



## The Religious Perspectives on Sustainability

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**Abstract:** Nowhere in human history is environment and ecology faced with so much degradation. Reeling from the adverse of its abuse and exploitation, we are compelled to employ technological and scientific knowledge to protect the environment, prevent its further deterioration, if not restore the integrity of the earth. However, this modest research contends that mere application of scientific knowledge, no matter how indispensable, would not suffice to preclude further destruction to the environment and ecology unless we consider the various perspectives, values and attitudes advocated by major religions in relations to environment. In bringing into the fore the foregoing perspectives, the main exposition will be on the Jewish-Christian perspective on environmental sustainability.

### INTRODUCTION

The advances in the field of science and technology, provided tremendous knowledge on how the world works. Such knowledge, however, is a doubled edged sword. On one hand, it generated theories and practices on how to harness the world's resources and

at the same conserve the environment and ecology. On the other hand, the same knowledge contributed in no small measure in environmental alterations, ecological degradation and destruction. This situation leads to the indubitable conclusion that knowledge per se, no matter how considerable, is incapable to achieve ecological sustainability.

The inadequacy of mere knowledge alone to achieve environmental viability, was expressed by a leading figure in the field of environmental history. He commented that knowledge can show that "nature is a thing of beauty and integrity, a set of laws that must be obeyed, an order that must be respected and protected. On the other hand, knowledge tells people "about a nature that is power inchoate...power waiting for human ingenuity to develop it."

Since knowledge can be used to employ nature as a means to whatever end human beings have in mind, whether it be wealth or war, pleasure or security, bondage or freedom, the degradation that threatens us and Earth is rooted in knowledge itself. Without knowledge, human beings could not have achieved the means to large scale intensive use of the earth nor impose their will upon the planet. Earth's degradation is rooted in knowledge, "in that complex and ambitious brain of Homo sapiens, in our unmatched capacity to experiment and explain, in our tendency to let reason outrun the constraints of love and stewardship and in our modern drive to achieve infinite power over our surroundings."<sup>1</sup> One author also shares this sentiment when he wrote that "modern environmentalism focused too much on shallow technocratic discourses."<sup>2</sup> But while "science ...makes major contributions to minor needs, by contrast, religion whether or not it comes up with

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<sup>1</sup> Donald Worster, *Nature's Economy: The Roots of Ecology* (San Francisco : Sierra Club Books, 1977).

<sup>2</sup> Jaime Tatay & Catherine Devitt, "Sustainability and Interreligious Dialogue," *ISLAMOCRISTIANA* 43 (2017): 24.



anything, is at least at work on things that matter most."<sup>3</sup>

The foregoing insights provided the impetus for this paper. Though cognizant of the tremendous contributions of scientific knowledge, there is a need to transcend mere scientific knowledge and be attentive to "those things that matter most, and particularly to the requirements for living sustainability on a sustainable earth. There is a need to move beyond describing the world, developing and applying instruments to it, itemizing the use and abuse of it. Thus, the need of considering religion."<sup>4</sup>

In adverting to the religious perspectives on ecological sustainability, this writer is not unaware of the undeniable deficiencies of religion in recorded history. Hence, it has been held that the current ecological crisis was brought about by religious teachings. For instance, the biblical passage in Gen 1:26 where God tells humanity "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living things that moves upon the earth," had been misconstrued across the centuries, to justify pillaging the earth's resources with abandon.

Yet, for all its glaring inadequacies, religions help uphold civilization and the environment. However, in the face of squalor of Mother Earth, one wonders whether religion has failed to provide the required moral or ethical moorings to individuals and peoples to discipline themselves and inculcate collective responsibility to Mother Earth. Such query is inevitable given that the current lamentable state of the environment is ultimately traced to the unbridled self. And such conceit in relation to the environment should be a source for a pause and reflection to consider religions' contribution to the debate.

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<sup>3</sup> Clavin Dewitt. "The Environment is a Moral Issue" in *The Mother Earth Handbook*, Judith S. Scherft (ed.) New York: Continuum, 1991), 248-268.

Indeed, human being's intellectual prowess enables him/her to master and subdue the earth. As a corollary, it has engendered in him or her, wittingly or unwittingly, an erroneous belief that even without recourse to religion, the present systems of thinking and doing things has provided humanity an adequate knowledge and experience to adequately deal with the issue on environmental sustainability. However, as pointed out earlier, the present sorry state of Mother Earth is due to undisciplined pursuit of self. It is in this context that religion has so much to offer. "It confronts the individual with the most momentous option this world can present. It calls the soul to the highest adventure it can undertake ...the call to confront reality, to master the self."<sup>5</sup>

Respect for the integrity, wholeness, and harmony of the Earth, is a common concern shared by the world's major religions. This common interest led for instance, to the establishment of the Interfaith Center for Sustainable Development (ICSD), a non-governmental organization based in Jerusalem, Israel. Among its projects is the promotion of inter-religious cooperation on environmental sustainability and involve religious leaders, seminary students, and communities in several countries.

