From Christian spirituality to eco-friendliness

Emmanuel Orok Duke

Department of Religious and Cultural Studies, University of Calabar, Calabar, Cross River State, Nigeria
e-mail: emmanueloroduke@unical.edu.ng

Abstract
Spirituality connotes praxis informed by religious or faith convictions. This can transform the individual and society at large. Christian spirituality is centered on how a person's relationship with the God of Jesus Christ informs and directs one's approach to existence and engagement with the world. The ecosystem concerns humanity and relationship with it is invariably influenced by faith or religious informed praxis. The reality of climate change is convincing many people that humankind's common homeland needs to be treated with care and respect if created beings are to have a congenial habitat now and in the future. This article avers that Christian spirituality can contribute to eco-friendly behavior through re-formation of the behavior of people and emboldening their goodwill as regards the responsibility of all towards the care of the earth. Finally, this research proffers a three-fold model of eco-spirituality - scriptural, self-control, and sacramental approaches to the earth – as a contribution towards stemming the tide of ecological assaults on creation. Textual analysis is the method used in this research.

Keywords:
Ecology; Christian spirituality; ecosystem; eco-friendliness and ecological spirituality.

1 INTRODUCTION

According to Judeo-Christian faith-narrative, God settled humanity in the Garden of Eden and enjoined it with the dual task of cultivating and caring for the ecosystem (cf. Gen. 2:15 King James Version). But before this commission to the stewardship of creation, the same Book of Genesis states that: The Creator blessed male and female, that is, humanity commanding it to be fruitful and subdue creation. By this command, humankind was called to be co-master of the earthly environment with the Creator (cf. Gen. 1:28 - 30). But mastery of the ecosystem did not imply degradation. From the foregoing, one can see a creative tension between dominion (cf. Gen. 1:28 -30) and stewardship (cf. Gen. 2:15) in Judeo-Christian narratology concerning the beginning of the earth. The ecological environment that humanity should lord over and at the same time take care of is a gift from the Creator. Thus, the care for the environment is also a concern for Christian spirituality because it belongs to God as one reads in Psalm 42: 1: "The earth belongs to Lord and everything in it". Consequently, ecology and spirituality constitute an item in the contemporary study of religion, given that creedal convictions can encourage eco-friendly behaviors.

2 ECOLOGICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

The term 'ecology' was coined around 1866 by Ernst Haeckel (1834-1919). Haeckel was a German Biologist, Artist, and Philosopher, who considered ecology to be a sub-discipline in Biology that explains the interrelationship among living creatures (Bergmann 2005, 20). These relationships among living creatures concern humanity because human beings are part of the ecosystem. Furthermore, this synergy draws humankind's attention to the fact that dominion over nature should also be understood as custody of human and earthly ecology. Therefore, human beings are not to understand dominion over creation as exploitation but as careful access to the wealth of nature with due respect to the principles of conservation and renewal of earth's resources (Bassey 2019). In addition, one should always remember this truth: **nature does not need humankind; it is human beings that need nature!** Hence, anyone who takes good care of nature is contributing to the sustainability of creation, but if the reverse is the case, there are detrimental consequences that await humankind.

According to Phillips, discourse on ecology, which was popularized in America during the second half of the twentieth century, survived being relegated to the dustbin of history. This is because it came to be associated with awareness of the damage done to the earth by humankind and the need to cultivate values that will regenerate balanced relationships among living things. Even though some consider these ecological values to be utopian, yet they are meant to promote unity within the ecosystem. Nonetheless, many are of the opinion that these values remain indisputable when one considers the extent of ecological degradation caused by the exploitation of the earth's resources in the name of civilization and economic growth and human wellbeing (2003, 42). What Phillips says about the popularization of ecology resonates with Bergmann's observation that ecological discourse went beyond the scientific discipline of biology after 1970, and his 'ecological turn' that is interdisciplinary discourse and engagements concerning ecology was initiated in Europe by Heinz-Ulrich Nennen (2005, 27). Hence, anyone can talk about ecology because of humanity's close connection with it, and human existence, to a large extent, depends on how human beings care for the earth's resources. It is this interdisciplinary approach to research that justifies the quest into how Christian faith-praxis contributes to eco-friendliness.

