

**"TOWARDS RESPONSIBLE STEWARDSHIP
OF CREATION
AN ASIAN CHRISTIAN APPROACH"**

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I. PREAMBLE

Ecological issues are paramount among the most urgent to be addressed in our time. Since the industrial revolution, the general intensity of human conduct onto the environment has exceeded its potential for restoration over a vast area of earth’s surface. It leads to irreversible changes in the eco-system. The resource base of a region and the quality of its air, water and land represent a common heritage for all generations. Their destruction and manipulation in pursuit of short-term gains compromise the opportunity for future generations. The search for a solution to this problem cannot be only at political, economic, technological or ethical levels, but requires also a contribution from the religious, spiritual and theological perspectives.

Today it is 'fashionable' to be associated with terms like "eco-friendly", "green living", "going green", "sustainability" and much more. These are used in advertising, as slogans and labelled on products of all types. The images that we come across and words that we hear are on almost every product we use, and on many occasions, may be so overused that no one really pays attention to their meaning.

The word "ecology" became popular in the 1960s when people stated recognising that we live in a planet of finite resources. Over the course of years, the word "crisis" became attached to the problem of ecology. One activist describes the area of crises as follows: *overstressed planet, excess energy consumption and global warming*. In other words "natural resources are diminishing; global warming is causing species loss, increased flooding and hurricanes; energy sources are diminishing and earth's capacity for a sustainable future looks bleak." We are often reminded that the ecological reality needs to be addressed in concrete ways. In more ways than one, all of us want to preserve this planet of ours so that it can be passed down to the next generation.

Some authors have gone on to say that the source of our environmental problems is religious in nature. In the past, Christianity with its emphasis on human salvation and dominion over nature, made it possible to exploit nature. Genesis 1:28 states that God gave Adam dominion over creatures. If this claim has any truth in it, then theology certainly has a responsibility to put right what may have been misconstrued and taken out of context for whatever the purpose may have been.

Just like in many sciences, ecological terms such as "eco-theology", "eco-Christology", "theology of creation" and even "eco-spirituality" have found their way into Christian theological reflection and vocabulary. The purpose of this paper is to explore an Asian Christian approach to the issue of ecology.

This is a study undertaken by the theologians of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conference – Office of Theological Concerns reflecting on the issue of ecology and its impact on Asia. The

structure of this document is presented in the following manner. It begins with the realities in Asia with regard to ecology and its impact; and thereafter presents briefly the position of some major Asian traditions. The core of this study is to explore the issue of ecology from a biblical and theological perspective. This study concludes with some recommendations as to how the Church in Asia can concretely work towards protecting God's creation and promoting a spirit of responsible stewardship.

II. ASIAN REALITIES

For the peoples and cultures of Asia, the ecological system plays an integral part of their daily lives as it provides them with sustenance, protection, and also a sense of the Divine. Asia is blessed with vast forests, beaches, mountains, rivers, and many other aspects that maintain the eco system. They not only provide for humankind but also for the many other species that depend on them for their survival. A recent study shows that "with its huge human population and enormous biological resources, Asia's ecological conditions will continue to be crucial to the overall quality of the global environment. Many of the global ecological connections may be perceived in terms of biodiversity and biogeochemical cycles. As the largest continent in the world, Asia is a major source of global biodiversity."

Every day we come across impending warnings that the survival of human beings is in question due to climate change and global warming. Recently, a spate of unprecedented natural disasters occurred in every part of the world. When we look into the causes of these natural disasters, it may be more correct not to define them as just 'natural' disasters, but as 'unnatural' natural disasters. Climate changes derived from the 'glasshouse (greenhouse) effect' led to abnormal expansion of tropical storms, ending up with monstrous super typhoons, super hurricanes, and super cyclones.

On the other hand, in a blind pursuit of profit, we have lost the feeling of awe and sense of reverence for life. Greed means humans have become obsessed with the logic of productivity

and efficiency. These days the logic of materialism lays bare its arrogance to disturb and modify the natural flow created by God. It is a pity that the logic of materialism comes prior to the value of human life; as human greed doesn't know when and how to stop despite countless warnings from Mother Nature.

In spite of this great gift from God, the eco-system in Asia has been at risk over the past decades. There are many reasons as to why this is happening. It will not be possible to list here all the probable causes but to only highlight some of the more pronounced issues.

In many of the countries in Asia, due to rapid urban development, very little consideration is given to the environment. In the race to be a developed nation, forests are depleted, rivers and seas are polluted, and there is very little concern for sustainable development. This is indeed a cause for deep concern. Governments have almost no desire to curb the rapid development with laws and regulations that will protect the environment and therefore many entrepreneurs exploit these resources. These so-called developments are often driven by profit and therefore many people are blinded to the need to care for and protect the environment due to profitable development. Linked to profitable development is also corruption. There is no denying that corruption is rampant in Asia and therefore there are greater opportunities for exploitation. Therefore, even though there may be legislation to protect the environment, these laws are often not enforced due to corruption that exists in the system.

We are also confronted with the problem of a lack of awareness and education at many levels. In many of our countries, ecological literacy is not part of the education system and therefore does not become part of our educational and lived practise. The value and the well-being of the Earth are very rarely discussed when educating young people. Even if it is discussed, there is a lack of will to carry it out to completion. In many of the countries in Asia, people are indifferent towards ecological issues. There is a general sense of apathy because the

attitude is that as long as it does not affect them directly, the individual is not concerned. This lack of a sense of responsibility to nature and compounded by the fact that there is very little enforcement, results in many people being unconcerned about the ecological damage that can be done.

It is a fact that the population in Asia has increased in recent decades. In the light of this increase, urbanisation has transformed the natural landscape in many parts of Asia. Rapid urbanisation in many of the countries of Asia has not helped the ecological system that maintained certain equilibrium in the past. Connected to urbanisation is also the problem of environmental pollution. Deforestation, atmospheric pollution, and improper waste management are acknowledged as a wide spread problem in Asia. These are indeed issues that many governments and corporations are not concerned enough about. Political and economic interests often blur the vision for ecological preservation.

The above realities are not exhaustive. However they do demonstrate that the ecological problems confronting Asia today are varied and require not only our attention but also a rapid response to prevent further degradation. Asia has indeed a rich religious and cultural tradition revolving around the preservation of the eco system. We need to rely on these sources to promote greater reflection and analysis.

III. ASIAN RESOURCES

Not only are many of the major religions of the world born in Asia, but also the variety of cultural traditions provides us a foundation to discuss ecological issues. In this section, we will take a look at the teachings of the major religions in Asia on ecology. The purpose of this section is to show that ecological issues are shared concerns among many peoples of Asia, and that many of the major religions and spiritualities in Asia share a common heritage.

A. RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS

a) Christianity

One of the first assumptions of the Bible is that God is the creator of the whole universe. The entire world is God's creation, and its continuing life and preservation are thoroughly dependent upon God. Likewise, man who is part of God's creation, is also dependent upon Him for his life and survival. In this regard, the Bible does not recognise or make a distinction between such categories as "world of nature" and "humanity". The whole sweep of the existing realities is "creation". The creation category unites both humanity and the world of nature with God as the centre of this unity. Without the divine element, the creation category does not come into existence. Creator God, humankind, and the world of nature are thus united and brought into organic wholeness through the act of creation. The doctrine of Creation teaches that the whole of creation is a sacred gift. God creates, sustains, and preserves all life, both animate and inanimate. And in this regard, humanity is no different from the rest of God's creations. The creation saga is a poetic expression which proclaims the divine intention and love behind the act of creation.

The Genesis story begins by affirming the goodness of God by affirming the goodness of everything He has created. God is good in Himself and good in everything He desires and does for His creatures – humankind and the world. God's goodness is attested in the on-going creation. The creation story also tells us how humankind and the world may individually and collectively participate and share in this divine goodness. The continual goodness was experienced in maintaining a harmonious and creative interdependent relationship within the cosmic community, a symbiotic and systemic relationship. Psalm 104, more than anything else, speaks about this interdependent order and the symbiotic relationship.

Secondly, the Bible also confirms that the purpose of creation is to proclaim God's glory. The divine life is actively manifested in and through the created world. Therefore it would not be right

to deal with the world of nature merely in materialistic terms. Nature has its own intrinsic value, teleology, and destiny, and humanity is called to recognise this fact and respond to it with respect and reverence.

Thirdly, Biblical writers were keen to give a theological explanation for the presence of evil in the whole created order. They identified evil as a breakdown in the on-going creative relationship that existed between God and humankind, thus introducing death and decay. The ecological crisis we experience is a direct outcome of this failure and a sure sign of this breakdown.

