
The Significance of Ecotheology in a Significantly Changing Climate

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Abstract

Climate change is a natural phenomenon which should be expected. However, the rate at which climate is changing in recent years is rather worrisome and requires urgent attention to restore the natural equilibrium. This change is noticed in global warming which is attributed to high increase in the greenhouse gases caused by natural and anthropogenic emissions. God in his wisdom has designed some processes to maintain equilibrium. When this equilibrium is maintained the temperature of the earth's surface remains relatively constant. Man has divine mandate to manage the earth's resources in such a manner that shows respect for God who Himself owns creation which in turn maintains the equilibrium. This is the crux of ecotheology. The paper also maintains that there is African approach to ecological theology on the matrix of which climate problems could be positively addressed.

Introduction

The encompassing reality of climate change observed as “Global warning” is a problem that should concern every school of thought if lasting solution is to be proffered. It is not the climatologist alone or the enlightened that is affected. It is a problem that has affected everybody. For us to pretend that the Greenhouse effect is a problem that will be solved only by the scientist is a mistake that will yield adverse effect more devastating than what we currently face. The theologian must therefore lend his voice to proffer solution. All hands must be on deck before the present climatic epidemic turns out a religious nightmare called “hell fire” advertised in the religious books.

It is also necessary to observe that the complacency in many African societies as against the near-mythologize approach of the Western societies concerning this climate change is worrisome. Many Africans think the global warming is a problem created by the Westerners and therefore should be solved by Westerners. Some other Africans think that the problem is such a complex scientific issue that only those technologically and scientifically advanced societies can solve it. These are erroneous positions that should be corrected and this paper is prepared to achieve that.

The aim of this paper is to establish that biblical Ecotheology from African perspective can go a long way to proffering solution to the global warming. It stands on the matrix that Africans are not passive recipients of Jewish Christianity and Western technology. Africans are very active in these cultures, receiving and contextualizing. The paper insists that it could be far reaching to realize that in the African society man as a cognate entity exists in a series integrated relationship. It is African culture for human beings to interact healthily with the super humans – spirits, divinities and ancestors. Any upset of this equilibrium brings untold hardship that could be very devastating and calamitous. Africans can contribute her quota in an African way to solving the environmental problem of climate change. There is African approach to ecological theology on the matrix of which climate problems could be positively addressed. This establishes the genuineness of African initiative in ecotheology and takes its bearing from there to address the climatic change.

Climate change

Climate change describes “the variability or average state of the atmosphere or average weather over time scales ranging from decades to millions of years”¹. This is not a new phenomenon. Just as weather changes day by day the climate also changes and noticeable over a long period of time. These changes could be caused by natural processes or by human activities. Over the long period of the history of the world the earth has gone through series of climate changes.

What becomes a problem in climate change is an accumulated body of noticeable evidence creating a reasonable impact on the habitat within a short space of time. Climate change could cause a decrease or increase in the surface temperature over a long period of time.

There is an overwhelming consensus among scientists that the globe is experiencing rapid climatic change. The change is very significant because its effects are felt noticeably around the globe. There is increase in temperature, ice caps are melting faster, hurricanes, and other natural disaster are experienced in various parts of the globe quite regularly and thousands of people are already becoming climatic change refugees. World Health Report 2002 says that “climate change was estimated to be responsible in 2000 for approximately 2.4% of worldwide diarrhea, and 6% of malaria in some middle-income countries. Epidemics of weather and climate-sensitive infectious diseases such as malaria and

meningitis will have a devastating effect on human health and socio-economic development and severely overburden health systems in many parts of the world”².

Greenhouse Effect

The greenhouse effect is not a hypothetical ideology. It is such a practical experience that could be explained even from our daily experiences. It describes the trapping in of solar energy in the surface earth due to the blanketing gaseous layer in the atmosphere. It could be described in simpler terms with examples from daily experiences in a greenhouse experiment.

