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**RESPONSIBLE STEWARDSHIP OF THE ENVIRONMENT:
ECUMENICAL AND ETHICAL ANTIDOTES FOR
PEACE AND ECO-JUSTICE IN NIGERIA.**

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Abstract

The expectation of humans to live in a world that is peaceful has been a mirage because of their failure to recognise the nexus between justice and peace. It is no doubt that the concept of peace has taken central position in global conferences- political, economic or religious, yet, it seems people have only been paying lip-service to its realisation. Also, they fail to adequately address gender inequality, dehumanizing attitude of some stronger nations towards the weaker ones, and more significantly, the trending issue of the destruction of non-human creatures by humans. These factors among many others have orchestrated the tension that is being experienced in the cosmic order. This paper therefore advocates for mutual

respect among humans irrespective of gender or race and responsible earth stewardship, especially by all Africans, so as to achieve peace in the society. Special emphasis has been placed on eco-justice considering its far-reaching significance to the restoration of peace. Sociological approach was adopted in gathering data that cut across many disciplines.

Keywords: *Responsible Stewardship, Ecumenism, Eco-Justice, Peace, Nigeria.*

Introduction

The abuse of the environment no doubt is a grave threat that would lead to the dying of humanity. The sixties and the seventies were extremely influential in bringing about a greater awareness of ecological issues (Gnanakan, 2014:9). Man was instructed to rule and dominate, but the command has led to exploitation that caused devastation of the environment—a total misrepresentation of the doctrine of creation (Faniran, 2004:165). The African adage perfectly explains this misnomer; “the bug feasting on dog thinks it is killing the dog while in the actual sense it is killing itself”. The meaning in this context is that human exploitation of the ecosystem is actually an abuse on humanity as a whole since our survival grossly depend on the luxuriant environment. As the crown of creation, we have the task of showing care, concern and commitment by nurturing the resources entrusted to us. Although the Genesis 1 command to 'rule and dominate' has portrayed Christianity as the most anthropocentric religion, it does not suggest exploitation and devastation of the environment (White, 1967: 1204). This paper therefore aims at correcting the misrepresentation of the doctrine of creation, for God's word speaks of care, concern and sustenance of the resources entrusted to humans. Furthermore, the paper offers insights for us

to display our commitment as responsible stewards to a Creator who made everything good.

Eco-justice is a great concern because environmental crisis has touched every single area of life and is of increasing concern for survival today. Ecological interruptions are integrated and interrelated realities and not isolated occurrences that only impact local contexts, they are nationwide (Gnanakan, 2014: 11); and they have global consequences. Centuries of uncontrolled exploitation have wrecked an havoc on planet Earth, and both humans and the natural environment as a whole are being threatened (Gnanakan, 2014: 11). The continuing and alarming increase in our population have particularly placed enormous pressure on many nations, Nigeria in particular. Depletion of resources, desertification and deforestation, climatic changes, droughts and freak floods, and other such natural problems endanger all forms of life (Gnanakan, 2014: 16). As the crisis deepens day by day, there are dire consequences adversely affecting everyone. The wealthy ones face new pressures as they depend on the resources of the poor citizens, while the enlightened strugglers seek to have a say in the management of their own resources. The divide increases, conflicts escalate and crisis intensifies; making peace a mirage. With such grave concerns, the world is challenged by the urgent task of coming to grips with fundamental issues. Dealing with superficial symptoms will not help corporate existence, neither can we look only at local situations, as we mentioned, for ecological issues have global implications, penetrating all of human life.