And finally, Biblical writers go on to propose a way out of this cosmic disintegration and deterioration. They affirm that restoration of the broken down system is possible. The human predicament and all contemporary crises are not beyond divine redemption. And the deteriorating trend within the cosmic community is reversible. And this possibility is offered through an active faith in Jesus Christ, the very God who authored the whole of creation and came into the world in human form to restore the working model once again. The emerging new cosmic order is made up of transformed humanity within a renewed universe of a new heaven and earth -- a world free from strife, tension, pollution, sickness, poverty, deterioration, and ultimately free of death itself. Humanity is called upon to actively participate and share in restoring this disintegrating cosmic order, thus ushering in the Kingdom of God. And it is up to the present generation either to accept or reject this offer of Biblical promise of cosmic salvation and restoration in Christ.

b) Hinduism

Hindus are known for their search of the absolute. Hindu philosophers have reached lofty metaphysical heights which merit appreciation. In Philosophy, the living schools of Hinduism generally speak of some form of unity, but not necessarily identity, of the soul with the Supreme Reality, which in different traditions is named in various ways: *Brahman*, *Vishnu*, *Shiva*, etc. On the one hand in the *Kevaladvaita Vedanta*

School (to use its technical name, since there are various forms of *Advaita*) there is only One Reality and everything else is illusion. They of course follow the path of knowledge (*jnana*). But they also ascribe a role to the path of devotion (*bhakti*): by itself, devotion does not lead to liberation (*moksha*). It is not necessary to practice *bhakti*, but it can help to purify the soul so that the soul can practice the path of *jnana*.

It is the exponents or followers of this School who say that the path of knowledge is for the advanced, and other practices like *bhakti*, etc. are for the common people. It permits pluralism on the practical level or the level of ignorance, but on the absolute level there is only One Reality.

In this way, they reconcile in a limited and partial way, the path of knowledge with that of devotion, and monism (on the absolute level) and pluralism (on the practical level). However, this is only one of the many of philosophical schools in Hinduism. Though this school is not the main school yet it seems to enjoy prestige among intellectuals. In reality, there are several other schools that claim that the path of devotion is the best path to salvation and they say that the path of knowledge leads only to a lower form of liberation. In fact, the neutral Brahman, who is the Supreme and Only Being for *Kevaladvaita Vedanta*, is put on a lower level, just as *Kevaladvaita Vedanta* puts *Vishnu* or *Shiva*, etc. on a lower (and even unreal) level. The vast majority of Hindus actually believe in and practice *bhakti* as the path to salvation. Hence there are differing schools with greatly differing understandings of God, humans, other beings and the metaphysical and other (e.g., spiritual) relationships between these (God, humans and other beings).

The vast majority of Hindus emphasise love of, and devotion to, God which is known as – *BHAKTI*. And they express distaste for non-dual unity and identity with the Absolute. This practice of devotion is extended to and embraces inanimate objects such as plants, stones, water, fire, rivers and trees. Animals such as snakes, monkeys and cows become objects of worship and adoration.

The following hymn from the *Atharva-veda*, XII, 1, is one of the most ancient testimonies to the Hindu attitude to the cosmos. The hymn brings out the beauty, splendour, order and harmony of nature and environment in the context of faith and spirituality. There is a personal and dialogical relationship with the earth which has to be upheld. However, there does seem to be a tendency towards sacralisation of the earth and elements therein for their eventual inclusion into the Hindu pantheon. Since the entire earth hymn is too long, a few select verses are cited here below:

1. Truth, greatness, universal order (*rita*), strength, consecration, creative fervour (*tapas*), spiritual exaltation (*brahma*), the sacrifice, support the earth. May this earth, the mistress of that which was and shall be, prepare for us a broad domain!
2. The earth that has heights, and slopes, and great plains, that supports the plants of manifold virtue, free from the pressure that comes from the midst of men, she shall spread out for us, and fit herself for us!
3. The earth upon which the sea, and the rivers and the waters, upon which food and the tribes of men have arisen, upon which this breathing, moving life exists, shall afford us precedence in drinking!
4. The earth whose are the four regions of space, upon which food and the tribes of men have arisen, which supports the manifold breathing, moving things (things), shall afford us cattle.
5. The earth upon which of old the first men unfolded themselves, upon which the gods overcame the Asuras, shall procure for us (all) kinds of cattle, horses, and fowls, good fortune and glory!
6. The earth that supports all, furnishes wealth, the foundation, the golden-breasted resting-place of all living creatures, she that supports Agni Vaisvânara (the fire), and mates with Indra, the bull, shall furnish us with property!

7. The broad -earth, which the sleepless gods ever attentively guard, shall milk for us precious honey, and, besprinkle us with glory!
8. That earth which formerly was water upon the ocean (of space), which the wise (seers) found out by their skilful devices; whose heart is in the highest heaven, immortal, surrounded by truth, shall bestow upon us brilliancy and strength, (and place us)in supreme sovereignty!
9. That earth upon which the attendant waters jointly flow by day and night unceasingly, shall pour out milk for us in rich streams, and, moreover, besprinkle us with glory!

The following verse of *Tukaram* witnesses to the devotees' association with nature and his great appreciation of all the elements of nature, even in the context of his desire to unite with God: *Trees, plants and animals are all our relatives (kith and kin) | The birds also sweetly chant | | By this bliss we relish abode in solitude | No defects and vices do we contract | | ch | | The sky is the canopy, the earth is the throne | The spirit therein engages and plays.*" (Indu Prakash 2481)

In short, the Hindu view of the eco-system and celestial galaxies are all connected and are considered one rhythmic cycle.

c) Islam

The roots of Islamic view on the environment are to be found in the Quran and the guidance (sunnah) of the Prophet Muhammad. The Islamic worldview is based on the belief in the existence of an all-powerful creator, Allah. From the Quran, it is said that Allah created *the universe and every single atom and molecule it contains and the laws of creation include the elements of order, balance and proportion: "He created everything and determined it most exactly" (25:2) and "It is He who appointed the sun to give radiance and the moon to give light, assigning it in phases... Allah did not create these things except with truth. We make the signs clear for the people who know" (10:5)* [Fazlun M Khalid, *Islam and the Environment* (Volume 5, Social and Economic dimensions of

global environmental change, pp 332 – 339) in the Encyclopedia of Global Environmental Change, Peter Timmerman (Ed)].

It is said that there are over 6,000 verses in the Quran, of which more than 500 deal with natural phenomena. Allah repeatedly calls on His people to reflect on His signs, which include all aspects of nature such as trees, mountains, seas, animals, birds, stars, the sun and the moon – and our own hearts. The Quran refers to creation or the natural world as the signs (ayat) of Allah, the Creator, and this is also the name given to the verses contained in the Quran.

Islamic jurisprudence contains regulations concerning the conservation and allocation of scarce water resources; for the conservation of land with special zones of graded use; for the establishment of rangelands, wetlands, green belts and for wildlife protection and conservation.

In short, the Quran says that Allah (God) is the Creator of the world. Human beings are on the world as trustees or ‘vice-regents’ - they are told to look after the world for Allah and for the future. In the Quran, Muslims are instructed to look after the environment and not to damage it:

Devote thyself single-mindedly to the Faith, and thus follow the nature designed by Allah, the nature according to which He has fashioned mankind. There is no altering the creation of Allah (Surah 30:30)

Islam calls on its believers to look after the earth because it is all Allah’s creation and it is part of a human’s duty to Allah:

Allah is He who raised up the heavens without any pillars that you can see. Then He settled Himself on the Throne, and constrained the sun and the moon to serve you; each planet pursues its course during an appointed term. He regulates it all and expounds the Signs, that you may have firm belief in the meeting with your Lord. He it is Who spread out the earth and made therein firmly fixed mountains and rivers, and of fruits of every kind He has made pairs. He causes the night to cover the day.

The Hadith also teaches that *the Earth is green and beautiful, and Allah has appointed you his stewards over it. The whole earth has been*

created a place of worship, pure and clean. Whoever plants a tree and diligently looks after it until it matures and bears fruit is rewarded. If a Muslim plants a tree or sows a field and humans and beasts and birds eat from it, all of it is love on his part.

Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) emphasised the Quranic decree of treating the earth as a trust, and humankind its guardians. Likening our planet to a sacred place of prayer, "All of the earth has been made to me as a mosque," Muhammad promoted respect and responsibility towards the environment amongst his companions. He encouraged water conservation, instructing them not to be wasteful even if they were next to a flowing river, and stipulated the importance of keeping public places tidy.

Nature and environment have always played an important part in Islam. Its believers understand that God has not created all this for nothing. In fact, Muslims have been commanded to find the wonderful signs of God around them so that they will only increase in them their awe of Allah.

In conclusion, Islam teaches that Allah has given man a responsibility and that man will be accountable to God for his actions and the trust placed in him. Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) said, "Everyone of you is a guardian and is responsible for his charges. The ruler who has authority over people is a guardian and is responsible for them" (Sahih Bukhari 3.46.730). Islam has urged humanity to be kind to nature and not to abuse the trust that has been placed on the shoulders of man. In fact, to be kind to animals is an integral part of Islam for Muslims. There are two primary sources defining Islam i.e. the Quran and the Hadith (the example, sayings, and actions of Prophet Muhammad) and both emphasise the accountability and responsibility of man toward the rest of creation.

d) Buddhism

Buddhism tries to point to the roots of the problem and to show a possible way towards a more responsible use of nature. Buddha has actually incorporated some forms of environmental attributes in his preaching and views humanity as an integral

part of nature. We should immediately notice that in a Buddhist context the question of the beginning of the world is not addressed. For this reason it is more proper to use the term “ecological consciousness” referring to the context of our study.

Buddhism considers the destruction of natural resources as unethical and it encourages sustenance of human existence through the balance of the eco-system. The relationship between man and nature should be based on a wide range of interests: present and future, human and non-human. It should be purposeful, farsighted and everlasting. Unfortunately humans concentrate primarily on satisfying their present “wants” (a now-oriented society) instead of their own present and future needs and the needs of future generations, as well as that of other forms of life on earth.