3 THE BACKDROP FOR ECOLOGICAL SPIRITUALITY

In the history of human civilization, there is always a creative tension between the improvement of human condition and the depletion of the earth's resources. It is the case that emergence of science and its application through technology has accelerated the exploitation of these resources on the one hand, and on the other hand, improved human comfort and well-being. For example, in the pre-modern and scientific world, it was difficult to clear an acre of land in one day for lumbering and other purposes. Now, with the help of machines, that is possible. However, without planting more trees, the risk of

deforestation and desertification of the earth is high. This has enormous consequences for the planet: the imbalance of the ecosystem, the greenhouse effect, and other seemingly irreversible climatic changes. Rasmussen observes that the post-second world war's 'consumption' of earth's resources is no longer sustainable (2013, 191). This is partly because humankind is not cultivating enough to replenish these depleted resources or the fact that cultural practices employed in the use of earth's resources are not eco-friendly. Thus, there is a clarion call, by eco-friendly people and institutions, for sustainable practices in the use of natural resources so that their collateral effects may be minimized. On a related note, it seems true that unjust industrialization processes cause almost ecological disasters. This could be a result of the earth's aging process also. If it is true that this universe is aging, how can humankind handle it with care? This and other related questions bring to the fore contemporary ecological issues and questions, as well as how Christian spirituality relates to them.

Consequently, barbarism should not go side by side with civilization and industrialization. This is because true civilization and industrialization recognize the sacramental nature of the environment, and nature tells people about God. The canticle in the Book of Daniel (3: 57-88) demonstrates this by inviting all of creation to praise God. And if nature tells everyone about God, it has inherent values that are not dependent on human beings. Since this is the case, human beings ought not to relativize the values of nature because of their egoistic ends. So, an eco-friendly person would see in the exploitation of the earth, for various purposes, a demonstration of humanity's barbarism and lack of adequate care for the earth.

Contributing to the ongoing call towards care for the earth, Pope Francis, in his Encyclical: *Laudatio Si* encourages humanity to work together for the good of the ecosystem:

> *The urgent challenge to protect our common home includes a concern to bring the whole human family together to seek sustainable and integral development, for we know that things can change. The Creator does not abandon us; he never forsakes his loving plan or repents of having created us. Humanity still can work together in building our common home. Here I want to recognize, encourage, and thank all those striving in countless ways to guarantee the protection of the home which we share. Particular appreciation is owed to those who tirelessly seek to resolve the tragic effects of environmental degradation on the lives of the world's poorest. Young people demand change. They wonder how anyone can claim to be building a better future without thinking of the environmental crisis and the sufferings of the excluded (2015, No. 12).*

The above exhortation calls for a new relationship with the ecosystem, and it is also an invitation towards a comprehensive ecological spirituality. This spirituality will not only sustain the change that is needed now for the sake of the earth's future and humanity's ecological destiny but engender a new symbiotic relationship with the ecosystem.

4 ECOLOGICAL SPIRITUALITY: A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

From a Christian perspective, the relationship between nature and spirituality has a transcendental and ontological basis since everything belongs to God. Hence, humanity will have to give account on how the gift of creation is received and treated. God speaks to humanity through nature and vice-versa. Following this line, Primavesi states that St. Francis of Assisi, through his intimacy with God, had a deep connection with nature, and he is considered to be the Patron of Ecologists, Environmentalists, and Earth's Activists (2001, 122). Therefore, ecological spirituality is not just connecting with nature. It is not a new naturalism. For Christians, it is an attitude towards creation, a way of life informed and influenced by Christian values. These values are founded on ontological truths like i) God created out of nothing (ii) creation belongs to God, (iii) human beings are stewards of creation, and (iv) creation reflects the Creator. White explains further:

> *The Christian dogma of creation, which is found in the first clause of all the Creeds, has another meaning for our comprehension of today's ecologic crisis. By revelation, God had given man the Bible, the Book of Scripture. But since God had made nature, nature also must reveal the divine mentality. The religious study of nature for a better understanding of God was known as natural theology (1967, 1204).*

From the stand of natural theology and divine revelation, ecological spirituality is a resolute way whereby humankind gives the lordship of creation back to the Creator – to whom it belongs and assumes responsibilities as custodians of the earth. As custodian of nature, humanity is called to develop an ethically responsible way of tapping nature's resources rather than squandering the resources of the earth without re-cultivating the same for its future inhabitants.

Ecological spirituality encourages humanity to humbly recognize its role in the exploitation of the environment for economic and developmental purposes and the readiness to undo the damages done via an eco-friendly lifestyle. Thus, this spirituality invites everyone to the key to developing and making use of renewable energy that will enable the preservation of the ecosystem's balance. The face of the earth, which has been disfigured by ecological sins, needs to be renewed. This renewal could be sustained through searching for scriptural narratives that support respect for the earth and making 'green' pastoral initiatives. These narratives are to be translated into concrete plans for the renewal of the earth's resources. In this regard, Christians are to partner with non-governmental organizations and governmental agencies in view of implementing earth-renewing programs.