A glasshouse will usually allow sunlight into the house. But this trapped sun energy does not leave the house at the rate it came in. In fact much of the energy is trapped inside. This trapped energy causes the house to heat up. The same experience is observed when a car is parked in the sun. Because the glasses are wind up sunlight goes into the care. Once absorbed the solar energy is trapped inside the car making the car to be very hot. If the glasses are wind down the solar energy easily escapes into the atmosphere outside the car.

Greenhouse gases include water vapour, carbon dioxide, methane, nitrous oxide and certain industrial gases. They allow sunlight enter the atmosphere. Once this sunlight reaches the earth surface it is released back into the atmosphere. Some of the energy passes back into the space but much of it still remains trapped inside.³ “Over time, if atmospheric concentrations of greenhouse gases remain relatively stable, the amount of energy sent from the sun to the earth’s surface should be about the same as the amount of energy radiated back into space, leaving the temperature of the earth’s surface roughly constant.”⁴

Global Warning

It has already been observed that climate change could bring about increase or decrease in global temperature. Temperature change could fluctuate but the average will usually be expected to be relatively stable. If there is a noticeable average increase it becomes global warming. Global warming may not always be a point of deep concern except where it becomes worrisomely obvious. Karin Lindinger has noted that the global problem “is not only about how much the earth is warming, it is also about how fast

it is warming”⁵. The rate of increase of global warming is becoming a serious threat to human life. Scientists have noted that “out of the 20 warmest years on record, 19 have occurred since 1980. The three hottest years ever observed have all occurred in the last eight years, even.”⁶ It is also on record that “the world has warmed 0.74⁰C in the past hundred years and scientists are clear that the world will get warmer this century due to further increase in greenhouse gas concentrations. Global average temperature is forecast to rise 4⁰C (7.2⁰F) towards the end of the 21st century.”⁷

The Meeting Point of Science and Religion in Ecotheology

Science is man’s effort to explain, through systematic observation and empirical means, God’s infinite design. The more man enquires into the profundity of the unknown, the more he realizes that there are so much unknown, and the more he wants to know the unknown. By divine enablement, called knowledge, he could grab, though very insignificantly little, relative to what is unknown, God’s design he calls nature. The divine command was “Be faithful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it” (Gen.1:28). The English Version that has “subdue” is not a better interpretation. The correct interpretation of the word is that man should have control over creation. This divine declaration confers on man the ability to understand creation. By the knowledge coming from this divine empowerment man is able to simulate the creation of God to achieve some scientific goals. Consider the ship, for example, it is a simulation of the fish; aeroplane is a simulation of the birds of the air. Even the computer is a simulation of the human brain and its environment.

God, a Perfect Designer

God has created nature, designing some recycling process which maintains the equilibrium. What do we have from God to recycle the ecological effects? God has put the greenhouse effect in place, for example, to ensure that life continues. “Seen from space, our atmosphere is but a tiny layer of gas around a huge bulky planet. But it is this gaseous outer ring and it’s misleadingly called greenhouse effect that makes life on earth possible”⁸ God in his wisdom has designed some processes to maintain equilibrium. When the sunlight reaches the earth, passing through the blanket of greenhouse gases the solar energy is sent back into the atmosphere. The greenhouse gases will usually allow some of the energy to escape back into

the space while some are trapped in the atmosphere. The reduction of the level of greenhouse gases accumulation through photosynthesis and other natural processes are divine arrangement to allow some level of anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions without upsetting the atmospheric equilibrium or nature balance. When this is done the temperature of the earth's surface remains relatively constant.

Man, an Imperfect Maintainer

The Christian theology presents man as the steward of God's creation, which the scientist calls nature. By this term man is expected to maintain creation and to be accountable for whatever goes wrong in creation. That man is a steward is an indication that things can go right or wrong in his stewardship. The divine declaration that creation is "very good" (Gen 1:3') is an indication that nature by itself is not created to work against man.

