



An Overview of Biodiversity Conservation Ethics in Christianity

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Introduction

If the mankind is to survive on this planet perpetually, the safety of environment and conservation of biodiversity should be their two major concerns. However, despite efforts of several national and international organizations this aspect has not taken required fillip politically, sociologically or religiously in most countries. Considering the importance of conservation of biodiversity and safety of environment almost all religions of the world have provided adequate guidelines for sustainable and judicious use of natural resources including biodiversity and wildlife. I conducted an in-depth research on how doctrines of various religions of the world support conservation of our flora and fauna, and published a book entitled *Biodiversity Conservation Ethics in Major Religions* in 2010. For propagation of the idea of conservation of biodiversity I wrote the same book in Urdu in 2020 published by the National Commission of Promotion of Urdu Language, New Delhi. In his paper an overview of biodiversity conservation ethics in the Christianity is described. However, the readers are encouraged to read the said book to grasp better understanding on this aspect. Further information can also be gathered by referring Forums given in Appendix 1.

Biodiversity is manifested at gene, species, habitats and ecosystem levels. It is often used as a measure for the health of biological systems. Present diversified life-forms, inhabiting mega, macro or micro biodiversity zones on earth, consist of many millions of biological species which are products of four billions of years of evolution.

In a larger perspective, conservation means wise use of natural resources. Despite a gradual decline in its importance, religion's role in shaping the history of mankind has been tremendous. In the philosophy and doctrines of all religions peaceful living and compassion towards other creatures, including animals and plants, has been the basic

code of conduct. Despite civil advancements, religious teachings, by far, are the most binding guidelines for human beings. In fact most civil societies laws are based on religions jurisprudence. "Live and let others live" has been the motto of all religions. Besides humans, 'others' include all life forms that coexist with us. However, due to our shortsightedness, natural resources have been overexploited resulting in the present ecological crisis.

Biodiversity Conservation Ethics in Christianity

As given by Richard, et al. [1] there has been mix response of Christians on biodiversity conservation backed by religious sentiments. However, as deterioration of environment has continued more and more Christian clergy are coming up with stronger conviction to restore a healthy environment on this planet for the survival of mankind vis-à-vis other life forms. Several forums on conservation of biodiversity and ecology are now actively working in bringing out more supporting documents from Bible and other sources of Christian scriptures. The most effective, rather controversial, statement on environmental ethics under the jurisprudence of Christianity in recent years came from Lynn, et al. [2] who wrote, "Especially in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen". This statement aroused many positive and negative responses and resulted in the publication of large number of essays supporting biodiversity conservation issues through the doctrines of Christianity. Dieter Hessel, et al. [3] has contributed enormously on topics related to biodiversity conservation and Christianity.

He has emphasized the conservation ethics in Christianity illustrating seven Key Themes: "The first theme examines elements of scripture and tradition and refocuses

Christian affirmations and ethics in ecologically-alert terms. The second theme explores the complex relation between cosmology, spirituality and morality, knowing that the cosmos (and this plane) bodies forth the power, wisdom and love of God. The third theme offers a deep critique and response to disastrous assumptions underlying modern philosophy, religion, technology and politics. The fourth theme notes that in theology and praxis, sacramental sensibility and covenantal commitment are joined together because both are required for a sustainable community. The fifth theme reconstructs affirmation about God, Christ, finitude, world, soul/body, relations, sin, evil, redemption, and the "end" with ecological seriousness. The sixth theme illuminates the emergence and transformation of Christian ecological virtue ethics that lead to a praxis of frugality, humility, esteem for every kind, beneficence, and justice toward all. The seventh theme emphasizes human obligations in every place and pursuit, that respect and care for Earth as God's creation and life's home (habitat), while seeking justice for biodiversity as well as humankind". The illustrations to these themes are quite logical and convincing which stress that there is immense Biblical emphases for Christians to contribute in the welfare of this planet and in restoring the balance of ecosystems.

In a very interesting study Bae Tae, et al. [4] has focused on the problems of environmental degradation, due to the process of modernization in South Korea. The study also highlights as to how one Korean denomination, The Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea, has responded both theologically and practically to these environmental problems. It is a good case study. Similar such efforts should be made at other places. It is obvious that biodiversity conservation problems can be most suitably addressed and solved by indigenous methods.

