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Contextual and global environmental ethics : interreligious perspectives

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Item Type	Book chapter
Authors	Stückelberger, Christoph
Publisher	Dharmaram Publications
Rights	All rights reserved
Download date	2026-07-15 17:34:26
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/223556

Chapter 2

Contextual and Global Environmental Ethics: Interreligious Perspectives

2.1. Interreligious Perspectives of Caring for the Earth

Caring for oneself, for other human beings, and for non-human life is deeply rooted in all world religions. Even though the theological frame may be very different, the ethical conclusions have much in common.

The *Christian-Jewish* view of being a guest on earth is not the only one which calls for caring and carefulness. The contrary is true. Most religions and philosophies include in one way or the other the notion of carefulness, but they do it in different ways and with remarkable differences in practical consequences.

In *Hinduism*, “There is a spiritual consciousness of the universal harmony and a sense of responsibility towards the wellbeing of all in the Indian psyche. Protection of environment, thus, becomes an ethical imperative.”¹ The *Bhagavad Gita* calls human beings for a “passionate concern to bring about the welfare of all beings” (12:4; 3:9-13). Ahimsa as the “art of Dharma” is non-violence and caring,

¹ Nalkara, “Pauline Cosmic Christology and Indian Eco-Spirituality,” 266.

doing no harm to any living entity which is the way towards Brahman. But as in all religions, this way is difficult to go and many Hindus violate the “Earthly Body of God”² as many Christians do not respect the Cosmic Christ and violate his Body. “The Difficulty of Being Good”³ is evident.

As it is in Hinduism, the wonderful concept of ahimsa (*carefulness*, mindfulness, non-violence) is a core value and attitude in Buddhist environmental ethics. *Karuna* (sympathy, empathy) with all creatures is the most important virtue in Buddhism, because it is the virtue of Buddha. Buddhists have always been strong in caring for creation.⁴ But they often did it in an individualistic way, not taking into account the structural, economic and political reasons for environmental destruction.

In *Confucianism*, which is more a philosophy than a religion, the virtues of *respect*, *benevolence* (*Ren*) and *mutual benefit* (*Pingdeng Huli?*) are deeply rooted and influence the Chinese society. They offer the firm

² Lance E. Nelson, *Purifying the Earthly Body of God: Religion and Ecology in Hindu India*, New York: State University of New York Press, 1998.

³ The Indian former manager and philosopher Gurcharan Das analyzes, in his bestseller, the famous Hindu Epic Mahabharata in order to find orientation for modern ethical business practices. Gurcharan Das, *The Difficulty of Being Good: On the Subtle Art of Dharma*, New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2009. See the discussion on Ahimsa in pages 249-255.

⁴ Otto Bischofberger, “Mensch und Natur: Die Sicht der Religionen des Ostens” in Otto Bischofberger, Christoph Stückelberger, et al, *Umweltverantwortung aus religiöser Sicht*, 33-62, Freiburg/Zürich: Paulusverlag/Theologischer Verlag, 1988.

foundation for harmonious relations between human beings, in family, business, and nation, with fairness as reciprocity, with coexistence and respecting the middle way of harmony. This wonderful teaching has only to be enlarged from human relations to relations with the whole creation. If fairness, respect, and harmony become the fundamental values in the relation to soil, natural resources, air, forests, and water, then environmental ethics becomes a Confucian face.

The view of human beings being guests on earth is similar in Islamic faith as in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Allah as the owner of the earth and humankind as stewards, the critic of greed and the virtue of modesty are common to all three monotheistic religions.⁵

In all religions, *Eco-Feminism* is a growing perspective. The feminist thrust on care and household economy is part of it as the feminist emphasis of caring for the body.⁶

The problem of all world religions and of philosophies is that they often deny and neglect environmental concerns, blinded by the industrial and technical progress of the 19th

⁵ Ibrahim Özdemir, "An Islamic Perspective on Environmental Ethics," 2007 [online]: http://www.nur.org/en/nurcenter/nurlibrary/An_Islamic_Perspective_of_Environmental_Ethics_469.

⁶ For example, see "Sacred Immanence: Reflections of Ecofeminism in Hindu Tantra" in *Purifying the Earthly Body of God: Religion and Ecology in Hindu India*, ed. Lance E. Nelson, 89-132, New York: State University of New York Press, 1998; Anne Primavesi, *From Apocalypse to Genesis: Ecology, Feminism and Christianity*, Turnbridge Wells: Burns and Oates, 1991; Naval Ammar, "Are Islamic Thinking and Ecofeminism Possible?" *Ocak* 3, 2010 [online]: <http://ecologyandislam.wordpress.com>.

and 20th centuries. They all must not deny their core message and values – be it respect, non-violence, justice, or carefulness; they all, however, have to enlarge these values from the human sphere to the whole creation.