Buddhist ethics show that the ecological adaptation is a process of advantageous variation and progressive modification by which human beings are adjusted to the condition of the environment in which to live a harmonious life. Buddha suggests that human beings are supremely capable of going deep into the causes of their suffering. They understand what is good for them and adjust themselves without passing the responsibility for their suffering on to some invincible forces. They make an effort to walk on the noble eight fold path (*1. right view, 2. right intention, 3. right speech, 4. right action, 5. right livelihood, 6. right effort, 7. right mindfulness and 8. right concentration*) to lead a good ethical life. Buddha regarded every environmentally harmful action as questionable and ethically wrong. Our intention depends on our mental makeup. If it is polluted with lust, hatred and delusion, it will translate itself into the external environment as a complex of physical life and material development based on exploitation of nature without moral restraint. Delusion associated with greed results in environmental problems, because satisfying one’s appetite can lead to natural resources being mercilessly exploited, resulting in the suffering of people.

Buddhism always believes in the middle way. The middle way, in today's terms, means harmony. Any extreme measure may produce opposite results. In the light of the Buddhist doctrine of the middle way, economic recovery measures should not go to any extremes. The middle way economic recovery measures have to be the ones that will aid environmental protection, and drive economic growth towards being in harmony with nature.

Life is not an isolated process starting with birth and ending in death. Each single lifespan is part of a series of lives having no discoverable beginning in time and continuing on as long as the desire for existence stands intact. Rebirth can take place in various realms of human beings and animals; on the higher level we meet heavenly worlds of greater happiness, beauty and power and on the lower level we find infernal worlds of extreme sufferings. Karma is the cause of rebirth. *Karma* determines the sphere into which rebirth takes place, with wholesome actions bringing rebirth in higher forms, and unwholesome actions bringing rebirth in lower forms.

It is clear that in Buddhist teaching, all forms of living beings are interrelated, particularly because they can be considered the individualisation of the same being in different forms. Therefore, care and love for other beings and creatures is basic and important in Buddhist ethics and morality.

The human world and nature are joined together in a reciprocal causal relationship: change in any one of the two necessarily brings about change in the other too. The human world and its environment stand or fall with the type of moral force at work. If immorality grips society, humankind and nature decline. If morality exists, the quality of human life and nature also improve. Buddha says that change is universal; neither man nor any other being, animate or inanimate, can be exonerated from it. Everything is framed in a constant process of change.

In short, Buddhism presents its teaching on care for the environment as follows:

- i. Buddhism states that *Karma* is the major factor responsible for what we are and what we will be. Man has an element of free will or personal endeavour; by practicing it one can change his own nature as well as his environment.
- ii. According to the Buddhist idea of dependent origination, everything in the ecosystem is interdependent and interconnected to some other; for this reason everything has its own intrinsic value. However, in the scientific world, nature is conceived as a material thing which has a merely extrinsic value and can be used in order to fulfil the desire of the people. From this point of view we can say that the relation between human beings and nature may be spelled out in a threefold way: human beings are superior; nature is superior; and both human beings and nature are interdependent and interrelated. Only this last way can be considered the correct one. Therefore a new paradigm of development should promote economic activities and a lifestyle based on the concept of '*man with nature*' and not '*man against nature*'.
- iii. Buddhism aims at eliminating human suffering and bringing peace and prosperity to all mankind. It is a religion that in its core has a deep sense of responsibility in protecting the environment. Environmental protection has to begin in the mind. Buddha clearly ruled out the two extreme positions of self-indulgence and self mortification and adopted the middle path. Buddhist concedes that re-orientation of our inner life is a sine qua non to preserving nature. Everything is interconnected and interdependent in the ecosystem. However, due to our ignorance, often we are not able to understand this interdependence. We think that our happiness depends upon our maximum consumption. Hence in order to diminish the problems, we will have to moderate our consumption. The only way to minimise our consumption is to restrain our desires, walking on a middle path which rejects the waste of resources in displays of wealth designed to gain ephemeral status. Instead we should focus on friendship, good

relationships, and meditation. Metta (Mercy) can be extended to the protection of other species, and indeed to the whole ecosystem. This is a great contribution that Buddhists can offer to the world.

- iv. In Buddhism there is a close relationship between science and spirituality. When science is only based upon the concept of self-interest, it will become the cause of destruction. But when it is built upon spirituality, it will be connected with the welfare of all human beings. Buddha gave the wisdom to perceive the interconnectedness of all life and all living things. A holistic approach towards a solution must consider that everything is interdependent and interconnected to each other in the ecosystem. Everything has, therefore, its own intrinsic value. Therefore when speaking of the conservation of the ecosystem we should not only be concerned about the preservation of flora and fauna in its totality, but also about their regeneration. Through his eight-fold path, Buddha was not only aware about preservation but he also emphasised on regeneration.

e) Confucianism and Taoism

Confucianism traces its origin back to 6th Century B.C. with Confucius. He stressed a way of life which looked into the past for a guide to behaviour in the present. Virtues, righteousness, propriety, wisdom and sincerity are basic ethical principles of Confucianism. Confucius' teachings encouraged human beings to live in ordered social relationships, and to have "religious" reverence for all life. A place for every human being, and every human being in his or her place is the only way to achieve harmony. These ethical principles are found in the *Book of Analects* (Lun Yu): "Fix your mind on truth; hold firm to virtue; rely upon love-kindness; and find your recreation in the arts." Confucianism teaches that human beings are not intended to overindulge. Preservation is a virtue: "With coarse food to eat, water to drink, and bent arm for a pillow, happiness may still be

found." A human being's relationship with his or her surroundings and the environment, then, is moderation.

Although not a religion, religious sanctions are alluded to in Confucianism in reference to Heaven: "Does Heaven ever speak? The four seasons come and go, and all creatures thrive and grow. Does Heaven ever speak?" and "He who does not recognise the existence of a Divine Law cannot be a superior man [sage]."

Confucian humanism then understands human beings, not only from a human point of view, but also from a cosmic point of view. The full significance of a human being is found in the relationship to Heaven and Earth, realising the Heavenly endowed potential in the human. The sage is the person who fully realises his or her Heavenly endowed potential.

The Confucian sage is the person who truly practices "reciprocity" – "Do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you" – not only in human and social contexts but also in the context of nature and the universe. In this respect, Confucian humanism is based on a reciprocal relationship with Heaven and Earth, nature and the universe. Reciprocity can be achieved when we become receptive. In this sense, a Confucian sage is a receptive person who is able to discern the signs of Heaven and Earth. The sage is the person who has developed the wisdom and art of seeing and listening in order to feel and be able to respond to Heaven and Earth.

The Taoists inherited from the Confucian tradition the idea of the "three spheres" of heaven, earth, and the human, which are intimately inter-fused with each other. The Taoist conception of creation is metaphysical: it is "Tao", eternal and nameless. Yet, at the same time, it is "all-pervasive, eternal, life-sustaining, and nourishing." Tao stands for the ultimate reality of nature. In Taoism there is a natural relationship between humans and nature. Humankind is viewed as a "member" of creation and is, therefore, without exception internally linked to the Tao as well as to everything else. A human being receives no special place from Tao; thus, homocentrism is an alien thing in the Taoist

axiological ordering of beings. As well, human beings are considered to be endowed with intellect, and thus quite capable of living in harmony with nature. In Taoist thinking this means that there is no unbridgeable chasm between the two. They are interconnected. The extent of Taoist harmony between human being and nature reaches down to the smallest of creatures, even insects and crawling things, herbs and trees may not be injured.

Uncontrolled attitudes to nature can only result in disharmony and hurtful results. Anyone who tries to do things in violation of this interconnectedness is doomed to failure. In order to prevent such transgressions, the Taoist books refer to two classes of officials whose duties were concerned with preservation and conservation. One is Shan-yu, inspector of mountains, and the other, Lin-heng, inspector of forests. These officials, through their protective duties, enforced conservation practices by admonishing, for example, what trees could be cut, by whom and when, and warned against the consequences of deforestation.

The regulation of nature also finds its philosophical roots in an appreciation of nature and in feelings of painful sentiment which arise out of the senseless destruction of nature. An ancient compendium of songs, the *Shi Ching*, contains such lines about trees torn up by "cruel brigands" and "no one knew of their crime", and of trees being so lovely that they were not even looked to for firewood.

Chinese ancient religions or philosophies, then, present an image of human beings in harmony with, and sympathetic to, nature. Whatever harm humankind does to nature inevitably creates human being's own self destruction because of the interconnectedness between the two life systems.

f) Shintoism

It is difficult to give a definition to Shinto for it does not have a founder. It seems to be originally a common feeling of the Japanese people. Shinto is a culture rather than a religion. Shinto had been formed little by little based on ancient feelings and folk

beliefs. Being influenced by the rule of the Emperors, the aristocrats and Samurai, some practices and attitudes like expressing deep and sincere gratitude towards the work of gods by praying, has produced ceremonies and content for the Shinto faith.

Although Shinto doesn't really have its own specific doctrines and scripture, it is believed that there are gods in all things in the universe and people have worshipped these gods in their excellence and celebrated several festivals in their honour. Humans and gods are strongly connected. Moreover, gods lead people in this world and therefore people must live under their guidance.