Supporting the conservation of animals under the jurisprudence of Christianity Baulkham, et al. has given a good explanation of the phrase: Jesus "was with the wild animals" mentioned in Mark's Gospel. According to him," the human relationship with nature has a key place in Jesus' identity and mission as the messianic Son of God. The kingdom of God inaugurated by Jesus includes peace and companionship with the wild animals."

Barky, et al. [5] has coined an interesting term "theocentric relatedness" and has explained how the Christians can have a better approach to recognize the internal connection between faith and ecological concerns. According to him if such connection is not implemented we cannot have solace either divinely or ecologically. Similarly in another study, Bernal, et al. [6] has provided a criteria-setting element for an "ethic" that is based on an "eco-justice" framework. Berry,

et al. [7] has given the most comprehensive analysis of the concept of "environmental stewardship." He has explained some of the most thoughtful and/or prominent thinkers' concepts in the field of Christianity and Ecology.

Almost a similar concept is argued by Getui, et al. [8] when they talk about eco-justice, social justice and justice to the non-human under the jurisprudence of Christianity. In another very useful book *Sharing God's Planet: A Christian Vision for a Sustainable Future*, Foster, et al. [9] have illustrated history of human engagement with the environment.

There is great respect and emphasis on Noahic concept and covenant in Judaism, Christianity and Islam [10]. This event in religious history can be very well regarded as an intelligent act of biodiversity conservation by Prophet Noah at the behest of God. Greenway, et al. [11] has provided a brief introduction to an ethic of animal care based upon the Genesis creation accounts and the Noahic covenant. Hall Douglas, et al. [12] has immensely contributed to biodiversity (ecology) conservation ethics in Christianity.

Like other religions, Christianity teaches that all creations is loving act of God and if the humans destroy God's creations there is always risk of destroying themselves. In the Bible, the book of Ecclesiastes states in chapter 3, verse 19: "for the fate of the sons of men and the fate of beasts is the same, as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and man has no advantage over the beasts; for all is vanity". But on account of reasoning power and thought provoking actions mankind do have certain advantage over animals and this superiority brings on them more responsibility for caring for the creations of God. That is the point also emphasized in Islam when it supports the Biblical concept of Stewardship.

The World Bank Group has also given several salient points about biodiversity conservation in Christianity.

Prof Pimm, et al. who is internationally known in his field, in a recent interview summed up, "because as a Christian and a conservation biologist it has always seemed to me to be self-evident that one of the deepest and most important reasons why we should be concerned about conserving biological diversity is an ethical one. We ought not to be destroying a quarter of all the variety of life on Earth."

Considering the importance of biodiversity conservation and environment safety, in addition to scholars and writers, several important statements have been made by Christian leaders and preachers. The Orthodox Church published an important document 'Orthodoxy and the Ecological Crisis' in 1990 that entails conservation ethics in Christianity [13,14]. In 1991 Pope John-Paul II made a very strong statement, "The

concepts of an ordered universe and a common heritage both point to the necessity of a more internationally coordinated approach to the management of the earth's goods". Indeed many of the world's problems, more particularly ecological and economic crises, can be solved better if we keep this philosophy in mind while formulating various measures for judicious development and sustainable life style.

Although much more is needed, it is gratifying that now several Christian groups have come up with a particular focus on conservation of nature. They are working hand in hand with other conservation organizations in different parts of the world. It is more gratifying to see that several innovative ideas are being discovered by young Christians. In such a new tools campaign for Creation Care Movement and "green" Christians an 'Eco-friendly Bible' has been published in October 2008 by young Evangelicals of east Pennsylvania University. However, the earth's environment has deteriorated so badly and loss of biodiversity is so rapid more concentrated efforts are needed to restore the order of nature.

Earlier some clergy members and preachers were of the opinion that scientific discourse is against divine designs and plans. But as realistic inputs on the issue have revealed, now it is affirmed that there is hardly any contradiction between science and religion. The concept of evolution (not necessarily Darwinian theories) of biodiversity under the process of natural selection is in accordance with the creativity of God and modern developments of science support this view. The famous physicist and Nobel Prize winner, Albert Einstein has rightly said, "Science without religion is lame. Religion without science is blind." Scholars, preachers, leaders, and propagators of almost all religions are now unanimous that their religious ethics strongly support biodiversity/wildlife conservation. One interesting link between science, ethics and praxis has been illustrated by Calvin, et al. (*The Oxford Handbook of World Religion and Ecology*) under the heading 'The Science and The Shepherd'. However, available theories and doctrine of religious in support of biodiversity conservation should be applied practically.

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