There is the need for a fight against oil spills polluting factories and power plants, raw sewage, toxic dumps, pesticides, freeways, the loss of wilderness, and the extinction of wildlife, because they all deteriorate the environment (Gnanakan, 2014:16). Hence, Eco-justice envisions and values ecology and

justice together, since there will be little environmental health without socio-economic justice, and vice versa (Cobb, 1992: 23). The visions and values of eco-justice ethics express a spiritually grounded moral posture of respect and fairness toward all creation, human and non-human. E-J ethics are shaped by religious insights and scientific knowledge, interwoven with social, economic and political experience. According to Gibson, Eco-justice recognizes in other creatures and natural systems the claims to be respected and valued and taken into account in societal arrangements (Gibson, 1985: 12). Pope Francis's statement corroborates Gibson's assertion when he said that: 'Today we have to realize that a true ecological approach always becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor.' (Pope Francis, *Laudato Si*).

Today, Earth Day is being commemorated, a credit to Gaylord Nelson, then a U.S. Senator who stirred a nationwide environmental protest in the seventies. This was the genesis of modern environmentalism, a movement that condemned Western material ideologies, even the Christian religion (White Jr's, 1966: 184ff), but there has always been biblical environmental concern, which we all need to consistently cultivate today. The Earth Day of 1990 gave a huge boost to recycling efforts worldwide and helped to pave the way for the 1992 United Nations Earth Summit. The Earth Day movement has grown and more than one billion people in 192 countries took part in its 42nd Anniversary in 2012 (Gnanakan, 2014: 14). Bailey recounted thus, "From Cairo to Beijing, Melbourne to Rome, Rio to St. Louis, communities everywhere stood united in their effort to mobilize the Earth..." (Gary Bailey, 2012: *Mobilise the Earth: Speech*).

Twenty years later, the heads of State and Government, met at Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in June 2012, and reaffirmed the Earth Summit goals, resolving "to

work together for a prosperous, secure and sustainable future for our people and our planet.” Part of their resolutions read:

We reaffirm our determination to free humanity from hunger and want through the eradication of all forms of poverty and strive for societies which are just, equitable and inclusive, for economic stability and growth that benefits all. We are committed to making every effort to accelerate progress in achieving the internationally agreed development goals, including the Millennium Development Goals by 2015, thus improving the lives of the poorest people. We are also committed to enhancing cooperation and addressing the ongoing and emerging issues in ways which will enhance opportunities for all, be centered on human development while preserving and protecting the life support system of our common home, our shared planet. Taken together our actions should fill the implementation gaps and achieve greater integration among the three pillars of sustainable development – the economic, the social and the environmental (www.nature.com/news/earth-summit-rio-report-card-1.10764)

In view of the above submissions, we now more than ever need an ethical contract with nature and the earth. And as the then UN General Secretary, Boutros Boutros Ghali posited, the earth has a soul (UNCED, 1992), and to restore it is the fundamental demand of eco-justice.

Definitions of Relevant Concepts

It is needful at this juncture to define some terms in the context as a

background to this study. These include environment, ecology, Ecosystem and sustainability.

Environment – Generally speaking, the environment is everything around us, both biotic and abiotic. Biotic refers to the living, while abiotic connotes the non-living thing component of an eco-system. For our study, the term refers to the complete range of physical and biological conditions that surround us. Humans are all part of a particular environment or surrounding. Ogedegbe categorized environment into social and physical. The former consists of family, community and social institutions, while the latter refers to four components namely: the lithosphere, hydrosphere, atmosphere and biosphere (Ogedegbe, 2010:67).

Ecology – The word “ecology” is more scientific and has an interesting evolution. In its earliest form, ecology concerned itself with the study of the animal and vegetable world, their interrelationship and their environment. It soon became an interdisciplinary branch of biology, the scientific study of the processes relating to the distribution and the interactions between organisms, and the cycles or chains of energy and matter. Ecology is, therefore, a specialized word and refers to the scientific interactions between biotic and abiotic organisms and their environment.

Ecosystem – An ecosystem is an independent self-sustaining system formed by the interaction of individual organisms with each other as well with other components of the environment. Each ecosystem is self-contained and self-regulating. While the whole of our living environment is one ecosystem, smaller units, whether a tropical forest, a lake or a field, even a small pond, are also ecosystems.

