

Problems with Religious Conceptions of the Environment

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“Human belief and practice mark the earth. One can hardly think of a natural system that has not been considerably altered, for better or worse, by human culture” (Sullivan Lawrence 1997, p xiii).

Abstract

In this paper, I argue that religious conceptions of the environment cannot provide an adequate foundation for a viable environmental ethics. I compare and contrast three religious conceptions of nature, namely African (Igbo), Eastern (Hinduism and Buddhism), and Western (Judeo Christian). Whereas the first two seek to foster harmony between the human person and her environment, the last has a rather domineering posture towards the environment. I argue further that the harmony the first two seek to foster is not so much born out of respect for nature per se as to what nature represents. In other words, nature is seen, in this optic, as the appearance of the "real" world. It emerges then that both the approaches that seek to establish harmony with nature and the one that seeks to dominate nature have the same defect which is a dualism that does not augur well for a viable environmental ethics. I therefore argue that it is only the consciousness of our oneness with the rest of nature—a philosophical rather than a religious consciousness—that could lead to a viable environmental ethics.

Wonder! Our environmental consciousness begins with wonder. Most environmentalists, of differing persuasions and disciplines, attest to this fact. We see things around us, and we marvel at them in a spontaneous manner. Philosophy was actually founded on the special attention paid to this wonder by the earliest philosophers, also known as the pre-Socratics. They went beyond just being awed by the natural entities around them to a careful observation of the processes those entities undergo. They discovered that both they and the entities were changing in a perpetual manner. They then began to inquire into what could be permanent so as to underlay that change. It is remarkable that these

thinkers thought that all organic entities in the universe were made up of inorganic substances, instead of looking beyond the world for their origin. This is the reason why they have been described as physicists. The inquiry they inaugurated was to culminate in Plato, who postulated that there is a world of Forms that is devoid of change. That was, for Plato, the real world. The world we live in is but an illusion, at best an imitation of that real world of Forms.

So what began as a wonder that led to physical inquiries (a wonder that had some beautiful expressions, as in Heraclitus, for instance); became in Platonism a distinctly metaphysical enterprise, leading to a very sharp dualism between what is *real* and what is apparent. But seeing nature or the environment (the environment and nature are used interchangeable throughout this essay) as simply a mere appearance is not unique to Platonism, nor did it originate with it. As we shall see, some religious and cultural traditions hold similar theories about the environment. However, Christianity—or Christendom—which Nietzsche aptly described as “Platonism for ‘the people’” (Nietzsche 1972, 14), exhibits a more distinct Platonic influence in its understanding of the environment and the place of human beings in it. As our first citation says, human belief and culture affect the environment. The role religion plays in our attitude to the environment tends to be neglected by comparison to the role science and technology play on the way we treat the environment (Sullivan 1997, xiii). Some religions hold that human beings are essentially different from nature while others do not seem to hold such views. What are the consequences of such views? These are the issues I want to deal with here. I begin with Igbo (African) traditional religion and culture. (I am using Igbo here as a distinct African culture with which I am very familiar, and also to avoid lumping all of Africa into one homogenous cultural group, which is certainly not the case).

What marks the Igbo attitude to the environment is respect and reverence. God is believed to be in heaven (identified as the sky) which is his exclusive abode while the earth is for human beings. But, although God lives in heaven, his spirit permeates the earth. Everything in the universe is believed to be created by him. It is absolutely important for the Igbo to live in harmony with nature as that means living in harmony with God whose spirit is present in his creation. Both animate and inanimate natural

entities are worshipped and revered as being essential to human well being and for general harmony in nature.

The earth, *Ani*, from which he gets his nourishment, is worshipped and revered as a goddess and due respect and propitiation is paid to her before digging any hole in the ground, either for building a house, for planting crops, for building a road, for burying the dead, etc. The earth goddess holds a central and crucial position in Igbo cosmology because of the role she plays in the life of human beings, animals and plants. According to Achebe, “Ani played a greater role in the life of the people than any other deity. She was the ultimate judge of morality and conduct. And what was more, she was in close communion with the departed fathers of the clan whose bodies are committed to earth” (Achebe 1962, 26). Hills, mountains, rivers, forests, oceans, the sun, the moon, plants, and animals are similarly worshipped and revered. Most forests have days in which one could not go into them without incurring the wrath of the gods. Trees can also be cut down in the forests only after due consultation with the priests of the gods who own the forests. This is also true of rivers, springs, streams, oceans, etc. Respect for them entails that things are not dumped in them indiscriminately. They are regularly kept clean and sacrifices offered to appease them. The rules of these gods are enacted as taboos and it is through them that respect for the environment is inculcated in the larger populace. It is important to note here that the gods do not abhor things because they are taboos; rather they are taboos because the gods abhor them. And the gods speak only through the priests and elders. What it boils down to is that the elders are the sages who make the rules for the respect of the environment and these rules are given divine provenance and authority in the form of taboos.

