The Sacred Environment: Facts and Myths

Accepted 17th August, 2023

ABSTRACT

Abrahamic religions, which are currently the most widespread organized religions in the world, still lack a fully developed moral discourse with reference to the environment. The sacred scriptures still lack a dialogue with the current environmental issues, inner debates, and academic theorization, despite the vast accomplishments of the humanities and philosophy. Writers, poets, and literary critics have to a great extent treated the concept of God from different perspectives, but interestingly failed to tackle it as an epistemic edifice that shapes the moral and intellectual background of half of humanity today. Through analyzing related excerpts from the Torah, New Testament, and the Quran, it is shown that these institutionalized writings reflect a patent anthropocentric and ecocidal perception of the natural world and its inhabitants.

Key words: Environment, ecology, moral obligations.

INTRODUCTION

According to Cambridge Dictionary, the term environment stands for the air, water, and land in or on which people, animals, and plants live. On the other hand, ecology could be defined as the study of human beings’ ethical understanding of and attitude towards the natural environment. While numerous writers, poets, and philosophers have tackled this topic throughout history, ecology only developed into a specific academic discipline in the 1970s. This emergence was no doubt due to the increasing awareness in the 1960s of the effects that industrial, economic pervasiveness, nuclear armament, and population growth were having on the environment. The development of such awareness was galvanized by the publication of one of the most tell-tale books at that time. Rachel Carson’s Silent Spring, first published in 1962, alerted readers to how the widespread usage of chemical pesticides was posing a grave menace to public health and causing the obliteration of the wild and endangering the life of human beings. Absolutely, pollution and the depletion of natural resources have not been the only environmental concerns since that time: decaying plant and animal biodiversity, the loss of wilderness, the degradation of ecosystems, and climate change are all part of a constellation of green issues that have breached both public consciousness and public policy over the following years. As the most pertinent branch of environmentalism, deep ecology aims at outlining our moral obligations regarding such concerns. The field addresses questions such as: are human beings a part of or apart from the natural world? What ethics or moralism do human beings have in respect to the environment, and why? Does the natural world exist for serving human needs or has an intrinsic entity and value? Are human beings allowed to interfere limitlessly in the natural order, and if yes, are we the ones to blame for the current environmental crisis? And can we then conclude that reliance on the current ‘human scale’ cannot count in determining moral considerability?

Perspectives on the environmental crisis

Critique of anthropocentrism

To tackle what human moral obligations and demarcations
are, it is crucial to consider first why we have them in the first place. For instance, do we have environmental obligations for the sake of human beings living in the world today, or for the sake of protecting biodiversity and ecosystems, for human posterity living in the future, or for the sake of different life forms within the environment itself, devoid of any human centeredness and interests? Different deep ecologists have provided substantial and congruent answers to this central question which, as it will be demonstrated later, went in accordance with most of ecological feminist thought or what is well known as ecofeminism.

Despite human-centeredness, the concept of anthropocentrism has played a major part in the extension of a new moral recognition. This extension has not been exclusive to the non-human world though, but instead to human beings who do not yet exist. The recognition of moral accountability of future generations has been considered necessary because many environmental problems, such as global warming and resource depletion, will affect future humans much more than they affect present ones. Furthermore, it is evident that the actions and policies that we as contemporary humans undertake will have a great impact on the well-being and awareness of future citizens. In fact, deep ecology has basically founded its environmental commitment by relying on and addressing these future generations.

The most fundamental question that ought to be asked when dealing with a particular environmental ethic is simply, what obligations do we have in regard to the natural environment? If the answer is simply that we, as human beings, will perish if we do not constrain our actions towards nature, then that ethic is anthropocentric. Anthropocentrism literally means human centeredness, and broadly stands for the view that the existence and interests of humans are of more importance and value than those of nonhumans. “This ideology argues that man is at the center of the creation and it is therefore right for him to do whatever pleases him. This notion is deeply ingrained – all of us act on it every day” (McKibben, 1990). In one sense all ethics must be considered anthropocentric. After all, as far as we know, only human beings can reason about and reflect upon ethical matters, hence giving all moral debate an absolute “human-centeredness.” However, within environmental ethics anthropocentrism usually means something more than this. It usually refers to an ethical framework claiming that moral standing is assented solely to human beings. Therefore, an anthropocentric ethic claims that only human beings are morally considerable, meaning that all the direct moral obligations we possess, including those we have regarding the environment, are attributed to our fellow human beings. However, Greg Garrard defends the deep ecological view of the world in believing that:

Deep ecology demands recognition of intrinsic value in nature. It identifies the dualistic separation of humans from nature promoted by Western philosophy and culture as the origin of environmental crisis, and demands a return to a monistic, primal identification of humans and the ecosphere. The shift from a human-centered to a nature-centered system of values is the core of the radicalism attributed to deep ecology, bringing it into opposition with almost the entirety of Western philosophy and religion. (Garrard, 2012)

As one of the most basic branches or forms of environmentalism, deep ecology was introduced first by Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess in his famous 1973 article “The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement: A Summary”. The central idea of deep ecology is that we are part of the earth, rather than apart and separate from it. This idea contrasts with the dominant Western perception of culture, where human beings are separate from the natural world and superior to it. It is predicated upon the belief that humans must radically change their relationship to nature from one that values nature merely for its usefulness to human beings to one that recognizes that nature has an inherent value, because “Deep ecology identifies the anthropocentric dualism humanity/nature as the ultimate source of anti-ecological beliefs and practices” (23). The term was introduced by the Naess to assert his view of “organisms as knots in the biospherical net or field of intrinsic relations” (Naess 95), and to call for further sensitivity towards continuity and biospherical interaction. In his article, Naess draws a seven-point survey to which most deep ecologists would subscribe. They are set out:

1. Rejection of the man-in-environment image in favour of the relational, total-field image.
2. Biospherical egalitarianism—in principle.
3. Principles of diversity and symbiosis.
4. Anti-class posture.
5. Fight against pollution and resource depletion.
6. Complexity, not complication.
7. Local autonomy and decentralization. (Naess 95-96-97-98)

Naess also criticizes the shallow ecology movement for being anthropocentric and neglectful to nondominant groups. Despite its attempt to fight pollution and resource depletion, the shallow ecology remains a white, clannish, and elitist movement that is in favor of the well-being and progress of merely developed societies.

In fact, anthropocentrism is a key concept in the deep ecology movement and ecofeminist thought accordingly. It is described as the leading factor behind current environmental crisis. The deep ecology movement has unveiled major analytic issues that are associated with the term. The relationship between human beings and the natural world must be completely rethought. The recognition of the value of the natural world and its
inhabitations ought to be addressed as the most effective way
to achieve justice and balance in the entire biosphere.

The ecofeminist stance

What ecofeminists have in mind, however, is the central idea that values associated with Western dominant masculinity are the ones used to determine what is morally and culturally human. Reason, mind, production, and the domination of nature define what it means to be fully human, as opposed to feminine characteristics such as emotionality, passivity, and interconnectedness. “The concept of the human is itself very heavily normative” (Plumwood, 1993). The concept of being human is conditioned by the existence of a constant excluded and inferiorized Other, defined mainly through male-dominated lenses.

Ecofeminism tackles traditional masculine values as used to determine what is to be a human. Males refuse to recognize their dependence on women and the nonhuman world, and concurrently preserve their dominance of the human and the world in terms of male values and logical order. The concept of the human per se is constructed and maintained as degrading and exploitative to women and nonhuman world, and therefore this paper argues that anthropocentrism is defined in relation to androcentric and patriarchal views of the world. Woman-nature connection ought to be completely rethought, and the current conceptualization of the human, culture, and rationalism must take up what Val Plumwood calls ‘a critical ecological feminism’. In her mind, it rejects every aspect of women’s liberation which endorses or fails to challenge the dualistic definition of women and nature. She writes that “For women, the real task of liberation is not equal participation or absorption in such a male dominant culture, but rather subversion, resistance, and replacement” (30). While she criticizes liberal feminism for indulging the dominant culture, she proposes an ‘unsexed’ character alternative to the old two-sex view of the body “where the old feminine ideal was perceived as subsidiary and sexed” (25).

As a concomitant, to quellanthropocentrism, speciesicism, sexism, and other forms of oppression, liberating women only will not be sufficient. Women will free themselves only if patriarchal systems of oppression are disassembled, and intersectionality is affirmed. Ecofeminism establishes this analytical framework in believing that the association of the female with nature goes hand in hand with nature/culture, sex/gender, and male/female dichotomies that have firmly shaped modern Western culture. Women’s biology and their role in reproduction are behind the traditional view of women as more corporeal beings than men. In this view, the perception of nature as feminine is deeply ingrained in Western thought, it is because of women’s biology that they are aligned with the natural order. The view of nature as the source of raw materials is devalued when compared to culture as the source of knowledge and productivity.

Facts and Myths

Nature in the three scriptures

In 2022 it was estimated that 2.38 billion persons have identified themselves as being Christians, 1.91 billion as Muslims, and 14.6 million as Jews (“Religion by Country 2022”), combining therefore 4.304.600.000 of the world population.