Eco-justice- is a word that combines together the concept of ecology and justice. It aims at responsible and just living, by calling humans to help correct ecological as well as economic imbalances. Eco-justice affirms the need for respect and fairness towards both human and non-human creation. The environment is considered in its totality and is seen to include the ecological, physical, social, political and economic spheres; and all humans are seen to have an equal right to enjoy these, so that there is fairness to all concerned. Issues of poverty, social injustice, and environmental degradation all of which are rampant throughout the entire created order are included in the uses covered by the term eco-justice. Ecological justice concerns fairness with respect to common environments, and it is therefore closely connected to the idea of commons. (Alroe, Hugo et al, 2005:191).

Sustainability – Sustainability is basically the ability to sustain. It has to do with the careful handling of the natural environment for the survival both of humans and non-humans, as well as needed resources. Humans and the rest of nature must exist in harmony. The often quoted Brundtland Commission of the United Nations that met in 1987 defined “sustainable development as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (www.un-documents.net/ocf-02.htm Our Common Future: Towards Sustainable Development: 1986:1). However, this definition, based on just human needs, was later broadened to include environmental, social equity and economic concerns – the “three pillars” of sustainability. The three pillars – referred to by business houses as the “triple bottom line” – have forced us to look at sustainability in far more interconnected terms to see the people, planet and profits as one whole, and not just our needs (Gnanakan, 2014:14).

Different Perspectives of Ecology

Lack of proper understanding of Earth Stewardship and non-application of the principles of a global ethic which demands that for the sake of global peace and welfare, both humans and the earth must be treated humanely resulted in the existence of despair and monumental chaos that is being experienced today. Proper understanding of the place of humans in God's creation is required as panacea to the elusiveness of peace in the global environment. The question that is germane to this discourse is whether humans are part of the creation or at the centre of it.

Three extreme positions have evolved from this concern, namely; the anthropocentric view of ecology which validates dominion mantra of humans over other creatures, the environ-centric ecology which emphasises respect for the ecosystem even to a point of deifying them, and of course, the equilibristic ecology which sues for friendly disposition of man towards the environment (Oladejo, 2017:viiiiff).

The proponents of the first position hinged their view on the authority bestowed on man to dominate and subdue the earth as stated in Gen 1: 26. Therefore, for them, man is in charge of this planet earth. But arguing against this position from exegetical perspective, Ojo posited that, though God created mankind as the crown of His created effort, the same Bible in Gen. 2:15 emphatically states that, mankind was given the authority to tend and care for other creation (Ojo, 2017:108). This validates the affirmation in Ps. 24 that, 'the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof.....' In other words, God has ultimate rule over the earth; He only delegates some of His authority to the humans who are expected to act as responsible stewards towards other creatures that share the planet with them. The human race should not be violent or wasteful in its stewardship so as to avoid environmental pollution and depletion of the ozone layer among other threats to the peace of the earth.

Corroborating this submission, Hall averred that the biblical injunction to have dominion should be interpreted etymologically which means humanity should play the role of servants, keepers and priests in relation to other elements of creation (Bamidele, 2017:133). Hall also argued that Biblical dominion can be viewed from the monarchical structure of ancient Israel where Israel's kings had covenantal responsibilities to care for those over whom they ruled, not in the exploitative or despotic or destructive manners. Just as the kings are intermediaries between God and His people, humans should serve as intermediaries between God and His creation.

The environ-centric ecology which is the second extreme positions states that the ecosystem should be treated with respect to the level of deifying the environment. In some parts of Europe and Asia where this belief is prevalent, certain restrictions are placed on humans in their relationship with other creatures. Even grass and flowers are prayed to for forgiveness by humans. Finally is the equilibristic ecology, which seeks for credible relationship between the humans and non-humans.