Humans receive the life from gods and are regarded as sacred as well. That is why people must respect their individuality, each other and must cooperate with one another. As a basic way of life according to Shinto, one must stay clean, happy and honest in as much as possible. People must have *Makoto*, i.e., people must see gods in their life and being connected with gods, live with sincerity and humbleness.

Shinto establishes a harmonious integrity that come from the Emperor's empire and directed to the local deities. This concept of the unity of various powers gave way to open the minds of the people in accepting the different thoughts and cultures that came from other countries. And so this has been a Japanese way of thinking with regards to coexistence with others as well.

From a Shinto perspective of the world, the word "nature" is identified with anything that exists in the universe. For Shinto "nature" means "the essence of existence" or "anything that exists in its pure state, hence untouched and uninfluenced". In other words, nature is not an abstract existence but a concrete one.

In the ancient books of Shinto for example, "Universe" is defined as "the infinite space and time continuing from the past to the future." Sometimes it refers to the ground world. There is also another expression, "heaven and earth" that means a concrete

space composed of ground and heavenly worlds. Therefore in Shinto, the concrete world is the major premise.

In the classic book of Shinto, the universe consists of three vertical layers: *Takama no hara* (plain of high heaven – the kami's world), *Ashihara no Nakatsukuni* (middle land – the present world) and *Yomi no kuni* (Hades – the world after death). These three vertical layers are not considered separated but are connected through *Amano mihashira* which is believed to be the centre of the world.

They also categorised time in three layers: the former life (*zense*), this life (*gense*) and the future life (*raise*). These on the other hand are considered separated, although it is believed that spirits can communicate and move.

Having these concepts intact, in Shintoism, it can be concluded that from the very beginning, the gods were just hiding somewhere and decided to appear as gods at the right time and at the very exact moment as they did. In Shinto however, the existence of the world was spiritual and not created by God. Its essence appeared as many different Gods. To follow on that, *Izanagini no mikoto* (deity born of the seven divine generations) and *Izanami no mikoto* (goddess of creation and death) got married and gave birth to the Japanese Islands and its people (as mentioned earlier). Gods appointed *Amaterasu omikami* (sun goddess) at the centre and let her rule the country.

Therefore, Shinto believed that Japan is the only existing world at that time. Shinto always does not consider the world in a general sense (the whole existence of world), but in a particular sense (Japan). Shinto tries to believe in concrete existence, to recognise the existence concretely and individually.

In Shinto it is believed that gods, humans and every creature are all connected and inseparable and if ever this connection is cut, it will result in chaos. Therefore, for the Shinto, it is very important that all creatures should learn to live harmoniously with each other and in accordance and as a reflection of Gods in order to obtain a peaceful and prosperous life.

In reference to ecology, the ancient people of Japan lived in harmony with nature. This is because they thought that all things come from nature. Because nature sustained life, they respected nature. Moreover they knew well which parts of nature they could or could not touch. The parts of nature that people could not touch are the top of the mountain, riverside, seaside and hillside, which are protected by the Shinto shrines and temples located there. As a result, these temples and shrines took measures to prevent nature from destruction.

B. INDIGENOUS ECO-SPIRITUALITY

Apart from the major religious traditions of Asia, it is to be noted that there are approximately 300 million indigenous peoples¹ living in more than 70 countries in the world; with half of them living in Asia. More than 150 million Asians define themselves as indigenous, and among these 2,165 groups we find thriving Christian communities in both Southeast and Northeast Asia (Pakistan, Bangladesh, India Burma/Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines, China, Korea and Japan).²

Despite the political, economic and cultural discrimination suffered by indigenous peoples all over Asia, these groups have so much to give and to teach (post)modern societies. They have been acknowledged for their environmental consciousness and ecologically-sound way of life, especially at this time when we in Asia experience half of the natural calamities and disasters in the

¹ For a good and succinct background on Asian indigenous peoples and their struggles, as well as the responses from the Asian churches, see John Prior, "Dignity and Identity: The Struggle of Indigenous Peoples in Asia: To Preserve, Purify and Promote their Cultures", FABC Paper No. 104. See also the following: FABC Paper No. 81 - "The Spirit at Work in Asia Today"; FABC Paper No. 92g - "The Indigenous Peoples and a Renewed Church in Asia"; FABC Paper No. 105 "Towards a Paradigm Shift in Mission Among the Indigenous Peoples of Asia".

² Prior, FABC Paper No. 104, p. 1-2. In FABC Paper No. 92g, p. 5, Karotempr estimates that 10% of Asian population would be indigenous, but this does not include indigenous peoples who have integrated themselves into dominant social groups. He posits that a sizeable number of Asian peoples come from indigenous origins.

world. Their natural healing practices, communal way of living, as well as their deep spirituality have inspired and challenged people living in globalised societies that have promoted individualism and greed, as well as unhealthy lifestyles.

Some of the fundamental beliefs³ and main practices of indigenous peoples all over Asia regarding the natural world could be summed as follows:

1. **Belief in Interconnectedness:** Indigenous peoples look at life in a holistic and integrated way. The spiritual and the material permeate each other. Nature, culture and cosmos are interconnected and work together.
2. **Belief in the Sacredness of all things:** Everything is an epiphany of the Divine and there is Divine presence in everything. This is the reason for their deep respect and care for creation and the natural world.
3. **Belief in Spirits:** The indigenous peoples believe in spirits, both good and bad, who reside in material and natural things. They – especially their shamans – relate with the spirits (through their rituals and prayers) and negotiate for community needs and desires.

In a special way, their relationship with the land summarises what they believe in. They believe that the Land is sacred and that the Land is life itself. The land is the source, the setting and their community of life.⁴ The land feeds them: “Land was created by *Magbabaya* (Supreme Being). The earth is the breast of *Magbabaya* that feeds us. That alone is our source of life.”⁵ The

³ Prior, *ibid.*, p. 8-9, summarizes their values as two ecological values (value of the land; value of culture as part of nature) and five community values (value of the group, consensus, cooperation, hospitality and celebration).

⁴ FABC 104, *ibid.*; see also J. de Mesa, “Land is Life: Cultural Energies of Indigenous Spirituality” in E. Lamberte, ed., *Selected Studies in Environment and Health* (Quezon City: Central Book Supply, Inc., 2011), pp. 312-318.

⁵ Lubusan-Sildap, “Four Datus from Northeastern Mindanao Speak the Truth on Land and Life” in *Gimba: The Popular Magazine of Culture in Mindanao* 2, No. 4 (no date), p. 8.

land is also the setting for their daily life and grounds their community of life. In this land where they live, they are in touch with their God, with the earth, with their ancestors, with the spirits of the land. The land symbolises this network of relationships, this interconnectedness of life. It is also this land and all the interconnections within it that have given birth to their culture – their way of believing, their rites and rituals, their customs and practices, their arts and music, their laws and ways of living. The land is “the wellspring of life, the cradle of consciousness, the soil from which history grows, the arena for social and cultural practice, the basis for their political system; in short it is the foundation of ...identity.”⁶

Because the land is a gift from God, it belongs to all. This sense of common ownership or stewardship of the land also strengthens the strong community values which are foundational to indigenous peoples.⁷ Such sense of ownership of and responsibility to the land does not only cover this generation but the next generation as well. “The land was entrusted to us by our ancestors. We need to protect and care for it for future generations.”⁸

Because of their relationship with the land and the natural world, they have a high ecological aptitude, and an excellent knowledge of the environment. Because nature came from God, they have a deep reverence for it. Because of their gratitude to God and to nature that keeps them alive, they feel responsible in caring for it. Such relationship with the land and with nature has nourished their spirituality which has been described as **ecospirituality**.⁹

⁶ Quoted in de Mesa, *ibid.*, p. 316.

⁷ Footnote # 3.

⁸ Quoted in de Mesa, *ibid.*

⁹ Ma. Teresita Rapadas, “Christian Asceticism and Indigenous Ecological Wisdom: towards Ascetic Practice in a Consumer Society (Master’s thesis, Maryhill School of Theology, 2001), pp. 55-80.

Although briefly mentioned in the first FABC Assembly (1974),¹⁰ the life, wisdom and the role of indigenous peoples went unnoticed and unacknowledged through the years until 1995 in all the FABC concerns on evangelisation, interreligious dialogue and inculturation. In 1995, the Church in Asia opened the *International Decade of the World's Indigenous Peoples*. The contents and the spirit of this Conference on Evangelisation and the Indigenous Peoples flowed into the 1998 Synod of Asia and finally into the FABC Assembly in 2000. The following statement from the 2000 Assembly show a comprehensive perspective on indigenous peoples – an openness to and a recognition of their indigenous cultures as well as the wisdom that arise from such, their role in evangelisation, especially regarding environmental struggles.

“Indigenous peoples form a significant section of Asian society and of the Church in Asia. These communities are ancient and well-knit communities, and have preserved many important human and social values. Today, in many countries in Asia, their right to land is threatened and their fields are laid bare; they themselves are subjected to economic exploitation, excluded from political participation and reduced to the status of second-class citizens.

Detribalization, a process of imposed alienation from their social and cultural roots, is even a hidden policy in several places. Their cultures are under pressure by dominant cultures and ‘Great Traditions’. Mighty projects for the exploitation of mineral, forest and water resources, often in areas which have been the home of the tribal population, have generally worked to the disadvantage of the tribals.