What renders the Abrahamic scriptures truly particular is the claim that a supreme being himself had revealed them unto humanity. In Judaism, Christianity, as well as Islam, it is culminated that God had spoken to Mankind and bestowed upon it a cogent and apodictic template that humanity must ascribe to in order to gain salvation here on earth and in the hereafter. To my purposes, I shall tackle in this second part how Abrahamic religions have represented the concept of environment, and how, concomitantly, this perception has affected the moral and ethical edifice of approximately half of humanity today.

As previously stated, this paper intends to examine related excerpts from the three scriptures that centrally treat the natural environment in tandem with the world’s contemporary environmental challenges. Be that as it may, let us situate the sacred environment in the sacred books.

In the Torah, the backbone of the three religions, the well-known story of creation, Satan’s deceit of Eve, and the banishment from the garden of Eden, represent the lonelinessness and estrangement that Mankind has to endure upon earth and the longing for a lost latitude and heaven. Man had relinquished a God-giving right and he had been therefore condemned to a sever, yet a temporary, damnation on Earth. As De Beauvoire puts it, “He dreams of restfulness in restlessness and of an opaque plenitude that his consciousness would nevertheless still inhabit” (De Beauvoire 194). Salvation and eternal rest come with death. Life is merely a gateway to paradise and everything nature has to offer is dilapidating and decrepit when compared to the everlasting amenities of the hereafter.

In the book of Genesis, it is stated that “And God said, let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth” (1:26). In the same sense, it is also stated that “And God blessed them, and God said unto them, be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.” (1:28). The two versespatentlyresemble: 1. Man’s preference and unique stance in creation. 2. Man’s psychological and ontological reaction to the undeserved eviction from heaven. Man had accepted Nature’s domination as a God-giving decree that
entitles him to control life and all beings for his own interest. 3. Man’s interference in natural law is ultimate. 4. Nature is the Other; Man’s needs are centralized. 5. There is no moral background enshrining natural order or principles of egalitarianism. Briefly, in its 5 major books, the Torah is quite irrelevant towards the concept of environment or any sort of environmental moralism for that matter.

In The New Testament, the ten commandments are given the same significance as in the Torah, here Jesus answers a person who enquired about the key to earthly salvation and eternal life, Jesus responds thus, “Thou shalt do no murder, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, Honour thy father and thy mother: and, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself (Matthew 19:16-19). The original Torahic version superadds four additional commandments: Acknowledging that the Lord is God, he is the only God, not to take his name in vain, and finally remembering the Sabbath and keeping it holy (Exodus 20:2-20:3:6/20:7/20:8-11). The basic commandments that characterize life on earth have to do exclusively with believing in God’s existence and the way human beings sought to treat each another meritoriously. In a relevant passage in which Satan attempts to coax Jesus via offering him all the kingdoms and gardens of the world, Jesus’s response is note-worthy:

Again, the devil taketh him up into an exceeding high mountain, and sheweth him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them; And saith unto him, All these things will I give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me. Then saith Jesus unto him, Get thee hence, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve. Then the devil leaveth him, and, behold, angels came and ministered unto him (Matthew 4:8-9-10-11).

Life on earth is represented as a test by the Lord, and other than that is Satan’ work. A test in which all temptations and predilections must be quelled in order to gain salvation and spiritual ease. In a word, the scripture displays Man’s centeredness and superiority over other living organisms and over life itself, and emphasize how God had made all living things just to serve his provisional needs on Earth. Man is at war. At war with his natural impulsions to yield, also with the irresistible promise of eternal life after death. Without exaggeration, the New Testament tells the story of Man’s entrapment on Earth, the devaluation of its import, and the need to transcend above it. Briefly, in its 27 books, the New Testament is quite irrelevant towards the concept of environment or any sort of environmental moralism for that matter.

In the Quran, nature is invoked in contexts merely to show God’s might and eminence, also to display the triviality and inferiority of life on earth. Here in the book of Al’Ankabut it is opined that “What is the life of this world but amusement and play? but verily the Home in the Hereafter,-that is life indeed, if they but knew” (29:64). Also in the book of Al An’am, mundane life is degraded and overtly linked to divertissement and enjoyment, “And the life of this world is nothing but play and amusement. But far better is the house in the Hereafter for those who are Al-Muttaqun (the pious - see V. 2:2). Will you not then understand?” (6:2). Also in the book of Al-A’raf “And surely, We gave you authority on the earth and appointed for you therein provisions (for your life). Little thanks do you give” (7:10). The Quran represents life on Earth as the Other, giving therefore the ideological alibi to rule over it entirely. Additionally, the Quran gloats over the creation of Heavens and Earth, mountains, and sky, mainly as evidence of God’s existence and as sign of our unimportance:

Say: Is it that ye deny Him Who created the earth in two Days? And do ye join equals with Him? He is the Lord of (all) the Worlds. He set on the (earth), mountains standing firm, high above it, and bestowed blessings on the earth, and measure therein all things to give them nourishment in due proportion, in four Days, in accordance with (the needs of) those who seek (Sustenance). Moreover He comprehended in His design the sky, and it had been (as) smoke: He said to it and to the earth: “Come ye together, willingly or unwillingly.” They said: “We do come (together), in willing obedience. So He completed them as seven firmaments in two Days, and He assigned to each heaven its duty and command. And We adorned the lower heaven with lights, and (provided it) with guard. Such is the Decree of (Him) the Exalted in Might, Full of Knowledge” (Fussilat 41:8-9-10-11).

God wonders at Man’s denial and suspicion of his mighty work. His creation indicates the proof of his existence and monotheism. He created heavens and earth just to show us how insignificant and submissive they are, like human beings. In other contexts, the Quran is compatible with the act of deforestation and animal slavery. Animals and trees are discerned to demonstrate their usefulness and utility to Mankind, as in the following,“(He has created) horses, mules, and donkeys, for you to ride and use for show; and He has created (other) things of which ye have no knowledge” (An-Nahl 16:8), and “Whether ye cut down (O ye Muslim!) The tender palm-trees, or ye left them standing on their roots, it was by leave of Allah, and in order that He might cover with shame the rebellious transgresses (Al-Hashr 59:5). Briefly, in its 114 books, the Quran is quite irrelevant towards the concept of environment or any sort of environmental moralism for that matter.

In fact, the three Abrahamic religions constitute an anthropocentric discourse that has not yet been successful to cope with today’s environmental challenges.

**Recognition of a more inclusive discourse**

As previously mentioned, the three Abrahamic religions fail
to establish an environmental-based discourse. When compared to the ongoing debates in philosophy and humanities, it is found that the scriptures still retain their recondite and esoteric style that lack any theoretical or academic significance. Instead of the Man-in-the-sky image, God is to be perceived rather as a manifestation of the natural world and natural phenomena, and it’s up to human beings to appreciate and admire Creation. This mirrors a critical transformation from a belief in a single God, incarnated in a Man, to a God that exists inside everyone and all around, and is part of the human and nonhuman world. It is about appreciating and admiring God’s beauty through its creation, this understanding is made clear through recognizing the causes of oppression, the dualistic mindset that leads to a global pattern of oppression, that the environment is devalued and exploited in relation to Man, and that, by and by, the sacred environment in the Abrahamic scriptures is not really that sacred.

**Conclusion**

As far as oppression and democracy are concerned, researchers have unveiled the connection of ecology, humans, and the common struggle for liberation. What is interesting to note is that Abrahamic writings fail to offer a new insight on environmental ethics, yet succeed at affirming dualistic perception and treatment of the natural world driven by patriarchy and its hierarchical systems.

This variability of constructing nature suggests that our very conceptions and understanding of our surrounding is shaped by culture. Through writing, we could somehow realize that religion has destroyed everything of value and beauty in nature:

Generally, it can be said that there are three types of struggles: either against forms of domination (ethnic, social, and religious); against forms of exploitation which separate individuals from what they produce; or against that which ties the individual to himself and submits him to others in this way (struggles against subjection, against forms of subjectivity and submission) (Foucault 781).

The best and only solution lies in an ecocentric view to act in the world, a view that relies essentially on shaking the reader’s own assumptions and beliefs and induce them to reconsider their commitment toward themselves and toward nature. The reader becomes no longer apart from the issue, yet they begin to be more entangled in examining issues related to them in person, as Elaine Showalter believes, “We are moving towards a two-tiered system of ‘higher’ and ‘lower’ criticism, the higher concerned with the ‘scientific’ problems of form and structure, the ‘lower’ concerned with the ‘humanistic’ problems of content and interpretation” (Showalter 218). The goal lies in finding a new bridge, a language, a new way of writing and reading, what is a part of our perception of the world, experience, reason, emotion, and suffering. This task does not concern the intelligentsia only, but it also invites the layman, to a new and pressing dialogue with the natural world.

In fact, respecting the environment is about recognizing its difference and distinctness and does not mean assimilating it into the human scale of culture and advancement. Eradicating dualism can be accomplished through acknowledging the concept of difference and continuity, also by establishing a non-anthropocentric relationship with nature. The ultimate panacea therefore lies in destroying phallocentric and male-dominated view of nature that’s deeply ingrained in Abrahamic texts.

**REFERENCES**


---

**Cite this article as**


**Submit your manuscript at**

http://www.academiapublishing.org/ajer