Among the seminars and conferences which ICSD sponsored and attended by representatives of major religions, is the 2016 International Seminar on Science and Religion for Environmental Care held in Torreciudad, Spain. The seminar produced a declaration which stated: "The vast majority of people living in our planet believe in the spiritual and religious traditions in their lives. As Pope Francis wrote in *Laudato Si'*: This should spur religions to dialogue among themselves for the sake of protecting nature, defending the poor, and building networks of

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*



respect and fraternity.<sup>6</sup> The Declaration contained six points on the impact science and religions can work together in promoting ecological sustainability, and emphasized how "we need Science and Religions working together to make this necessary change happen."<sup>7</sup>

### **Degradations of Creation**

In providing the ecological background for the assessment of religion and ecology requires among others, a recognition that creation is being seriously degraded globally. Environmental studies have summarized the earth's degradation in the following areas:

1. Alterations in planetary circulations and exchange. These exchanges of energy between the sun and earth are being altered with consequences for global warming and increased transmission of damaging ultraviolet radiation;
2. Land degradation. Cropland and food production capacity is being degraded by soil erosion, desertification, and salinization;
3. Water quality degradation. Both surface waters and ground water are being polluted by agricultural chemicals and landfill leachates;
4. Deforestation and habitat destruction which is rampant across the world with nearly one hundred thousand square kilometers of tropical forests lost annually;

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<sup>6</sup> "Laudato Si' (24 May 2015) Francis." *W2.vatican.va*. Retrieved 2016-07-18. Pope Francis is neither the first nor the only spiritual leader to address the environmental challenges of our time in religious terms. Others, from the Dalai Lama to Anglican archbishop Desmond Tutu, have also spoke eloquently on environmental concerns. Cfr. D. Dorr, *Option for*

5. Species extinctions and biotic alterations. Animals and plants species are extinguished and bio-engineered organisms are introduced into agricultural and natural ecosystems that have not shared in the millennia of co-adaptation of native species with the environment;

6. Wastes and global toxification. The seventy thousand chemicals produced by modern society have produced tons of solid, liquid, and radioactive wastes that threatens nearly everyone;

7. Human and cultural degradations. Long standing human cultures that have lived sustainably for centuries are rapidly are rapidly degraded and extinguished by non sustainable developments.<sup>8</sup>

### **Environmental Teachings of Five World Religions.**

Respect for the integrity, wholeness, and harmony of the Earth and its life, is shared by the world's great religions: Buddhism, Christian, Christian, Hindu, Jewish and Muslim Beliefs.

#### **Buddhist Perspective**

In 1986, an interfaith conference held in Assisi, Italy, brought together representatives from the world's great religions.<sup>9</sup> In this conference, the Venerable Lungrig Namgyal, Abbot of Gyuto Tantric College, India, quotes his Holiness, the Dalai Lama: "As we all know, disregard for the natural inheritance of human beings has brought about the danger that now threatens the peace of the world as well as the chance

*the Poor and for the Earth: Catholic Social Teaching* (New York: ,Orbis, 2012).

<sup>7</sup> Final Declaration. Retrieved 2016-07

<sup>8</sup> De Witt, p. 254.

<sup>9</sup> The venue of the conference is the birthplace of St. Francis of Assisi who is deemed as the Patron of animals and natural environment.



to live of endangered species. We are the generations with the awareness of a great danger. We are the ones with the responsibility and the ability to take steps of concrete action before it is too late."<sup>10</sup>

The Buddhist viewpoint of nature is permeated by reverence for life, and awareness that the great forces of nature – the earth, the sky, the air, the water and fire – as well as various orders of life including plants and trees, forests and animals, are all bound to each other, within the great rhythms of nature. Hence, from the Buddhist perspective, interdependency and favourable relationship with nature is a main principle in nature's sustainability.<sup>11</sup>

### Muslim Perspective

The essence of Islamic Teachings is that the entire universe is God's creation. For the Muslims, mankind's role on earth is that of a *khalifa*, a vice-regent of trustee of God. We are God's stewards and agents on earth. We are not masters of this earth; it does not belong to us to do with it what we wish. Being a trustee, the absolute owner of the universe is Allah the Almighty (Al-Quran, 20:6). "This universe is created by Allah the Almighty as a gift (Al-Quran,45:13), a sign of His greatness (Al-Quran,16:65-69) and a place for the sustenance of life (Al-Quran,7:10). The trust must be executed wisely and appropriately as ruled out by Allah the Almighty, failing which the consequences or the impact is on us (Al-Quran, 30:41). The two principal sources of Islam; the AlQuran and the Al-Sunnah, tell us that the universe is created in due proportion and measurement (Al-Quran, 54:49) and that the

resources are sufficient for human consumption as long as the world exist, if it is managed wisely."<sup>12</sup>

### Jewish Perspective

The Jews hold the view that when Adam named all of God's creatures, he helped define their essence. Adam swore to live in harmony with those whom he named. Thus at the very beginning of time, humanity has accepted responsibility, before God, for all creation. Now, when the whole world is in peril, when the environment is in danger of being poisoned, and various species, both plant and animal, are becoming extinct, the Jews hold the view that it is everyone's responsibility to put a defense of the whole of nature at the very center of concern.