In our contemporary society, where there is a steady erosion of traditional Asian values, Indigenous Asian communities can play an

¹⁰ “That the FABC, in collaboration with the Sacred Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples and the Pontifical Secretariates... evolve a working concept of evangelization that embraces, as integral to that concept, genuine dialogue with the great religious traditions of Asia, and the other deep-rooted forms of belief such as animism...” in G. Rosales and C. Arevalo, eds., *For All the Peoples of Asia Vol. 1* (Quezon City: Claretian Pub. 1987), p. 20-21.

important role. Close to nature, they retain the values of a cosmic view of life, a casteless sharing, and a democratic society. They have preserved their simplicity and hospitality. Their values and cultures can offer a corrective to the culture of the dominant communities, to the emerging materialistic and consumeristic ethos of our modern societies.”¹¹

C. ECO-FEMINIST SPIRITUALITY

Part of this indigenous eco spirituality is the healing practices of indigenous ritual leaders called shamans. Recognition and study of shamans/shamanism as integral to indigenous culture and spirituality have also been a recent concern for the Asian church. *FABC Paper No. 105* on “A Paradigm Shift in Mission Amongst the Indigenous Peoples of Asia” is all about the prevalent practice of indigenous shamanism in Asia. Starting from the premise that “over the centuries, God has been speaking to indigenous peoples through their cultures”, this FABC paper reports that shamanism lies at the heart of indigenous (ecological) spirituality and culture and proposes some criteria for valuing as well as evaluating shamanic practices. Moreover, it expounds on the theological principles grounding this practice and the missiological models that could guide reflection and action of Christian communities.¹²

Shamans are religious leaders and through rites and rituals perform the role of healers, masters of spirits, guardians of the psychic and ecological wellbeing of individuals and families,

¹¹ “Final Statement of the Seventh Plenary Assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences Samphran, Thailand, January 3-12, 2000”, FABC Papers No. 93, p. 11.

¹² See also important theological insights and pastoral practice in Oliver Lardinois, SJ, “Improvements in the Meeting of Shamanism and Christianity among the Indigenous Peoples of East Asia and Oceania”, *East Asia Pastoral Review* No. 43 (2006), pp. 359-367. This international symposium was organized by the Research Center for Aboriginal Theology at the Theologate of Fujen Catholic University in Taiwan and hosted by Bp. J. B. Cheng, the only indigenous bishop of Taiwan and president of the Commission for Indigenous Pastoral Ministry of the Taiwanese Bishops’ Conference. See also Alena Govorounova, “Pentecostalism and Shamanism in Asia” in *Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture Bulletin* No. 36 (2012).

clans and communities. They alleviate afflictions of disease, misfortune and crop failure. They communicate with ancestors in order to diagnose sickness and misfortune. In healing practices they use natural medicines - herbs, seeds, roots, fruits, leaves, etc. They know how to talk to and what to offer to the spirit world in order to negotiate the wellbeing of their peoples.

Although shamans can be both men and women (in some Asian countries, there were/are more women than men shamans), healing has long been associated with women. In the past two decades, women's role regarding healing the earth and ecological liberation have been highlighted through what has been called '**ecofeminist spirituality**'.¹³

Ecofeminists regard theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether's ideas as foundational for ecofeminism. She said: "Women must see that there can be no liberation for them and no solution to the ecological crisis within a society whose fundamental model of relationships continue to be that of domination. They must unite the demands of the women's movement with those of the ecological movement to envision a radical reshaping of the basic socio-economic relations and the underlying values of society."¹⁴

Proponents of ecofeminism seek to eradicate every kind of dualism and work for the healing of split relationships between male and female, culture (history) and nature, soul and body. They also promote a concept of God that is IN the world and not beyond it. Feminist theologians speak of the world as God's body (*McFague*), as Primal Matrix (*Ruether*), God as Heart of the Universe (*McDaniel*). Most importantly, they oppose any kind of domination - of women, nature, races, among others.

Characteristics of an ecofeminist spirituality/ethic include:

¹³ For a good background on ecofeminist theology and spirituality, see the following: I. Diamond and G. Orenstein, *Reweaving the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism*; R. Ruether, *God and Gaia: an Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing*; and Kwok Pui-lan, ed., *Hope Abundant: Third World and Indigenous Peoples' Theology*.

¹⁴ D. Bombongan, "The Promise of Ecofeminist Theology in a Globalized World", *MST Review* 3, No. 2 (2000): 236-55.

- Stress on the goodness and sacredness of nature;
- Respect of and celebration of the plurality and diversity of all earth beings;
- Self-affirmation;
- Mutually empowerment;
- Preference to oppressed bodies;
- Contemplation;
- Promotion of an ethic of a community of care;
- Celebration.¹⁵

A famous poem by American artist and writer Judith Chicago summarises the heart of ecofeminist spirituality:

*And then all that has divided us will merge
 And then compassion will be wedded to power
 And then softness will come to a world that is harsh and unkind
 And then both men and women will be gentle
 And then both men and women will be strong
 And then no person will be subject to another's will
 And then all will be rich and free and varied
 And then the greed of some will give way to needs of many
 And then all will share equally in the Earth's abundance
 And then all will care for the sick and the weak and the old
 And then all will nourish the young...
 And then all will cherish life's creatures
 And then all will live in harmony with each other and with the Earth
 And then everywhere will be called Eden once again.*

IV. THEOLOGY OF CREATION

1. BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

The Bible opens with the story of Creation (Gen 1:1-2:3), and follows on with certain events of humanity's story on earth onwards within the perspective of the story of the People of Israel, touching upon nations of the world, progressing into the

¹⁵ Vilma Ismael, "A Biographical Exploration in the Life of a Filipino Woman Shaman: An Ecofeminist Perspective" (Master's Thesis, Maryhill School of Theology, 2001), pp. 71-82.

story of Jesus. The elaborate story of Creation in Genesis is continued as a major reflection throughout, as it progresses into the story of the New Creation in the story of Jesus.

A. CREATION NARRATIVES IN GENESIS

The Book of Genesis begins with two accounts of creation (1:1-2:3 and 2:5-3:24), the older, Gen 2:5-3:24, attributed to the Yahwist tradition, and the other, Gen 1:1-2:3, composed later by the Priestly author as a fitting introduction to the Pentateuch.

i) First Creation Account (Gen 1:1-2:3)

The account in Gen 1:1-2:3 affirms that God created (*bara'*) "in the beginning" (*běřeshit*), and by His word: "And God said, Let there be..." (1:3.6.9. 14.20. 24), and "so it happened" (1:6.9.15.20.24.30). The narrative is punctuated by the recurrent formula "and there was evening and there was morning" as the end of each day (1:5.8.13.19.23.31), all activities happening within the time frame of six days. The first three days narrate the dispelling of the primordial condition of "without form or shape" (*tôhû wābôhû*), to provide the setting of the earth and the space with light (1:3), sky and sea (1:6-8) and dry land with plants (1:10-12); and the second three days with those which "inhabit" them, the lights of day and night (1:14-18), creatures of water and air (1:20-21) and creatures of the land (1:24-27), a progression from the inanimate to animate creatures. The climax is the creation of the human being, not simply as "let there be", but in deliberation and with greater thoughtful specification: "Let us make (*nă'asēh*) human being (*ādām*) in our image (*bětsălmênû*), after our likeness (*kidmûthênû*)" (1:26): and "in the image of God (*bětsěləmelôhîm*) He created them, male and female He created them" (1:27). All living beings including the human beings are given instruction for food they are to eat (1: 27-28); and "He blessed them saying, "be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth" (1:22.28). And humankind is also bestowed with the authority to subdue (*kābas*) the earth and have dominion (*rādâ*) of all living beings in it (1: 26,28).

God affirms each day's creation as "good" (1:4.10.12.18.21.25); and indeed He affirms the totality of the six days' creation as "very good" (1:31). And then on the seventh day "God rested", and "blessed the seventh day and hallowed it" (2:1-3).

ii) Second Creation Account (Gen 2:5-3:24)

This older Yahwist narration begins as "the story (*'ēllēhtōlēdōth*) of the heavens and the earth at their creation when the Lord God made the earth and the heavens" (2:4). This story of creation is introduced in a summary form indicating an agricultural creative order on the face of the earth (2:5-6).

But the story concentrates on the creation of man (*'ādām*) (2:7), formed (*yātsār*) out of the dust (*'āpār*) of the ground (*min-hā'adāmāh*), into which God breathes (*yāpāch*) the breath of life (*nishmāthchāyyīm*) (2:7). And the Lord God planted a garden (*gān-bē'ēdēn*) of loveliness and delight (*'ēdēn*), where He placed the man (*'ādām*) (Gen 2:8.15), with provision of "every tree that was delightful to look at and good for food" (2:9, cf. 1:11-12.29). The man is to "cultivate and care" for the garden (2:15), to till the ground (2:5) that is favourable, because it is God who causes things to grow (cf. 2:6.9-14). However the human being's life is fine-tuned by a distinct command: "You are free to eat from any of the trees of the garden except the tree of knowledge of good and evil. From that tree you shall not eat; when you eat from it you shall die" (Gen 2:16-17).