For Christians, the creedal dimension of ecological spirituality is rooted in the Apostles' and Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creeds: *'I believe in God the Father Almighty Creator of Heaven and Earth, all things visible and invisible.'* This confession of faith in God the Father as the Creator of all things that are visible and invisible has strong implications for the ecological spirituality from the Judeo-Christian perspective. In the same vein, Scheffczyk argues that creation is a first history of salvation that bears testimony to divine providence from the beginning of all things (1970, 3).

The spirituality under consideration indicates that every believer ought to see creation as divine benevolence and generosity that should evoke gratitude and responsibility. Gratitude becomes humankind's attitude towards God for the resources given through creation as a free gift from God for the good of all. And a sense of responsibility arises from the moral implications that behoove humankind to use carefully all that God has given.

These dispositions, namely, gratitude and responsibility, call for care for the earth. Thus, 'hurt not the earth, neither the sea nor the trees' (Rev. 7:3) are an imperative and metaphor from the Creator of all things to humanity, as regards how creatures should handle creation. On the other hand, it analogically serves as a command that has implications for human relationships with the ecosystem. It is a warning, as well as an appeal. A warning against every form of exploitation in humankind's relationship with the environment; and an appeal for a change of attitude concerning the earth given protecting the ecosystem since it is evident that humanity has collectively failed to do this in the past. Despite this clarion call concerning a refrain from hurting the earth, sea, or trees, Agouridis observes below that environmentalists have linked ecological exploitation with Judeo-Christian narratives.

> *Christians and theologians entered the new technological and ecological age as the 'accused.' The ecological movement targeted the unbridled exploitation of natural resources and the unrestrained economic development of nations in the northern hemisphere, along with an absence of any ideological restraints or reins. This polemical altitude of the environmentalists was expressed, at least in the religious domain, predominantly as an assault against Christianity: not only did Christianity fail to prevent the irrational stance of the Western world concerning nature, but in fact, it promoted it (2013, 75).*

In the above citation, Agouridis expresses the concerns of Environmentalists that anthropocentric narratives in Judeo-Christian scripture are partly responsible for contemporary ecological woes. This is because all other created things on earth are evaluated concerning how they serve human needs. And in some instances, exploitation of the environment was recorded. Burton-Christie is of a similar opinion that runs as follows: "Too often throughout its history, the Christian community has not taken this elemental aspect of its own faith in Christ" (2011, 478) seriously.

Despite the fact-value of the above observations, it is also evident that the Judeo-Christian religion is doing more than it was in the past regarding care for the earth. There are many proactive responses to "hurt not the earth, neither the sea, nor the trees" (Rev. 7:3 King James Version), and other ecological friendly injunctions promoted by various Christian communities. Breda O'Brien's "Social Sin not a recent discovery by the church," in *The Irish Times* (2008) draws attention to the Roman Catholic Church declaration of pollution as an ecological offence as well as social sin. In the same vein, Patriarch Bartholomew I of the Orthodox Church develops Eucharistic spirituality that is strongly ecological by teaching that through the Sacrament of the Eucharist,

> *We care for the plants, and for the animals, for the trees and the rivers, for the mountains and the seas, for all human beings and the whole natural environment …creation on the one hand, and humanity, on the other hand, the one that encompasses and the one that is encompassed, cooperate and correspond. As humanity offers creation in the act of priestly service and sacrifice to God, so also does creation offer itself in return as a gift to humanity (2012, 97).*

Eco-consciousness that connects social responsibilities towards the earth and the Eucharistic spirituality with ecological emphasis can contribute positively to attitudinal changes that can make believers more eco-friendly. The above initiatives and others are the strongest that contemporary Christian communities have taken towards overcoming exploitative approach towards creation and at the same time, encouraging a caring disposition for the earth.

Ecological spirituality will necessarily be ecumenical and inter-religious. Since the care for the environment cuts across denominational boundaries, Christian communities are to search for common grounds through ecumenical dialogue so that doctrines may not be a barrier to caring for the earth. The care for the earth needs collaboration from people of all faiths. Hence, ecological spirituality will be inter-religious, and Nita indicates that even though such initiatives were strongly opposed in some climes, "they responded to the challenge by finding creative ways to merge the environmental and religious aspects of their identities…Christians and Muslims who become involved in Climate and Transition movements adopted several strategies for incorporating these experiences into their religious identities" (2013, 235). This planet is the only one that humankind has now, and it is its common responsibility to care for the earth. Therefore, differences in religious affiliations should not be a hindrance to collaborative responsibility towards the earth. This being the case, humanistic principles will be very much appreciated towards arriving at policies that will be beneficial to the preservation of the ecosystem.