For the Jews, it is the Sabbath, and the idea of Sabbath that introduces restraint into stewardship. On the Sabbath, the observant Jew does more than rest, pray and refrain from ordinary work. At least three other elements of Sabbath are critical to stewardship. On a Sabbath day, individual persons should create nothing nor destroy anything, but they should simply enjoy the bounty of the earth. In doing so, they are minded that although their work, if properly done, will uncover more of God's bounty that humanity would otherwise have enjoyed, nevertheless God and not human intervention is still the ultimate source of that bounty.<sup>13</sup>

The foregoing insight, affirm the biblical message: "God created the world as a place where righteousness and beauty will be established. However, this involves a system of relationship, between God and his people,

<sup>10</sup> The Venerable Lungrig Namgyal, "Assisi Declarations," 1986.

<sup>11</sup> Rev. Pinnawala Sangasumana, "The Buddhist perspective on measuring wellbeing and happiness in sustainable development." *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Development* 6 (March 2019): 245.

<sup>12</sup> Azila Ahmad Sarkawi, et al., "The Concept of Sustainability from the Islamic Perspectives," *International Journal of Business, Economics and Law*, Vol. 9, Issue 5 (Apr. 2016), 112-116, p. 112.

<sup>13</sup> David Ehrenfeld, "Nature in the Jewish Tradition, Au Sable Forum Papers, Au Sable Institute, Mancelona, MI, 1982.





among people, and between people and the land, which is included in the Covenant God has established with earth. There is every encouragement to use wise methods of stewardship. When we respond to obedience, we will enjoy the fruits of the earth and the poor will be cared for. When we turn away from God, ecological disaster and social oppression ensues. The Jewish perspective asserts that stewardship cannot be divorced from accountability for it is the latter that puts teeth in stewardship. "When stewardship is corrupted by power in the absence of restraint, it becomes tyranny and exploitation."<sup>14</sup> Moreover, The Torah establishes that humans may use the earth's natural resources, but restrictions, such as the Jewish dietary laws, are placed on such usage.<sup>15</sup>

### Hebrew and Christian Perspectives on Creation

The Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings, which together comprise the Hebrew Bible and referred to as the Old Testament in the Christian Bible, yield the following insights:

1. **The Testimony of the Creation.** All creation and all creatures praise the Lord. Everything that God has made praises their Creator (Ps. 148): Earth and people (Ps. 96:1-8); fields and everything in them, trees of the wood (Ps. 96: 11-13), fruit trees and cedars, wild animals and all cattle, small creatures and flying birds (Ps. 148:9-10); the heavens, the sun, moon and stars (Ps. 148:3-4); the sea and all that is in it (Ps. 98:7); the world and its inhabitants, the floods and the hills (Ps. 98:7-9); lightning and hail, snow and clouds, stormy winds that do his bidding (Ps. 148:8); everything that has breath (Ps. 150:6). "From the rising of the sun unto the going down of the same, the name of the Lord is to be praised" (Ps. 113:3).

2. **Reason for this praise of God by the creatures.** All creatures praise the Lord for his wondrous works (Ps. 104:24). They praise their Creator for his steadfast love (Ps. 107:21); for faithfulness and justness of his works (Ps. 111:7); for unsearchable greatness and mighty acts and abundant goodness (Ps. 145:3-7). They praise God for faithfulness, graciousness, sustaining love, providential care, justness and kindness of all doings (Ps. 145:13-17).

3. **The qualities of the Creator.** The Hebrew Bible speaks of God's wisdom and knowledge as a Creator. It is God who is the creator of all (Gen. 1:1): the Lord by Wisdom laid the earth's foundation. By the Lord's knowledge the depths of the sea were divided, and clouds drop down the dew (Prov. 3:19-20). It also speaks of his goodness and providence which is displayed in his creation (Ps. 136); he preserves man and beast (Ps. 36:5-6). He makes springs to flow and provides water for the earth and its creatures, the creatures wait upon God for their food and life.