In the Garden of Eden takes place the making of the woman as the "helper suited to the man", for "it is not good for man to be alone" (2:18). The created animals are presented to man to find that suitable helper (2:19-20); but while the man gives them their name (2:19), the desired "helper suited to himself" is not among them. The Lord God then casts a deep sleep on the man... "This one, at last, is bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called 'woman' (*'ishāh*), for out of man (*'īsh*) this one has been taken" (Gen 2:23-24). And "the man and his wife were both naked (*'ārūmīm*), yet they felt no shame." (2:25).

The blissful happiness of human life in the Garden comes to an end through mankind's failure to keep God's command not to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil (Gen 3:1-24). The snake (*nāchāsh*), "the most cunning (*ārūm*) of all the wild animals", allures the woman: "God knows well that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like gods, who know good and evil" (3:5); and adding: "You certainly will not die!", corroborating the growing desire for the fruit, which the woman sees to be "good for food and pleasing to the eyes" and "desirable for gaining wisdom." She then takes and eats of the fruit, and gives some to her husband who likewise eats it (3:6). And indeed "the eyes of both of them were opened" (3:7), but only to recognise their own nakedness, causing them to be afraid of God and hide themselves (3:10). And then at God's questioning, the man blames the woman, and the woman blames the snake (3:12-13).

Punishments result from this disobedience: the tempter is cursed among all the animals, which results in hostility towards human beings (3:14-15,24); and the woman is to have pain and suffering in childbearing and to have "desire for her husband", who will "rule over" her (3:16). The man) is to have to work hard in order to produce the needed food; and the ground is cursed to be barren (3:17-19). Yet God affirms that while the snake's race "will bruise the heel" of the human race, humankind "will bruise the head" of the snake's race (3:15). And to sum up, the man gives the name "Eve" (*ḥāvvāh*) to the woman, for "she was the mother of all the living" (3:20). And the man and the woman are clothed (3:21).

At the end the Lord God affirms that "the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil", and notes the possibility of man reaching out to the tree of life, eating of its fruit and living forever (3:22). And so the Lord God "expelled the man, stationing the cherubim and the fiery revolving sword east of the garden of Eden, to guard the way to the tree of life" (3:24). The Yahwist narrator then continues with primordial history of humankind on the earth.

B. KEY POINTS IN THE TWO CREATION NARRATIVES IN GENESIS

i) Creation “in the beginning”

The opening phrase “in the beginning” (*bĕrēshīt*) already signals a glimpse into the mystery of time, as if stretching into time before time, , touching onto infinity, to a God already existing, yet giving a sense of creation’s time-conditioned existence, which is expressed in the second account as the beginnings of history of created order and of humankind. There is, however, an immense gap and distance between the “beginning” and our present age, moving into its future. “In the beginning God created (*bārā’*)” is an affirmation of faith in God as Creator, indicating the faith-perspective in the total story. It affirms the origin of all things in the heavens and on earth as God’s activity. God’s creative act is presented as the primal event.

ii) Creation of the Human Being

The creation of the human being is placed as special and is noted to be the climax of God’s creation in contrast with His other creations. The process of deliberation (“let us make..”) indicates a hint into the depth of God’s will and of humankind’s nature, aptly expressed as being created in the Creator’s image and likeness (1:26-27), the two words virtually identical in meaning with certain difference in nuance. The human being is an earthly body made living by the breath of God’s life, an awesome communion of the perishable matter and the imperishable spirit for eternity in resurrection. This gives a very specific challenge to the human creature. The Psalmist offers a constant contemplation into this divine likeness in mankind: “When I see the heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and stars that you set in place - What is man that you are mindful of him, and a son of man that you care for him? Yet you have made him little less than a god, crowned him with glory and honour” (Ps 8:4-6). The entire Scripture witnesses to God’s everlasting faithfulness to conserve this divine image and likeness in the human being, and finally to bring its fullness in the mission of His perfect

image and likeness of His eternal begotten Son born as man into the history of humankind.

This divine image and likeness in the human being is further elaborated in creating the human being as “male and female” (1:27), and in creating the woman from the man as “the bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh” and that “they are not two, but one flesh”, an incomparable element of communion in the nature of the human being. The male and female stand in a special and same relationship to God, and are sacred and of infinite worth, thus needing to be respected and safeguarded (cf. Gen 9:5-6).

Herein seems to lie a distinction between the “being” and the “personality / personhood” of the human entity: while the Priestly text points to the essential equality of being in the man and the woman, the Yahwist text expresses rather the relational equality between them in the order of distinction of “personality”, as if under the sign and shadow of “procession” as in the Trinity, procession that is also the foundation for essential relationship. The created “goodness” of the human being can be fulfilled by dovetailing the essential equality into the relational distinctiveness of man and woman and among all human persons.

iii) Goodness in creation

All creation is “good”, and that goodness comes from the goodness of the Creator Himself, the source of all that is good. God created everything according to His design and purpose, by the power and authority of His Word. God’s creation is characterised by order and harmony. While each creative reality has the divine goodness in it, yet the totality of it has the bearing of being “very good”: goodness intensified, indeed becoming perfect, whole and holy, when communion and spirit of oneness is dwelling among all things. The totality of God’s creation includes the intricate web and network of relationships of the created realities with their limits and possibilities.

The order of goodness in creation is further taken up in the area of the moral goodness in the human being (in relationship with

God), in the story of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Knowledge of good and evil can mean experiential knowledge, or perhaps knowledge of opposite realities; or it may rather mean total and perfect knowledge belonging to God as source and author of perfect liberty (cf. Gen 3:5.22; 2 Sam 14:17). The human being is given the good of liberty in view of the breath of God in it, but in participative and limited quality as to a creature, received as by a child under the quality of obedience. The prohibition vis-à-vis this tree is in view of keeping intact the delicate distinction and communion of liberty in God and in the human being. Everything said, the principle for this prohibition is founded in the mystery of obedience of the human creature to the Creator, and of the consequent death to disobedience. The Lord God does not wish the death of the human being, but rather protection and perfection of the divine breath of life in him.

iv) Mission of the human being: Stewardship over creation

God's special intention for creating the human being is made specific in the responsibility and task given to it "to have dominion" (*rādā*) over and to "subdue" (*kābash*) especially all living beings. These are very strong terms, but in view of responsible stewardship for God's creation under God's authority, stewardship is an awesome task. In essence, stewardship means rendering service to God's order and plan in creation.

This stewardship is meant to responsively safeguard the divine intention of "ecology" in creation. In this the human being has a double task: first of all, it must be responsible to its own "ecology", namely to take proper care of the goodness of communion of body and the breath of God in it, so that it can be a worthy personality and agent for stewardship; and secondly, it must direct and guide the "ecology", namely the heart-matter of all creation. The Book of Wisdom (9:2-3) says thus: "In Your wisdom [You] have established humankind to rule the creatures

produced by You, and to govern the world in holiness and righteousness, and to render judgment in integrity of heart.”

The point of mankind’s stewardship for creation places us squarely in creation’s ecology today in the face of climate change and climate justice. In this great era of mankind’s Industrial and Technological Revolution it is important to recognise the steward’s role to render service to the Creator’s technology and industry in the Revolution of Creation, to safeguard them and discover hidden energies thereof.

v) Creation and the “daily bread”

Of the basic needs of the human being at creation, only food has been indicated in a definite way (1:29-30); and provision is made of “every tree that was delightful to look at and good for food” (2:9, cf. 1:11-12.29), and man is to cultivate for food from the land (2:5).

Throughout the Scripture the role of food is so constant and relevant, as “manna” was in the desert and the multiplication of bread in the hands of Jesus. However, there is temptation to distort the true miracle of life-giving food; and in the Eucharist, that food is brought to its divine aptitude to bear the offering of life as nourishing food for others. All created goods and life is perishable, but in its dying it has been given the liberty of being offered as food and nourishment and consolation for others. Misuse and wastage of created goods and life are countersign to this mission of creation as “food”. All good food and agriculture must remain pre-eminent among all industries of the world’s cultures; and the “daily bread” of the “Lord’s Prayer” must become an effective prayer and sign of earth’s true civilisation. Thus stewardship of the human being is also to cultivate all created goods into becoming food and nourishment for others and for one another. The Psalmist would sum up: “The eyes of all look hopefully to you; you give them their food in due season. You open wide your hand and satisfy the desire of every living thing” (Ps 145:15-16).

vi) Work and Rest

The Priestly account of creation has been set up as six days of activity, each day's active hours entering into the restful hours of "the evening and the morning", extending the full measure of the day, and to savour and rejoice in the created goodness; and this is brought to fullness into the great rest of the Sabbath Day (2: 2-3), to savour and rejoice forever in the total mystery of goodness in creation always throughout the epochs and ages of creation. The seven days is constituted as the primary functional unit of time for earth's life, with work, and daily and weekly rest. This is followed throughout the Old Testament (Ex 20: 8-11), with special elaboration for the Year of Jubilee (Lev 25), where the rest period for the productive land is especially envisioned as a method of correction of loss of creative goodness; it culminates in the New Testament with the Day of the Lord as "octave day", as new rest in the order of the new creation.