Against the idea of "control" or "be in charge" as the right interpretation of Gen 1:28 human beings read domination and end up exploiting the earth. By exploiting the earth human beings exploit themselves. It is wrong for one to exploit oneself. The earth was created for God's glory and not for man's glory. It is in the process of promoting God's glory that man derives joy in God's creation. Respect for nature is a result of respect to God. Stewardship rather than manipulation should be the watch word in scientific experimentation if the idea of exploitation of nature is to be removed. The present technological manipulation of a recalcitrant environment⁹ is not the purpose of God and is eventually working against man.

Ecotheology

Ecotheology is a combination of the terms, ecology and theology. It insists that the natural world is God's creation and good. In the human society God has allowed three laws to guide interdependence. These include the Revealed Law, the Natural Law and the Conventional Law. These three are well attested to in the Christian scriptures. Conventional Law refers to customs which could be enforced by a court or at least form the basis of litigation.¹⁰ Natural Law refers to the understanding of inherent principles of law in the nature of things which can be discerned by rational creatures in the light of reason.¹¹ Divine Law is a particular disclosure about the way man can find favour with God and as a result maintain good

relationship with fellow man. Christian theology insists that divine law culminates in the incarnation. The Bible itself becomes the written deposit of divine revelation which contains divine law.

Econtheology is the use of Judeo-Christian theology to examine the implications of contemporary ecology for human action. It seeks how theological and ethical principles could sustain nature as a stable equilibrium. The matrix of this position is always that nature was created by God and declared good and that man was basically required to take care of it to God's glory. Ecotheology combines the principles of Natural Law, Moral Law, Ecopurist, moral theology and theology of nature, environmental/Bioethics. The two main purview of Ecotheology are nature and God. The being referred to as God is the Creator of all things in heaven and on earth. God is the source of all beings – animate and inanimate, visible and invisible. Creation belongs to him. He demands worship from human beings. He is unchallengeable, and unchangeably sovereign in creation. "Since he is not open to direct observation, a meaningful account of him can only be given by indicating at each point his relation to ourselves and the world we know"¹²

Therefore, ecotheology is a theological standpoint that the earth is God's sacred design and should be protected, cared for and managed in an orderly and most circumspect manner that depicts the fear of God. It insists that managing the earth in an orderly manner should first and foremost be with the premise to glorify God. Secondly it is necessary so that human actions do not tantamount to crating imbalance in God's design. Thirdly a deviance from protecting God's design may result to a chaotic and disastrous existence of human life. Man therefore works against himself not against God. It is like a man who insists on breaking the law of gravity. He climbs the telecommunication mast. He then jumps off the pick of the mast. By the time he crashes on the ground he only succeeded in breaking himself and not the law of gravity he insists in breaking.

God created the earth and left in the hands of man the stewardship of this creation. If man stewards the earth very well he enjoys the goodies of the earth. If he turns an ecological despot and insists on exploiting the earth he suffers untold consequences that may eventually ushers in a climatic hellfire, devastating and disastrous. The Bible maintains, "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein" (Psalms 24:1). It is fallacious and unbiblical to see the earth as a

corrupt satanic abode. It is the human activities that are corrupt and desecrating God's orderly and sacred design.