So the entities that make up the environment are treated with reverence, even when they are to be used to meet human needs. Amends also have to be made when desecration of these entities occurs. As Ede noted, a farmer who mistakenly breaks a tuber of yam humbly apologizes to it (Ede 1985, 78). Similarly, a person who wants to slaughter an animal would first “talk” to the animal, explaining that he is not doing it out of hatred or disdain.

The Igbo believe in perpetual re-incarnation. So, life after death is believed to be the same as life before death all played out in nature which is his *only home*. The inability to “come back” to the earth is what the Igbo dreads most. One sees a similar thought in Nietzsche, where Zarathustra was preaching fidelity to the earth. “I beseech you, my brothers, *remain faithful to the earth*, and do not believe those who speak to you of otherworldly hopes!”

This does not mean that there are no abuses of the environment in the Igbo world. Abuses are, as a matter of fact, fairly wide-spread among peoples of the world. But basically the Igbo attitude to the environment is one that lays emphasis on harmony and not on dominion. So, what most Westerners see as unthinkable, as Stone pointed out (Stone 1974, 6), that is, giving some sort of right to the environment was not unthinkable to the Igbo. Here, of course, since the traditional Igbo society was theocratic the right is religious and legality is seen only through the religious framework. My problem with the system is that the harmony sought and maintained refers directly not so much to the entities themselves as to what they represent.

From the foregoing, it would be unacceptable to the Igbo to hear it said that the African has no respect for the environment. J. Baird Callicot who is quite conscious of the African origin of *Homo sapiens* makes such a claim:

Of course, all of us Homo Sapiens are Africans. Our Species is one among the indigenous charismatic mega fauna incubated in Africa. We evolved shoulder to shoulder with our phylogenetic first cousins, the gorillas and chimpanzees. After our African genesis, we gradually dispersed throughout the world. Perhaps for those of us in the Diaspora the reverence for the wildlife of Africa is like reverence for the things of home. It would be surprising to learn that our fellow Africans whose forebears remained at home during the past hundred thousand years did not share those feelings and incorporate them in their philosophies and religion. (Callicot, 1994, 156-157).

African religions and philosophy, as far as Callicot was concerned, are both monotheistic and anthropocentric. The conclusion for him is obvious: what the African sees in the environment is nothing but mere human interest, and not even “enlightened rational self interest.” The result is therefore a lacuna of environmental consciousness in Africa. This

is why Callicot asserts that “Apparently, therefore, Africa looms as a big blank spot on the world map of indigenous environmental ethics for a very good reason. African thought orbits, seemingly, around human interests” (Callicot 1994, 158). Contemporary events like the 2004 Noble Peace Prize won by an African woman, Professor Wangari Maathai, for her massive tree planting campaign, and the struggles of the late environmentalist Ken Saro-Wiwa, who died fighting against environmental degradation in the Nigerian Niger Delta by Western oil companies, disprove assertions like Callicott’s.

Callicott misses the point. The point is not whether Africans or any other group respect nature or use natural entities, but rather why they do. Callicott himself admitted as much when he noted that Aldo Leopold, a major figure in contemporary environmental ethics, enjoyed hunting and eating animals while at the same time being aware “that his ethical responsibilities extended beyond the human sphere” (Aldo 1996, 219, Callicot 2001, 52). Also, if by anthropocentrism Callicott means that the African understands the environment as his servant, then that charge is more pervasive in the Judeo-Christian-Islamic dualism, as we shall see shortly. I submit that the despoliation of the environment in Africa on a large scale began with the imposition of the oppressive system of colonialism and the conquering religions of Christianity and Islam on the continent. The same thing happened in the East and the West when Christianity and Islam and their environmentally unfriendly dogmas became the dominant ideologies.