Human life and the life of all creation have the active and the passive action, day time and night, work and rest, servile work and leisure action to be respected. Mankind must be stewards in creation also in this regard; and this is especially true in our present preoccupation with unilateral commercial activity at the expense of activities of aesthetics and beauty.

vii) The Fall and Promise of Redemption

Finally the hint is given of the deeper inclination of sinful disobedience in the heart of man and woman. The Lord God affirms that "the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil" (3:22), and sees the possibility of man reaching out to the tree of life, eating of its fruit and living forever. As such, the Lord God expelled the man and the woman to the difficult way of life. But this is done under the promise of life over death and evil, under the sign of a covenant (3:15), which manifests God's faithfulness as a covenant, bringing creation into its fulfilment. All subsequent covenants, especially as manifested in the

Scripture until the Covenant in Jesus, are founded on the covenant as creation matured into Covenant with new Creation.

Humanity and all creation are rooted in the first creation; it is now on the way to the new Creation. But the *felix culpa* is a constant teacher and guiding experience for the true knowledge of “listening” to the Creator that has been missed in the Garden of Eden. Throughout Scripture the exercise is that of listening to *Shema’ Israel*, until the “listening” to the Father of the Son himself.

We fall, and we rise again; and we fall again and we rise once again. The final burden is if we do not rise any more. In the present crisis with Climate Change and Climate Justice the path of solution is to listen to the heart of all Creation, down to its least component. Much attention is needed to listen to the water, soil, air, vegetation and animals in creation, including humanity among whom are the poor who belong so intimately to the created earth.

C. CREATION AND THE CREATOR IN THE BIBLE

The created world as seen in the history of salvation may be compared to a big tree having roots, body and fruit - all three as aspects of its total created being; the first aspect as “paradise given”, the second as “paradise lost and promised” and the third as “paradise regained”. Outwardly the three seem to follow one after the other in our time; yet inwardly they move altogether mysteriously under God’s eternal time. Simply the Bible has to deal with the Created World and the Creator thereof; and indeed the Bible, the Old and New Testaments, constantly go back and forth into the three dimensions of “goodness given”, “goodness lost and struggling in sin” and “goodness regained and fulfilled”. And while in the Garden of Eden, mankind failed in the given discipline and liberty as creature of the Creator, in the paradise regained that discipline and liberty was gained under the perfect discipline and liberty of the new creature, that of the Child of the Father through and in the image of the Eternal Son, in Jesus Christ. Creation as the root matter and New Creation as

its fruition are the inner story of the world in the Bible; and the story around these is ordered as preparation and maturation from one to the other.

Seeing God as Creator and the story of Creation placed at the beginning and narrated twice, points to its great importance, as the theme is carried on throughout the Bible, more in anthropomorphic description in the pre-exilic history of Israel (Gen 2, Ps 104) and in more cosmic and total vision and God as Lord of the world in the post-exilic period (Gen 1, Ps. 33, Is 40). The root vision of God is the Creator God and the history of the universe is hinged on the creative act of God.

The Old Testament has constant reference to creation and to God the Creator. There are a few passing allusions to Yahweh's victory over powers in creation myths, such as over Leviathan and Rehab (Ps 74:13-15; Jb 9:13), and about God's victory over chaos in creation (Ps 89:14, Is 51:9). But God alone is the author of creation (bara': Gen 1:1 and elsewhere). The painful experience of the Exile makes Israel recognize Yahweh not merely as the God of Israel, but as Creator God Lord and ruler of the Universe and all nations: "I have created the earth, men and animals which there are on the whole earth, by my great power and outstretched arm, and I give them to whom I will" (Jer 27:5). Deutero-Isaiah further indicates that as Yahweh has fashioned Israel, over and above He fashions and rules all nations and creation (Dt-Is 43:7,15,21; 44:2,21,24; 45:11; 49:5 etc.). The Psalms often pick up the glory and praise of God as Creator of all, as Israel recalls the wondrous work of God (cf. also Song of the Three Young Men in Daniel).

The story of the Floods (Gen 6-8) manifests how catastrophic disorders in creation and in the natural order result from the sinfulness of mankind, and how God safeguards His creation always.

In the New Testament, creation of the world is referred to more as arriving to its final times. The Creator God is seen as the loving Father of all. Jesus gently speaks of the everlasting care of

the Father for all created things, such as “birds in the air” and “lilies in the fields”, as also for mankind (Mt 6: 6:25-34).

Reference is made to the indissoluble nature of marriage founded in the order of creation (Mk 10:6; Mt 19:4). Jesus refers to final tribulations more catastrophic than those “from the beginning of creation” (Mk 13:19). Jesus also refers to the Father as “Lord of heaven and earth”, who fulfils everything in new wisdom (Mt 11:25).

Often the new order of things in Jesus is seen as manifestation of things “kept secret from the foundation of the world” (Mt 13:35, 25:34; Lk 11:50; Jn 17:24; Eph 1:4, 1 Pt 1:20, Rev 13:5, 17:8 etc), alluding to time even before creation and since.

Jesus manifests His authority over the winds and the sea (Mk 4:35ff). Jesus refers to great upheavals in the heaven and the earth at the coming of the final times of redemption (Mt 24); there is a catastrophic sign - earthquake - at the moment of His redemptive death (Mt 27:50-53). Even catastrophes in creation and nature contain an inner meaning and orientation pointing to challenging aspects toward redemption of the world.

Creation by God, revealed by Jesus as Father, is through the Word, revealed now as the Only Begotten Son, in whom all find its being (Jn 1: 3), who is “the beginning of God’s creation” (Rev 3:15) and now the Lamb, in whom is established “the new heaven and the new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away” - the coming of the “new city, Jerusalem” (Rev 21: 1-2). For Paul the Christ-event is spearheading the communion of all peoples, Jews and Gentiles, and all creation, to “make all men see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things” (Eph 3:9); Christ “is the image of the invisible God, the first born of all creation, for in Him all things were created in heaven and on earth” (Col 1:15). In Christ, the Incarnate Word, the new creation happens; and in Him, as the new Adam, stewardship of creation is fulfilled.

2. THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

In this section, the theological reflection is an attempt to articulate a faith response to God's self-communication through Jesus Christ. It is important to note that a theological reflection in no way replaces a scientific explanation. Science and theology each has its own distinct purview, and consequently, distinct methodology. Science involves an explanation of reality through a study of the elements of the universe and their interaction. Theology, on the other hand, treats the relationship between this scientific world and God as it is embodied in Christian Revelation. Consequently theology seeks to understand from a larger, deeper perspective, what science perceives on the level of observation.

The purpose of this section is to provide an Eco-theology, to look at the facts revealed by science from an ecological point of view, to ponder the mystery they manifest in the light of Christian faith, and draw from it a praxis.

One has to bear in mind that all Catholic theology presupposes a "Catholic" perspective: a certain way of viewing God, a certain way of viewing the human person and a certain way of looking at the world. In this regard, the universe and the human person, depend on God, but are not God - a relationship which is expressed in the core category of "creation".

Therefore, from an ecological point of view, contemporary theological reflection has generally tended to link itself to two trends of thought already present in the Bible, generally styled the Covenant Tradition and the Sacramental Tradition respectively.

A. THE COVENANT TRADITION

The Covenant Tradition is a vision elaborated around the key concept of the "covenant" which has had a major impact on the self-understanding of Judaeo-Christianity. The core of the Israelite understanding of its relationship with God was the covenant. This can be considered the foundation for the rest of

the recorded history of the relationship between Israel and God, as the Israelites saw it.

The Israelites did not understand God as being merely the guarantor of the Covenant; rather He was Himself considered to be an integral part of it. On the anthropological level, the people of Israel as a whole, is presented as the “addressee” of God, whom God encounters, confronts, challenges and empowers. For the Old Testament understanding, being created in “the image of God”, was not merely a religious overlay on natural humanity, but was considered fundamental to authentic humanity. And yet, on the other hand, in their freedom, the human person is also confronted with the mystery of evil and the option of sin. This awareness is articulated at different levels: In the first place, the people of Israel as a whole are the recipient of a special call (vocation) given by God; they are called to realise a task entrusted to them (mission) and are empowered for the same (consecration). As a consequence, religion permeated the entire social life of the Israelites. Cultic expressions, for the Israelites, embodied all those acts by which communities or individuals gave outward expression to their religious life, by which they sought and achieved contact with God.

From an eco-theological point of view, the Old Testament understanding of God did not set history against nature, but rather experienced God as the Lord of heaven and earth, whose power was present in every dimension of their lives. The same steadfast love of God was present when God created nature and likewise when God “brought Israel out from Egypt”. This is basically envisaged as one relationship, a lived reality in history that is not differentiated into separate dimensions of “creation” and redemption”. The powerful God who was present in historical acts of deliverance was at the same time the God who “made heaven and earth”. Furthermore, the blessing of God’s presence was found not only in those spheres of nature under human domain. God is equally present in places and times in nature to which humans have no access. God also provided for the wild animals not under human control. Although the metaphor of God as “potter” is modelled after the artisan

shaping artefacts (cf. Genesis 2/7), God is seen as creating a “living world” not “dead things”. Succinctly put, according to the Covenant Tradition, the natural world is pervasively and realistically present. God is understood as being present not only in the blessings of society and nature, but also in social and natural disasters.

In the Old Testament, not only was nature depicted as God’s good creation and covenant partner, but it shared in the blessings of the human covenant as well as in judgment when that covenant is broken.

In the light of the above, all human authority over nature was always envisaged as a delegated authority. Old Testament thought linked the covenantal relation of God to Israel to the gift of the “land”. The covenantal relationship between justice and prosperity in the land is found spelt out in detail in the sabbatical legislations.