From the backdrop of the contemporary consumerist culture that promotes an exploitative use of natural resources, a new way of looking at creation is emerging, namely, eco-consciousness. This movement towards a deeper realization of creatures' connectivity with nature is a reversal of the modernist ego and age-long anthropocentrism that made human beings the center of everything. This de-centering of everything given arriving at a new relationship with nature is one of the fruits of post-modern experience. For Tracey, this de-centering calls humankind to make a shift from anthropocentrism and ego-centrism to eco-centrism (2004, 182). This de-centering from humanity to connectivity among living things has political, economic, social, and spiritual implications. This article is concerned with the spirituality of this connectivity. Many people are rediscovering the inner peace that comes with a renewed connectivity with nature. Tracey calls this experience spirituality of nature or eco-spirituality (2004, 181). There is a growing awareness of the devastating effects of climate change on the earth's inhabitants. This is to a large extent, consequent upon humankind's ill-treatment of nature, and this makes a call for ecological spirituality expedient. Thus, this work is proposing a three-way approach to ecological spirituality: scriptural, self-control, and sacramental.

5 A THREE-FOLD ECOLOGICAL SPIRITUALITY FOR ECO-FRIENDLY LIFESTYLE

Firstly, a scriptural approach to creation that acknowledges creation as a gift from God the Creator can lead to an ecologically friendly behavior. This proto-narrative, which reveals divine generosity towards humankind can lead one to a new way of looking at the earth and its resources depending on how one internalizes the lessons from these faith stories. Redemption is a corollary to creation. The decadence that befell creation because of original and personal sins of humankind was reversed through Jesus Christ who liberated creation from decay. The truth concerning creation and redemption are explained in Bible as the root cause for all forms of liberation which is foundational for any ecological theology. One way of applying this liberation towards human ecology is living out practically the implications of ecological spirituality.

Chryssavgis argues that biblical approach has the potentiality to engender the spirit of solidarity with the most vulnerable constituents of the ecosystem that have no one to speak for them. For him, this sensibility resonates with groans of creation that awaits "their liberation from the children of God" (Rom. 8:22). With ecological spirituality, humanity becomes the 'new children of God' called to listen to the groans of creation evident in ecological degradation. For this reason, he avers that the need to respect the less respectable members of the ecosystem is also a way of liberating creation from oppression (2011, 159). This ecologically liberating attitude remains a concrete way of living out the intercommunion that exists among living beings (cf. 1 Cor. 12:20-25). Eventually, this spirit of liberation drawn from a scriptural approach to caring for the earth can benefit the conservation of nature's resources. From this Pauline perspective, the earth or the ecosystem should be treated as a member of the creation's living body. And since the Creator of all things listens to the cries of the oppressed, the cries of the ecosystem will also be answered.

Secondly, reckless depletion of the earth's resources needs self-control on the part of consumerist-humanity so that the tide of environmental exploitation and degradation could be stemmed. There is no effective spirituality without self-control. Similarly, ecological spirituality cannot change humanity's attitude towards the earth without self-control. For Chryssavgis, self-controlling attitude towards human ecology calls for the three R's: Renunciation, Repentance, and Responsibility (2011, 159). Renunciation is a conscious decision to forgo certain legitimate and illegitimate enjoyments for the sake of a simple lifestyle. What one renounces is can be shared with others. Hence, in consuming less, one can share with another person what she or he has and in doing this, the depletion of the earth's resources is slowed down. This might be seen as insignificant but when most people attempt to do it, the difference will be felt in the long run. Repentance is a process of returning to God the Creator after a humble acknowledgment of guilt as regards exploitation of creation.

Consequently, Chryssavgis avers that humanity's confession of its ecological sins is the recognition of a failed vocation to "to serve and preserve the earth" (Gen. 2:15) and readiness to turn over a new leave (2011, 159-160). This calls for true sense of responsibility that is backed up with concrete initiative towards green spirituality. With responsible attitude towards the earth, one is called to make a choice towards avoiding the exploitation of nature, wasteful use of natural resources and a new way of approaching creation with a reverential love.