In some Eastern religions—Hinduism and Buddhism—one also finds a similar attitude to nature. These religions see nature, including human beings, as one entity which should be treated with respect and reverence. According to Dwivedi, “...in the ancient past, Hindus and Buddhists were careful to observe moral teachings regarding the treatment of nature.” (Dwivedi 2001, 250) Water, land, air, trees, and animals are revered and severe punishments are stipulated for those violating, as it were, the rights of these entities. As in traditional Igbo culture and religion, these rights are mostly religious. Polluting the pathways (land) is an offence. So is polluting water. “God, Kesava, is pleased with a person who does not harm or destroy other non-speaking creatures or animals. To not eat meat in Hinduism is considered both an appropriate conduct and a duty...The wicked person who kills animals which are protected has to live in hell-fire for the days equal to the number of hairs on the body of that animal.” (Dwivedi 2001, 252). This is because in

the Hindu tradition there is an unshakable belief in re-incarnation, where a person may come back as an animal or a bird, etc, and this gives these entities not only respect, but also reverence. Also, according to Dwivedi, “This provides a solid foundation for the doctrine of *ahimsa—non-violence* against animals and human beings alike” (Dwivedi 2001, 252). Trees were also considered as capable of feeling happiness and sorrow (Dwivedi 2001, 253). Dwivedi tells the story of how the Bishnois community in India, inspired by Guru Maharj Jambaji (1450CE), who was against killing animals or cutting down trees, lost three hundred and sixty-three people in their bid to protect the environment. This happened when a king from another part of India sent soldiers to cut down the trees that were in abundance in the Bishnois community in order to build his palace, the villagers came out and hugged the trees in order to prevent the soldiers from cutting them down. After the soldiers killed 363 of them, the king ordered his soldiers to stop (Dwivedi 2001, 254). The Bishnois continue to the present day in their defence of the environment and have inspired similar other endeavours like the Chipko Movement which emphasizes the proper management and use of trees in order to achieve sustainable development (Dwivedi 2001, 255). According to George James, the Chipko movement was born in 1973 when a group who sought permission from the forestry department to cut trees to make agricultural equipment was refused while another group that wanted the trees for making sporting equipment was granted permission. The group at the receiving end of the injustice organized themselves to hug the trees, following the example of the earlier Bishnois community.

The Buddhist attitude towards the environment is also one marked by a sense of reverence. The Buddhist strives to live harmoniously with nature. As De Silva pointed out, Buddhism advocates a gentle non-aggressive attitude towards nature. “According to the *Sigàlovàda Sutta* a householder should accumulate wealth as a bee collects pollen from a flower. The bee harms neither the fragrance nor the beauty of the flower, but gathers pollen to turn it into sweet honey. Similarly, man is expected to make legitimate use of nature” (De Silva 1998, 258). The Buddha forbade the maltreatment of animals, even the least of them “... [T]he Buddha promulgated the rule against going on a journey during the rainy season because of possible injury to worms and insects that come to the

surface in wet weather. The same concern for non-violence prevents a monk from digging the ground” (De Silva 1998, 258).

As in the African setting, I do not want to create the impression that there are no abuses of the environment in these cultures and religions. Indeed there is some ambiguity concerning the Buddha’s attitude to the killing of animals. For instance, the Buddha expressly forbade monks from causing injury to animals and plants. But because of the need for food production, lay Buddhists are allowed to plough the field for cultivation, an activity that inevitably leads to injury and death of worms and other small creatures. This leaves the concept of *ahimsa* or non-injury, open to differing interpretations. More so, as the Buddha lays emphasis only on the intentions of the one who does the inevitable injury. Monks are also permitted to receive gifts of meat from the lay people whose intentions about the killing of the animals they ignore (Keown 2000, 115-117).

Similarly, in Hinduism, there is an ambiguity concerning purification or freeing oneself from the cycle of death and rebirth as it lays much emphasis on renunciation. Some scholars see this as implying a neglect and devaluation of the natural universe. According to Nelson, “In Advaita metaphysics, the world of nature—the suspect world of change and multiplicity—undergoes a wholesale objectification and radical ontological devaluation. This process includes, of course, the human body and mind. Advaita, betraying its legacy from the archaic Samkhya dualism, bases itself on a noetic discrimination...between Self and non-Self...a sorting-out process that is at least provisionally dualistic” (Nelson 1998, 68). This dualism is brought out further in the analogy of the defective eye and bile. “...persons with double vision may continue to see two moons where, in fact, there is only one...The second moon does not disappear, despite knowledge of the true situation...even though knowing for certain that sugar is sweet, persons afflicted by a disorder of the bile continue to experience a bitter taste...” (Nelson 1998, 74). The liberated person—or saint—should equally know that the natural world is, like the content of dreams, false. “The theme of perceiving the world as unreal is common in later texts. The *Pancadasi* teaches that knowledge makes one conscious of the unreal nature... of the universe. The liberated ascetic is conscious of the world’s falsity...” (Nelson 1998, 75).

