widening the boundaries of human community to include all other creatures in our ecosystem. In this regard, Walter Klassen proposes, “We are co-creatures with animals and trees, water and air, and cannot exist independently.¹⁸” Kinship as a relational pattern values human relatedness and mutual dependence over individualism. To be completely human entails being in a relationship with others, that is being in community with creation.

¹⁸Walter Klassen, “Pacifism, Nonviolence, and the Peaceful Reign of God,” in *Creation and Environment: An Anabaptist Perspective on a Sustainable World*, ed. Calvin Redekop (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2000), 153.

Human interdependence with all creation is therefore made possible by our kinship. One can see that the common good of every human being is inseparable from the common good of all creation in the ecosystem, and that solidarity is extendable to all other nonhuman species. This interdependency due to the interconnectivity of humans with other nonhuman species shows cosmic kinship of all creation, and that through creation, God may be experienced. In this case, God chooses the works of his creation in our ecosystem to be the outward sign of his presence, and also a mystical emblem that points to him, the creator.

Conclusion

Substantially, the Earth is not made up of human beings alone. In other words, humans have cosmic kinship with the rest of creation. This proximate interconnection, between humans and the entire creation, is a significant reminder of our interdependency with the ecosystem; because creation is of God, all of creation (human and nonhuman) therefore is a sacrament that connects to God. This truth is expressed in the admirable life of Saint Francis of Assisi over time, from whom humanity can learn that with a loving and pure heart, we can perceive the connection with all of creation. I think that this interconnection is not just emotional; it is deeply spiritual, and offers a sense of community and redemptive continuity, and also a profound expression of identity and compassion with all of creation in the ecosystem.

Therefore, while interacting with the ecosystem, human beings are to bear in mind that they have been entrusted with this extraordinary gift for their own flourishing: to help us

treasure this goodness of God since it is a product of love. Henceforth, we need to desist from maltreating the ecosystem. Mindful of this, we can substitute capitalistic consumerism and carefree wastefulness with a spirit of sharing and discovery, so giving and not always taking from the Earth, our Common Home. The invitation is to acknowledge the Earth as a sacrament of communion where we encounter God, and also share with our neighbors this divine gift of cosmic kinship.

Bibliography

- Boff, Leonardo. *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*. New York: Orbis Books, 1997.
- Chardin, Pierre Teilhard de. *The Divine Milieu*. New York: Harper and Row Publisher, 1960.
- Cho, Hyun-Chul. *An Ecological Vision of The World: Towards a Christian Ecological Theology for Our Age*. Rome: Gregorian University Press, 2004.
- Clifford, Richard J. "The Hebrew Scriptures and The Theology of Creation." *Theological Studies*, 1985: 507-523.
- Cook, Bernard J. *Christian Sacraments and Christian Personality*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965.
- Haight, John F. *The Promise of Nature: Ecology and Cosmic Purpose*. New York: Paulist Press, 1993.
- Himes, Michael J. Himes and Kenneth R. *Commonweal*. January 26, 1990.
<https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/sacrament-creation-toward-environmental-theology> (accessed November 5, 2020).
- Kaufman, Gordon D. *In Face of Mystery: A Costructive Theology*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993.
- Klassen, Walter. *Pacifism, Nonviolence, and the Peaceful Reign of God*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2000.
- Magesa, Laurenti. *What is Not Sacred? African Spirituality*. Nairobi: Action Publishers, 2014.
- Pope, Francis. *Fratelli Tutti: Encyclical Letter on Fraternity and Social Friendship*. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2020.

- . *Laudato si': Encyclical Letter on Care for Our Common Home*. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015.
- Sachs, John R. *The Christian Vision of Humanity: Basic Christian Anthropology*. Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1991.
- White, Lynn. "The Historical Root of Ecological Crisis." *Science*, 1967: 1203-1207.