Ecumenical Reflections on Eco-Justice

The last position which is the equilibristic ecology was sufficiently addressed by the World Council of Churches and Joint World Alliance of Reformed Churches in their theology of life and climate justice (Melisande and Werner, 2013:251). From the outcome of the consultation, the following arguments were advanced in order to stem the growing ecological crisis: the groaning of creation, the vocation of human beings in the community of creatures, the importance of land to life, the fundamentalism of the Sabbath to both humans and land, the intrinsic value of every creature and the challenge of environmental ethics.

The ecumenical consultation in its memorandum of 2004 affirmed that the offer of salvation is not exclusively limited to humans but the whole of creation (Melisande and Werner, 2013:254). This argument is hinged on Romans 8: 22 which states that, the whole of creation is groaning in travail and is expecting God's intervention that will usher in the 'new creation through which ecological restoration and justice would be realised. For many Christians, this promise of liberation of the cosmic order has been realised through the first advent of Jesus Christ, but many other Christians still believe that the consummation of the hope will happen much later.

This Spirit inspired many of them to interact in a friendly manner with wild beasts and natural phenomena. St Francis of Assisi for example called the sun and the moon as brother and sister and even went to the extent of preaching to the birds (Melisande and Werner, 2013: 254). This friendly disposition of humans is in support of equilibristic view of ecology which maintains human's responsible stewardship of the environment. In addition, the second issue raised at the consultation i.e. the vocation of human beings in the community of creatures stressed that although human beings are unique among God's creatures, yet they should always recognise the fact that they are part of the whole of creation. The fact that they are created in the image of God, *imago-Dei* does not confer on them the authority to act as God because such authority can only be exercised by the creator of the universe Himself. Man's creation in the image of God only confers on human beings the daunting task to be God's *vicarii* or representatives on earth.

Therefore, humans should be careful in exercising authority by relating to other creatures responsibly. Evidences abound in the Bible that established the fact that humans are part of the whole creation. The establishment of God's blessings in Gen. 1 and covenant according to Gen.9 were with all

creatures. In several Psalms, all animals, and even the sun and the moon participate in the praise of God. It should be realised that God gave the earth the creating power; power of growth.

At this juncture, the discussion dovetails into the importance of the land to life. Right from the Old Testament dispensation, the land or soil has been an indispensable item to human survival hence the close relationship of the people with the soil. This is seen in many scriptural texts and laws with the indication that the land requires much care to bring forth the harvest necessary for survival. In that wise, the Israelites decided to treat the land and its non-human inhabitants with respect and care in order to avoid the negative effect that disobedience to environment laws has on their covenant community. For example, the Isaiah narrative presents a direct causal relationship between human environmental exclusion and ecological degradation thus:

The earth is mourning, withering; the heavens are pining away the earth. The earth is defiled under the inhabitants' feet, for they have transgressed the law, violated the precept, broken the everlasting covenant (Isaiah 5:8-10cf; 24:1-6)

In addition to the view stated above, it must be stressed that the institution and celebration of the Sabbath had implications for the relationship of human beings to the rest of creations. The law of Sabbath which commands rest was not directed only to people but also to animals and the soil. Both the Sabbath and the Jubilee express a deep concern for the restoration of justice among the people and the maintenance of the fertility of the soil.

Arguments from Christian Ethics

Systematically, Christian Ethics has lent credence to this discussion on

equilibristic ecology. Out of many variables highlighted, this paper tries to limit its focus on two: the intrinsic value of every creature and the challenge of environmental ethics. The former emphasized the inter-dependence that exists between human and non-human creatures. The fact that human beings are created at the end of the creation process underlines the truth that they are not only part of creation, but depend on it. They should therefore recognise the worth and value of life in other creatures. Since this life is derived from God, an evidence of immanent quality He bestowed on His creation, intrinsic value of each creature has its origin in the relationship between God and creation. Therefore, respecting the value of all creatures is a pre-condition for living in harmony with creation. This means that humans can only experience peace on earth if the environment experiences peace.

The second point from Christian ethics is environmental ethics which questions the existing ethical structures that have been confined to human world to the exclusion of non-humans. Therefore, issues like "common good", rights and duties, exclusively refer to human society. There is an advocacy for widening the frame of ethical considerations so that non-humans existential realities such as the suffering of animals could be discussed alongside human pain.