As a sign of hope, all of them – not at all in the same speed, clarity, and decisiveness! – rediscovered and still have to rediscover the broader community of creatures which includes not only human beings, but the whole creation. Hindu, Buddhist, Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Jain, and Confucian environmental ethics have been more systematically developed during the last thirty years. They all are needed and have to join hands in order to overcome the huge environmental challenges such as climate change, which threaten humanity and the earth as our common house.

2.2. Global and Contextual Perspectives

Today's globalized and interdependent world needs common values for interaction and joint action. At the same time, it needs the respect for diversity as a gift, beauty and richness of this humanity. Environmental ethics has to be global and contextual. Therefore, contextual environmental ethics exists in almost all countries and all continents.⁷

⁷ In addition to the works cited, for Africa see, for example, Samson K. Gitau, *The Environmental Crisis: A Challenge for African Christianity*, Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2000; J.N.K. Mugambi and Vähäkangas, eds., *Christian Theology and Environmental Responsibility*, Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2001; Joseph O.Y. Mante, *Theological and Philosophical Roots of our Ecological Crisis*, Accra 2004; Aidan G. Msafiri, *Towards a Credible Environmental Ethics for Africa: A Tanzanian Perspective*, Nairobi, 2007. For Latin America: Ivone Gebara, *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and*

However, what is the relation between the two?⁸ “*Global ethics* is an inclusive approach towards common binding values, guiding principles, personal attitudes, and common action across cultures, religions, political, and economic systems and ideologies. Global ethics is grounded in the ethical recognition of inalienable human dignity, freedom, decision, personal and social responsibility, and justice. Global ethics acknowledges the interdependence of all human and non-human beings and extends the basic moral attitudes of care and compassion to our world. Global ethics identifies trans-boundary problems and contributes to their solution.

Global ethics fosters public awareness of those fundamental values and principles. They are the foundation on which the universal consensus on human rights is built. Human rights are the most tangible and legally binding expression of this ethical vision. Global ethics fosters trust among human beings and strengthens caring and action for global

Liberation, Minneapolis, 1999; René Krüger, et al, *Vida plena para toda la creación: Iglesia, globalización neoliberal y justicia económica*, Buenos Aires, 2006; For Asia: Purna Chandra Jena, *Masters or Stewards: A Theological Reflection on Ecology and Environment*, Delhi/Nagpur, 2003; Karel Philemon Erari, *Our Land, Our Life: The Relation of People and Land in Ecology: Irian Jaya as a Theological Problem* (A Study in Eco-Theology in Connection with the Malanesian Perspective), Indonesia, 1997; David M. Kummer, *Deforestation in the Postwar Philippines*, Manila, 1992; For global collections: David Hallmann, ed., *Ecotheology: Voices from South and North*, Geneva/New York, 1994; King-Tak Ip, *Environmental Ethics: Intercultural Perspectives*, New York: Rodopi, 2009.

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The following discussion, mainly written by the author, is quoted from *Globethics.net Principles on Sharing Values across Cultures and Religions*, published by Globethics.net, Geneva, 2009. www.globethics.net.

environmental protection.

Contextual ethics takes seriously the identity of persons and institutions in their local, cultural, religious, economic, and political contexts. Global ethics needs to be local and contextual in order to have an impact on individual action and societal structures. On the other hand, contextual ethics becomes isolationist if it remains local and is not linked to global ethics.

Contextual ethics appreciates and respects diversity in its different forms as social, political, cultural, religious, and bio-diversity. There is an enormous richness in diversity. It may decrease vulnerability and be a source of sustainability.

Contextual ethics contributes to global ethics. Together they can lead to unity in diversity. All cultures and religions can contribute to global values. For example, the contribution of African values to global values includes that all of reality is a continuum, from the spiritual to the human, to fauna, flora, and the inanimate world. Therefore, according to this vision, injuring nature is unethical. This implies responsibilities towards non-human living beings and the inanimate universe as well as the continuum between generations that have gone before and that come after us.

Global and contextual ethics are two poles which challenge each other and inseparably belong together. Global and contextual ethics have to consider power structures. Global ethics can be abused for domination over other cultures, religions, and values. Contextual ethics can be abused to defend traditional privileges or power. On global as well as on local level, 'power over others' tends to be oppressive,

‘power with and for others’ tends to be empowering and nurturing. Power as ‘power from’ (e.g., power from God, from the people through election) can be abused to justify oppressive structures and practices. It can also be used responsibly as an empowering power, serving the needy and, thus, responding to the origin of power.