Morality of Human Actions

By God's injunction human beings are required to care and protect the earth. Every godly measure that is adopted by science must be scientifically and divinely pursued. There is absolutely nothing wrong that science pursues scientific issues empirically. The earth is itself empirical. God has made nature to be natural and not supernatural. Yet, God himself is supernatural. We cannot bring God into our experimental laboratory for scientific examination. This does not mean He no longer permits our scientific enquiries. If a man is hungry, for example, he gets some food. He does not go to pray that God should remove the hunger. This is a simple biological function which God Himself has put in place. If, however, man finds it difficult to get about his problem the Bible requires that he should go to God who Himself is quite willing and ready to provide answer to the problem. That he prays to God to help him does not mean he drops aside his mental reason and application of knowledge; this comes from God and is requires by God. In fact, this God-given potential enables him to become more inquisitive. At the end he is able to discover or invent a measure that helps him to solve mundane problems. Only a fool refuses to acknowledge the superiority and initiative of God in our scientific enquiries. Great minds think because God has made them great in thought. That a particular scientist refuses to acknowledge God does not remove God from being God. That dies not also mean that there are no great scientists who acknowledge God. Conversely there are those riffraff who are neither scientific nor enlightened who do not acknowledge God. The problem of not knowing God is not a problem of a selected class of philosophical individuals but a general problem of the human heart. Yet those who know their God shall be strong and do exploit while those who do not know their God shall be weak and be exploited.

The morality of human actions requires that we justify the purpose of our actions in a divine context. Both actions and their purpose must be judged in the divine writ. It was human actions that brought the diluvian judgement of Genesis 7. It was also human actions that brought the post diluvian

covenant of blessings and protection in Genesis 8:21f. If human actions are not checked not only will they bring disaster to themselves they will turn around to attract God's judgement on themselves.

Common terms in ecotheology include balance and harmony in nature, sacredness, sustainability, health, integrity and stewardship. But these concepts are not new ideas in human philosophy. Allan Fitzsimmons has observed that "The concepts of balance and harmony in nature have a lengthy history. Ecological historian Frank Egerton observed that Herodotus addressed these ideas as early as 450BC"¹³ On the other hand "One bioregionalist argues that what is needed is a 'treaty' or spiritual bond between ourselves and the natural world similar to God's covenant with creation after the flood."¹⁴ J. Michael Beers has remarked that "A good steward does not coddle the resources entrusted to him and let them lie fallow and undeveloped. Rather, he uses them, develops them and, most appropriately attempts to the best of his ability to realize their increase so that he may enjoy his livelihood and provide stewardship for the good of his family and other dependents."¹⁵

African Insight

The African is religiously ubiquitous. He sees God is everything. Though that may have its shortfalls one may note that such position could still the African to impact positively on a significantly changing climate. The climate change is a very serious issue that is fast driving man into his doom. The present problem is largely human and human could also go a long way to solving the problem. If the African, in his usual way of observing sacredness observes respect in the creation of God obviously he would be contributing a lot in solving the problem at stake. In fact, Africans are known to have held the sacredness of nature. It was the White who taught him that the sacred could be exploited and desecrated. It was the Whiteman who taught the African that respect for nature divinities were useless, hopeless, fetish and a result of ignorance. The fear and respect for natural laws as well as ecological justice disappeared into the tin air of religious emancipation. Indiscriminate burning down of forests that ordinarily lay fallow for many years and ecological exploitation that formed taboo in African socio-economic life were given up for what was called civilization and enlightenment.

While the African is not encouraged to worship natural objects, which itself forms hyper-ecotheology. This term means "finding God Himself in nature – much less substituting God with nature

itself.”¹⁶ Besides, the individualistic Western approach to life that has been imported into the African society is very alien and unfriendly. If only Africans could detach a bit from the Western individualism he could, perhaps, contribute his quota to the present devastating climate change that is drawing a universal attention.

Recommendations

- i. A change in the pattern of industrialization must be adopted to reduce the anthropogenic emission of Greenhouse gases. This requires a new approach to industrialization which could adopt a revolution to solar energy.
- ii. Regulating International Body should be instituted to control industrial emissions which increase the greenhouse gases.
- iii. The scientific parlance of manipulation in its definition of experimentation should be changed to African friendly approach.
- iv. The theologian should adopt easier and technical ways of convincing human beings that the earth must be treated with respect as God’s property in the fear of God and that human beings are stewards of God’s creation. Efforts should be increased in creating awareness to divine requirements in the stewardship of the earth.

Endnotes

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