Right Attitude towards the Environment

The golden statement of Martin Luther King Jr. that "an individual has not started living until he can rise above the narrow confines of his individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity" is germane at this point (www.wisdomquotes.com/martin-luther-king). This statement strengthens the definition of ecology which points to the fact that all members of an ecological community are interconnected in an enormous and intricate network of relationships. The core concepts of ecology depict the integrated patterns and processes by which nature sustains life. Right relationship is

therefore germane to a peaceful environment as individual members derive their essential identity and their existence from within this relationship.

Social ecology attempted a solution we ought to pay attention to. A leading voice Murray Bookchin, proposed a society based on ecological principles as an organic unity in diversity, free of hierarchy and based on mutual respect for the interrelationship of all aspects of life (Bookchin, 2007:1-2). Social ecology emphasize that the destiny of human life goes hand in hand with the destiny of the non-human world. Social ecologists believe that things like racism, sexism, and the third world exploitation are a product of the same mechanisms that cause devastation of the ecosystem (Naess, 1989:48). Social ecology therefore aims to replace human mentality of dominion with an ethics of *complementarity*. Such a set of ethic reflects our true role, which is to create a fuller, richer environment for all beings. In other words, social ecologists propose an egalitarian society based on mutual aid, caring and communitarian values (Gnanakan, 2014:78). People in this new society would appreciate that the interests of the collectives are inseparable from those of each individual. This would enable humans to see their role in the natural world as creative, supportive, and deeply appreciative of the needs of non-human beings with their capacities to produce a richer, and more creative and developmental whole—not as a 'dominant' species, but as a supportive one.

With the proposal from social ecology, it is possible to arrive at social and environmental harmony in the Nigerian space, even amidst our prejudiced religious, cultural and social diversities. When relationships to the world and to nature are seen within the context of relationship to God, there is renewed hope amid the increasingly fragmenting world that is being witnessed. This is what defines Theo-centrism; a system that makes humans to see

themselves as representatives of God, with responsible and caring attitudes for all in the ecosystem.

Bases for Eco-justice

Mahatma Ghadhi's quote captured our thought on equity and justice a great deal—'There is enough on this planet for everyone's needs but not for everyone's greed'. This quote, taken as a principle, is basic to a commitment to eco-justice. Eco-justice is a call for recognition of our solidarity with all people and creatures (Gnanakan, 2014: 79). This will lead to equity in managing and sustaining community resources for the benefit of all. But what is equity? It is about fairness. The United Nations in 1973 shared a social contract that gives all human beings equal access to human rights, with equal rights to security and habitable environment. This ensures the right to clean water, unpolluted air and basic facilities that each country can afford (Gnanakan, 2014: 76). Therefore, before a nation begins to allow its resources to be exported for profit, its own people should have access adequately to facilities such as food, water, shelter, clothing and health care. Nigeria should learn from this in the wake of violence that often results between the 'privileged' Fulani herdsmen and the poor communities they exploit and often maim because of their rich *pastureralia*. The illegal exploitation of their God given pasture suffers continual devastation and loss of countless number of lives, particularly in the middle-belt region of Nigeria.

Another basis for eco-justice is that injustice breeds poverty. They are interrelated. Wherever there is poverty, it is directly or indirectly linked to the distortion of justice. Whether it is in human living conditions, with diseases and malnutrition, or a predatory of the environmental resources, the roots can be traced down to unfair practices that have dispossessed people and the environment of basic rights and privileges. The basic issue most times is, one

party demands its rights, without consideration of the rights for the other party. Aldo Leopold's often quoted maxim fits in here—'A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community; it is wrong when it tends otherwise' (Leopold, 1986: 240).