George James argues, however, that if that is the case, Hinduism could not give rise to a movement such as the Chipko. He concludes: “My conclusion is that Chipko is unquestionably a movement for the negation of the world. The world it negates, however, is not the world of nature, which for the Chipko activists is sacred. The world it negates is the world of scientific forestry and of politicians, technicians, and contractors within whose knowledge nature is reduced to a commodity in a system of economic exchange...” (James 2000, 526).

The point, of course, is that, admirable as it is, respect and reverence for nature in Hinduism is grounded on an ambiguous metaphysical value of nature. Objections like George James’ do not solve this problem. This is because the negation of nature in Hinduism did not start with its encounter with the world of the scientific forestry, politicians and technicians and contractors. These, one could argue, are later developments. Hindu reaction to such developments, as exemplified in the Chipko movement, stems from their understanding of nature. This understanding is essentially dualistic. One could therefore say that this dualism is a major weakness of the Hindu system. So, in as much as Hinduism approaches the environment with this dualistic view of nature, even if the dualism is only provisional, one can say that nature is thus devalued. One could mention here that Schopenhauer, the first Western philosopher to take these Eastern religions seriously, was attracted to them precisely because of their dualism that sought to make people aware that the world of everyday life experience was not the “true world” (Schopenhauer 1969 [Book II, chapter 17]). Even though one could argue that the effect of this dualism is not completely negative as far as the environment is concerned, I doubt that it is necessary.

In the Judeo-Christian religions, the dualism that is inherent in the other religions already discussed is made more explicit by the Christian dogmatic attitude toward the environment. That attitude is characterized by arrogance, anthropocentrism, and a domineering posture toward nature. In the book of Genesis, it is stated that God created the heaven and the earth and all that is in it. Then he created the first man, Adam, and then the first woman, Eve, as his companion. (Eve, according to White, seems to have been an afterthought, given to man so that he would not be alone). And he gave them

authority to dominate, conquer, and overcome the earth and all that is in it (Genesis 1:28).

White pointed out that in European antiquity, as in traditional Africa, before Christianity became the dominant religion; there was a reverence for the environment. "...every tree, every spring, every stream, every hill had its own *genius loci*, its guardian spirit. These spirits were accessible to men, but were unlike men; centaurs, fauns, and mermaids show their ambivalence. Before one cut a tree, mined a mountain, or dammed a brook, it was important to placate the spirit in charge of the particular situation, and to keep it placated. By destroying the spirits in natural objects, Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects." (White 2001, 17). White's point is that the pervasive modern science and technology which has a domineering posture towards the environment is inspired by the Christian dogma of man's dominion over the rest of nature.

Judeo-Christian apologists, it must be pointed out here, have consistently, at least since the publication of White's paper, pointed out that their religion lays emphasis more on stewardship than on domination. Callicott argues that being made in the image of God confers not just privileges, but equally responsibilities on human beings. "Paramount among these responsibilities, it might be supposed, is man's duty wisely and benignly to rule his dominion, the earth. To abuse, degrade, or destroy the earth is to violate the trust that the regent (God) placed in His viceroy (man)" (Callicott 1994, 16). Callicott notes that biblical scholars distinguish two creation myths in the book of Genesis. These are labeled as P and J, where P stands for the priestly narrative and J for the Yhawist narrative. J is said to be at least half a millennium older than P and begins in Genesis 2:4 with the creation of man, plants and animals, etc, and finally woman. P, which is the more popular account, begins with the creation of light, separation of water and land, other creatures, and finally with what Callicott describes as the amorphous "man" on the sixth and last day.

In J, man is made from the earth as were the other animals. It is in this narrative that the significance of the first man's name—Adam, from *adama* or the earth—is brought to bear

on his essential identity with the earth. As Callicott comments, “The first man’s very name thus associates him with the most material element—with the soil, with nature, and not, as the later *imago dei* suggests, with the heavens, the ethereal, and the divine” (Callicott 1994, 17). The implications of the J narrative are firstly, that the biblical account of creation cannot be said to be only anthropocentric as in P but equally ecocentric. Secondly, since J predates P it could be safely assumed that from the very beginning, God wanted the human being to live in harmony with the rest of nature as one among her creatures. And this was why after the Fall God bitterly regretted making man (Genesis 2:6). Or, taking both accounts as pure myths, which they really are, one can assume that P represents a negative shift in the environmental consciousness of the narrators.