Thirdly, sacra mentalization of existence is intrinsic to Christian spirituality for the very reason that divine presence can be mediated through the created order. Therefore, sacramental approach to human ecology and the ecosystem as a whole point to the fact that creation is hallowed by various forms of grace. So, ecological spirituality draws humanity to the sacramental nature of creation by reminding all that God the Father of creation has left His imprints on the ecosystem hence it cannot be commodified as a mere raw material that can be used according to the whims and caprices of human beings. In the renewed creation, the sacral and profane dimensions have met, ipso facto, the hallowed of creation must be respected.

In the same vein, Chryssavgis, argues that nothing is merely profane given the fact that everything created .by God is embraced by God (2011, 160). Therefore, ecological spirituality that is sustained by this divine embrace ought to stimulate in humankind respect for creation; a kind of reverence that compels human beings to care for the earth. This concern for the ecosystem should be evident in the way the habitants of the earth make use of the natural resources that God has given: not in an exploitative way but through practices that encourages the renewal of earth's resources.

6 CONCLUDING REMARKS

Ecological spirituality from a Christian perspective is one of religious faith's contributions towards eco-friendliness, thereby dealing with contemporary climate change related crisis. Ecological spirituality has already initiated dialogue on the relationship between religion and the environment across ecumenical as well interreligious climes. Christian ecological spirituality seeks to rediscover in Christianity and its values the means of redressing unfair treatment of the ecosystem because of false anthropocentricism that promotes violation of principles of nature concerning conversation and care for the earth.

Finally, ecological spirituality is an important dimension of contemporary Christian spirituality that draws the attention of every Christian (and non-Christians as well) to the sacramental nature of the ecosystem and the common responsibility of all to take of it. This spirituality reminds humanity of the need to pray for the wellbeing of the earth because it is the common home for all. Prayers should be backed up with feasible initiatives that commit most people to transform the ecosystem effectively and in a collective way. At the end, ecological spirituality from Christian perspective encourages human beings to appreciate creation as God's gift which each generation must hand over in good condition to successive ones.

REFERENCES

Agouridis, S. 2013. "Ecology, Theology and the World." In *Toward an Ecology of Transfiguration: Orthodox Christian Perspectives on Environment, Nature, and Creation,* edited by Chryssavgis, J and B. Foltz, 75-85, New York: Fordham University Press.

Bartholomew I. 2012. "Keynote Address at the Santa Barbara Symposium, California, November 8, 1997." In *on Earth as In Heaven: Ecological Vision and Initiatives of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew*, edited by J. Chryssavgis, 61-141, New York: Fordham University Press.

Bassey, S. A. (2019). 'Anthropoholism'As an Authentic Tool for Environmental Management. *International Journal of Environmental Pollution and Environmental Modelling*, 160-168.

Bergmann, S. 2005. *Creation Set Free: The Spirit as Liberator of Nature,* Translated by D. Stott, Grand Rapids, M.I.: Eerdmans.

Burton-Christie, D. 2011. "Nature." In *the Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality,* edited by A. Holder, 478-495, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

Chryssavgis, J. 2013. "A New Heaven and a New Earth: Orthodox Christian Insights from Theology, Spirituality and the Sacraments." In *Toward an Ecology of Transfiguration: Orthodox Christian Perspectives on Environment, Nature, and Creation,* edited by Chryssavgis. J and Foltz, 152-162, New York: Fordham University Press.

Francis, P. 2015. *Laudatio Si*. Vatican: Editrice Vaticana.

Nita, M. 2013. "Christian and Muslim Climate Activists Fasting and Praying for the Planet: Emotional Translation of 'dark green' Activism and Green Faith Identities." In *How the World's Religions are Responding to Climate Change: Social Scientific Investigations*, edited by Veldman, R, A. Szasz and R. Haluza-DeLay, 229-243. London: Routledge.

O'Brien, B. 2008. "Social sins not a recent discovery by the church" The Irish Times, March 15. *https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/social-sins-not-a-recent-discovery-by-the-church-1.903678* accessed 10/06/2019

Phillips, D. 2003. *The Truth of Ecology: Nature, Culture, and Literature in America.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Primavesi, A. 2001. "Ecology and Christian Hierarchy." In Custodians *of the Earth? Women, Spirituality, and the Environment*, edited by Low. A and Tremayne, S. 121-140. New York: Berghahn Books.

Rasmussen, L. 2013. *Earth-Honoring Faith: Religious Ethics in a New Key*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Scheffczyk, L. 1970. *Creation and Providence*. London: Herder and Herder, 1970.

Tracey, D. 2004. *The Spirituality Revolution: The Emergence of Contemporary Spirituality,* Hove, England: Brunner-Routledge.

White, L. 1967. "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis." *Science*, 155(3767):1203-1207.