There is injustice against the poor masses through the exploitation of the environment by the rich. The rich and the privileged unjustly exploit situation of poverty, and in doing so have contributed to the further exploitation of the environment. And the poor when exploited are forced to become exploiters themselves. Many times, the poor look into their environment and while under the pressure of survival use their endowed natural resources as barter to alleviate their poverty and survive their desperate condition. The fact must be stated that humans are responsible for the misery and poverty in the world, as the social system that is practiced today is anti-ecological. An ecological culture that Leonardo Boff, a Latin American theologian advocates should be strengthened: an awareness of the stewardship we have as human beings for the survival of the planet and of animal and plant life (Leopold, 1986).

Furthermore, there is no doubt that multitude affirmed that God is Creator and that there is a strong bond between Him and creation, but a true interrelationship between humans and the rest of his environment is not widely accepted, and even among humans, it is hard to maintain. Ecology, we have seen, implies interconnected relationships within the natural order, and when these relationships are upset, the result is chaos. This is the root cause for the environmental disaster today. Creation was brought out of chaos, but it seems humans have driven creation back into chaos.

The problem the world faces today is basically the interruption of the complex balance within God's creation. For very selfish and commercial purposes without a rethink to replace them where necessary, tropical forests

have been ravaged, natural habitats have been populated by humans and this has destroyed organisms essential to the ecological balance. This has not only affected the local environment but also neighboring environments as well. Rivers have been dammed, and a chain of consequences has dislocated people from their environment. Humans have dumped their garbage, even burned it, and have polluted the environment causing global and not merely local and national problems. Rash and reckless human interruptions have severely disrupted the natural order.

Man has refused to properly reckon his interrelatedness with nature whenever he reads from the Holy Scriptures, "Dust you are and to dust you will return" (Genesis 3:19). This should now be seen beyond the terms of the briefness of human existence or the brevity of life, so we may grasp its fullest significance. When seen in terms of the inseparable link between nature and humans, we will recognize an obscure interdependence, both for our well-being and for the well-being of our environment. The question is, *if I will return to dust, why do I act as if I am no dust?* Therefore, humans must approach solutions for the ecological crisis through a closer look at these intricate interrelationships within God's creation. This will result in recognizing the root issues for sustainable solutions. Relationship with creation needs to be seen in terms of a common identity.

There is a commonness shared between humans and all non-human creation, because both have undergone the same creative process. In the context of the ecological crisis, we are reminded that nature and humans belong to one another in an integral relationship within intricate designs. If humans have an edge over creation, it is primarily in the sense of a responsibility to respect this integrity. Here is a sobering thought: creation can survive without humans, but we cannot last long without drawing from creation's treasures!

Conclusion

The point so far presented is that while it is incontrovertible truth that God made all things good and entrusted humankind with the responsibility to care for creation (Gen 2: 4b-9), greed and self-centeredness on the part of humans have brought exploitation and destruction on the earth and its creatures. The exploitation of the natural world and the misuse of its finite resources disclose a pattern of violence that often benefits some people at the expense of many. Excessive consumption of fossil fuels and limited resources has done a great devastation to the planet Earth and its people and resulted in climate change with evidences of global warming, the rise of sea levels, the intensity of droughts and impoverishment of inhabitants of coastal community. Unfortunately, about 80% of people who contribute the least to global warming are the most vulnerable populations in the world.

This groaning and global crisis could have been avoided if humans recognize the fact that they are interdependent; each of creature depends on the well-being of the whole. Therefore, human beings should not only have respect for the community of people alone but community of other living beings-animals, plants, and for the preservation of Earth, the air, water and social. Therefore, the World Council of Churches interpreted lack of care for creation as injustice to ecology and in its Vancouver Assembly of 1983 shifted focus from social justice to eco-justice. This informed the formation of committee on Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation.

There should be a change in mind-set whereby humans would shun the dominant spirit and see themselves as part of creation entrusted with the responsibility to replenish the earth. This reorientation will broker peace with the Earth and usher in a new global order. This is the whole drive of eco-justice which guarantees peace for our now and future world.

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