4. **Human impact on creation.** However, the goodness of the creation is limited by the unjust human action. The degrading and polluting acts of humankind impoverish the of creation to bring praise to God (Gen. 1:11; 3:6-9; 4:8-9; 6:5-6). The degradation brought by human beings affect persons, homes, habitats, biotic communities, ecosystem, the biosphere, and outer space. Sin violates the integrity of creation (Ex. 23:1-13; Lev. 25: 23-24; Isa. 5:8-10). People willfully become like God, choosing to know good and evil (Gen. 35, 22); exhibiting arrogance and pride (Isa. 13:11).

5. **The Creator's response.** God hates arrogance and pride, evil behavior and perverse speech (prov. 8:12-13). God says, "I will punish the world for its evil, the wicked for their sins. I will put an end to the arrogance of the haughty and will humble the ruthless" (Isa. 13:11). The prayer of the upright is "Let slanderers

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Rebecca Lee Harris & Rabbi Ed Rosenthal, "Environmental Sustainability and the Nexus of



not be established in the land; may disaster hunt down men of violence" (Ps. 56:10-12)

**6. The Incarnate Christ as Creator.** Christ the Incarnate God, the Word, creates the earth and the universe (John 1:1-5); Col. 1:16-20). Christ is the One through whom all creatures are made. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him; and without Him was not anything made that hath been made (John 1:1-3). "He is the image of the invisible God, the first born over all creations. For by Him all things were created; things in heaven and (on earth, visible and invisible; whether thrones or power or rulers or authorities, all this were created by Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together (Col, 1:15-17).

### Requirements for Creation's Care

The Torah, Prophets, Writings, and the New Testament, contain several principles on the intimate relationship between beliefs and Ecology:

**1. God as the owner of all the earth.** The earth is the Lord's and everything it contains (Ps. 24:1; Ex. 9:29; Job 41:11). The creator is owner of the Earth because God created and established it (Ps. 24:2; Gen. 1-2). The Land must not be sold permanently since it belongs to the Lord and you are only my tenants (Lev. 25:23).

**2. Keep and preserve earth as God keeps it.** Prior to the fall, humanity was given the command to cultivate and guard, protect and preserve, the Creator's perfect garden (Gen. 2:15). As "Earth-keepers, they are to keep God's earth as God blesses and keeps the people of the Lord. Earth-keepers are to keep the land as God forever keeps the Lord's people from all harm and watches over their life, their coming and their going (Ps. 121:7)

Prior to the fall, humanity was commanded to subdue and rule the earth and its creatures. The one who rules must be adept in the Torah and through it to learn and revere the Lord and follow its precepts

((Deut. 17:18-19). If the exercise of dominion is self-serving and do not keep and protect creation, the dominion is lost and the land no longer provides for its people (Lev. 26:18-20; Isa. 56:10-12).

**3. Give the people, the land, and creatures their Sabbath rest.** The Hebrew scriptures commands that there be a Sabbath of solemn rest for the land. One year in every seven years should exclude, pruning and reaping (Ex. 23:10-11). If God's commandments are observed and obeyed, the people will dwell in the land securely; the land will yield its fruit, the people will eat their fill (Lev. 25:18-22), and the loss of one year of production, will more than be made up by the productivity of the other six (6) years. If these commandments are not obeyed, the land will be devastated, and the people will be driven off. Only afterwards, as long as it lies desolate, will it then enjoy its Sabbath, alone (Lev. 26:32-25).

**4. Respect earth when participating in its blessings.** People must not disrupt earth's providence as they take its provisions. In this regard, the Prophet Ezekiel asks: "Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture? Must you also trample the rest of your pasture with your feet? Is it not enough for you to drink clear water? Must you also muddy the rest with your feet? Must my flock feed on what you trampled and drink what you have muddied with your feet" (Ezek. 34:18-19).

**5. Save the creatures from extinction.** Faced with the destruction of creation and its creatures because of the disruptive acts of human beings, Noah was commanded by God to preserve every species from extinction by rescuing them from destruction and re-establishing them in their habitat. (Gen. 6:11-19:17).

### CONCLUSION

While human beings know more than about nature and conservation than any time in human history, they have also never experienced greater destruction and degradation than in the present. Having discovered how nature works, they have not been constrained by what must be done to protect and care



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for Creation's integrity. Unrestrained, they proceeded to do whatever is possible, with dire repercussions for earth and its creatures. The heritage of religions of constraints has been ignored. Long standing religious teachings that bring a caring and sustaining stewardship to earth have been set aside and neglected and people pursued a course of greed and disregard for the richness of earth and all living things. The great religions have warned against the vices of greed and counselled that human beings are not masters of the earth, but responsible and accountable trustee of earth's integrity. Thus, there is a need to re-nurture and re-apply the religious reverence for life which reveals not only the degrading effects of greed on earth's integrity, but also the norms that will enable people to live with caring integrity on a life-sustaining earth.