In any case, J is quite environmentally friendly. However, I can think of only one known authority in the Judeo-Christian tradition that took it to heart. That person was St. Francis of Assisi. But what Francis did was so unorthodox that White thought that the real miracle of Francis was that he did not end up on the stakes as many of his followers did (White 2001, 18). Despite Francis’ efforts, it is the P narrative that has taken root in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Unfortunately, what the stewardship interpretation, which is based on P claims is not just that we are different from other entities in nature, like animals from plants—a difference of degree—but that we are essentially different from nature. It also makes us believe, falsely, that we can really determine the course of the environment. We certainly do affect on the environment, but the ultimate course and fate of the environment do not depend on us.

It is, I suppose, with Francis in mind that White was therefore very careful to distinguish Christianity from Christian doctrine and dogma. (This distinction is similar to that of Kierkegaard who distinguished Christianity from Christendom). Nash has also remarked that “As a scholar concerned with the history of ideas, White knew the relevant question was not, what does Christianity mean? but what did it mean to a particular society at a given time and place? His approach, in other words, was pragmatic: How was the Judeo-Christian tradition used?” (Nash, 1989, 89). White further contrasts the attitudes of Eastern and Western Christians towards nature. According to him, the Eastern attitude

was marked by intellectualism or clear thinking—orthodoxy—while the Western attitude was more voluntarist. For the East, sin was intellectual blindness while for the West, sin was moral evil. Conversely, “the Greek saint contemplates while the Western saint acts. The implications of Christianity for the conquest of nature would emerge more easily in the Western atmosphere” (White 2001, 17). The Eastern Christians see the objects in nature, like ants and fire, as symbols of God’s communication to man. The Eastern attitude to nature could also be understood by this saying: “Sitting quietly doing no-thing, spring comes and the grass grows” (De Mello 1994, 94). In other words, the Easterner “acts through non-acting.” On the contrary, in the West, scientists (Christians and non-believers) use the objects in nature to try to understand the mind of God and how creation operates (White 2001, 17). They scrutinize nature, hoping to lay bare its secrets. In contemporary physics, such attitude leads to the endeavour to discover a complete or unified theory so that we can explain away, as opposed to describing, nature as a whole. According to Stephen Hawking, “...if we discover a complete theory, it should in time be understandable in broad principle by everyone, not just a few scientists. Then we shall all, philosophers, scientists, and just ordinary people, be able to take part in the discussion of the question of why it is that we and the universe exist. If we find the answer to that, it would be the ultimate triumph of human reason—for then we would know the mind of God” (Hawking 1990, 175).

White contrasts the above attitude with that of St. Francis, a thoroughgoing Christian. Francis, writes White, “tried to depose man from his monarchy over creation and set up a democracy of all God’s creatures. With him the ant is no longer simply a homily for the lazy, flames a sign of the thrust of the soul toward union with God; now they are Brother ant and Sister fire, praising the Creator in their own ways as Brother Man does in his.” (White 2001, 18). This, of course, means seeing a sort of divine presence in all the objects of nature. It’s not new with Francis. The great religions we have spoken of above all have similar attitudes towards nature.

In sum, the religions and cultures discussed in this paper, which are fairly representative of most of the world’s religions, exhibit an attitude that tends—subtly or less subtly—to separate human beings from the rest of nature of which we are part. It could be argued

that the more primitive religions operate out of fear of the unknown; but Christianity, with its domineering attitude and insatiable quest for knowledge, dispels such fear. Nonetheless, it is Christian dogma that has taught, not only that human beings are essentially different from nature, but also that she is God's gift to them, to do with as they wished. But we are an intrinsic part of the environment, a clever part to be sure. An adequate account of the environment requires that we reject conceptions of reality which include the *noumenal* world or world of forms since this world is our only home. So, however varied the approaches of these religions might seem, they all present the same problem: they are not conscious that all natural entities, including human beings, is One. I think the consciousness that all is one, which is a philosophical rather than a religious attitude, is what could lead to a viable environmental ethics.

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