From a study of recent trends in Christology one can discern its ecological potential. The following features emerge as dimensions of an “Ecological Christology”: the insistence on justice to the oppressed, including nature, and the realisation that solidarity with the oppressed will result in a changed lifestyle for the affluent; the need to turn to the earth, respecting and caring for it in local, ordinary ways; the recognition that God is with us, pre-eminently in the Christ event; but also in all that He has created; thus uniting all creation and sanctifying human life; the promise of a renewed creation through the hope of the resurrection, a promise that includes the entire cosmos and speaks to our ecological crisis; and finally, acknowledgement that human salvation of wellbeing and nature’s health are connected. Ecological Christology in the Covenant Tradition tends to focus on sin as the refusal to share the necessities of life with others, which includes humans and other life-forms. It is insatiable greed wanting to have all. This Christology is easily extended to nature: nature is the “new poor”. Covenant Christology provide a firm base for extending

“rights” to other life-forms, countering the supposition that sentimental attachment to nature is sufficient

B. THE SACRAMENTAL TRADITION

There is also another strand of thought in Biblical reflection known as the Sacramental Tradition, which has been seen to carry a wealth of ecological potential. In Sacramental Theology, the material creation becomes sign, symbol and instrument of God’s creative and saving action. Here, God is encountered as revealing God’s self in and through His salvific actions. He deals with His people without, however, allowing Himself to be encapsulated by them in a free, personal and existential encounter. In this process then, wherein He reveals His own priorities, one gets a glimpse of “who He is”.

To be a Christian necessarily involves encountering Jesus Christ, since Christianity is basically ‘discipleship’ of Jesus Christ. Here the emphasis is focused on the fact that Jesus Christ is the supreme expression of God’s radical commitment to humanity, which includes the cosmos. And this same Jesus is also envisaged as the symbol and the reality of the cosmos returning God’s embrace with a definitive “yes”. Among the different Christologies, in the Sacramental Tradition, the so-called Wisdom Christologies understand Jesus as the embodiment of God’s creative and ordering energy in both the human and natural worlds. Sacramental Christologies are characterised by their dimension of presence. The world is seen as being filled with the grandeur of God.

The Sacramental Tradition involves a systematic understanding of the Trinitarian God. Such a Trinitarian theology, in its turn, is intrinsically connected to Christology, since there can be no theology of the Trinity which is not explicitly grounded in the Christ event in the experience of the Holy Spirit; and no real Christology without a Trinitarian theology of the Godhead. From another point of view, the Sacramental Tradition emphasises the fact that there can be no theology of Jesus Christ which is not at the same time a theology of human persons

understood as interrelated creatures. An ecological theology then, will spring from an understanding of Jesus Christ, of the God revealed in Jesus Christ, and of a consequent understanding of humankind and other creatures.

The main thread of the Western theology of the Trinity runs through the visions of Augustine and Thomas Aquinas and obviously has much to offer to the contemporary world. It has always been centred on relations and the divine communion. Unlike the Greek tradition, it has tended to focus on the One Divine Nature of the Godhead than on the salvific missions of the Persons. Its emphasis on the being or substance of God has sometimes tended to obscure the reality of relationships – although it must be asserted that for Aquinas, for example, relations remain central. And its primary analogy or model is taken from the psychology of an individual thinking and loving person rather than from the experience of community.

For Thomas Aquinas, creation was not simply an act of God restricted to the origins, but rather a continuous involvement on the part of God. God is the cause of all being without exception, which signifies that God creates, in a most radical sense, out of nothing. According to Aquinas then, creation is fundamentally and essentially a relationship of the creature to the Creator as the principle of its very being. In this view, not only is God understood as holding all creatures in being (*conservatio*), but also as a principle of its activities (*concursum*). God is understood as the absolute or primary cause of all things. This absolute causality of God's being does not contravene secondary causality whereby creatures have an effect upon one another. The purview of science is the world of secondary causality.

C. CONTEMPORARY ATTEMPTS

In the light of the current ecological crisis, there have been attempts to retrieve a model of understanding the Trinity, with a view to dealing with such a concern. There are contemporary theologians who have developed creative emphases in Trinitarian theology that attempt to bring out more forcefully the

personal, relational and communitarian aspects of the Christian understanding of the Triune God. In this regard, there are important insights in the Scholastic tradition of the Middle Ages that have served as a great resource for this contemporary rethink. Richard of St. Victor for one, suggests that relationships of mutual love are the foundation of all reality. He argues that all creation springs from this dynamism of mutual love. For Bonaventure, instead, the procession of Word and Spirit from the Father springs from the very being of God; but, as far as creatures are concerned, they exist by way of exemplary causality, entirely from the divine free choice to create. In this community of all creation then, each species has its own unique place. Every creature bears the “stamp of origin” of the creation, the one primordial ground of all being. Every type of creature must be understood as reflecting something of the mystery of the creator. Humankind is part of the world of beings which are all related to one another as one community grounded in the life of God. However, in both instances, relationality is seen as the source of creature-hood.

More recently, there have been attempts on the part of many theologians to synthesize the dynamism involved in the Covenantal and Sacramental Traditions, by viewing the totality of creation with all its immense diversity as part of a unified whole; or in other words, to shift from an “Either x Or” mentality to a “Both x And” mind-set. This theological holism, firmly grounded in the one creator God, generally speaking, can be articulated in the following affirmations: God is the creator of the entire cosmos as one, diversified but yet inter-related system; furthermore, the same God is present to the whole of the cosmos sustaining and empowering it; finally, God is bringing creation to its completion.

There have been creative attempts on the part of contemporary scholars like Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and Karl Rahner who suggest that the human person can be understood, situated in a dynamic and evolutionary sense, in consonance with the faith in the Creator God. In other words God creates and empowers matter in such a way that it becomes self-aware and capable of

entering into a free and personal relationship with God. This gives a new perspective and new depth to the relationship that human beings have with all of matter. It would imply that the story of the cosmos and the story of humankind are a single story. In other words, the evolutionary history of the cosmos involves not only the movement from matter to life and the movement from life to self-consciousness, but also the experience by conscious and free persons of God's self-communication by grace. If human beings are the cosmos, they come to consciousness before the grace of God, if they are the self transcendence of matter, they remain profoundly interconnected with birds, rain forests etc.

The irreplaceable place of God is safeguarded in this vision. It is God who enables and empowers evolutionary changes to occur. The novelty is that, in this vision, creation is understood now, not as a relationship between the absolute being of God and a static world, but as a relationship between the dynamic being of God and a world in process of coming to be. The dimension of "novelty" obviously cannot simply be due to the creature itself. Karl Rahner, for one, suggests that evolutionary change occurs because of a power that comes from within the creature, but that this power is not due to the nature of the creature but must be understood as the "presence" of God acting from within - a notion which he styles "active self-transcendence". In the first place, the qualifier "self" in the expression is meant to signify that the evolutionary shifts occur through a power which is truly intrinsic to the creature. The capacity of creation to go beyond itself and become more than it was comes from within creation itself. In the second place, the word "transcendence" insists that this inner power does not belong to the being of the creature as such, but to God. In other words, Karl Rahner follows Aquinas closely in regarding creation as fundamentally a relationship between God's absolute being and the finite being of creatures, whereby finite beings are continuously constituted in existence by God. Creation is "not something that happens at the beginning of time but is rather the continuing relationship of the world to its transcendent ground. God is at the heart of the

evolutionary process empowering it from within. In the words of Karl Rahner, "what was formerly understood by the terms '*conseroatio*' and '*conkursus*' in Christian theology is nothing else than the dynamic impulse towards precisely this self-transcendence present in all beings in virtue of the immanence of God".

Viewed from a more holistic perspective, the movement of self-transcendence at the heart of cosmic processes does not reach its fulfilment simply in human life or in human community, but only in the encounter between creator and creatures that is called 'grace'. Grace is, as it were, the universal presence of God bent over us in love. These authors hold that we live in a world of grace, in which God is present in His self-gift to human beings at every point. Every act of human knowledge and freedom is an opening toward the mystery that comes close to us in love. The experience of wonder at the universe, the experience of human limitation, the experience of friendship - these and many other experiences open women and men to the mystery at the heart of human existence. Christian revelation tells us that in this experience of mystery one can see God present, reaching out toward us in self-offering. The life of faith is simply the free response to this love directed toward us from every point of the universe. This position therefore sees human beings and their self-transcendence towards God as the goal of the evolutionary process, thereby giving the human person a unique dignity. At the same time it differs from traditional anthropocentrism because it is profoundly relational. It views human beings as related to the Earth and as "companions" to every other creature. To put it concisely, it sees the human being as a "person" constituted by relationships.

But what of the relationship between the Christ event and the history of the cosmos? Catholic faith believes that Jesus Christ is the revelation of God in and to the world. The whole process of the world's self-transcendence reaches its climax in the "yes" to God embodied in the person and life of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is consubstantial with God, but also with us in His humanity, possessing a truly human nature.

What then is unique in what happens in Jesus of Nazareth? It is the fact that in Jesus Christ, God's self-offering (grace) and the human acceptance of this offer occur in such an absolute way that one can say that this is not only something which God *accomplishes*, but it *is* God. In Jesus "a human reality belongs absolutely to God". Here we find an irrevocable unity between the one who offers and what is offered, between the proclaimer and what is proclaimed. In Jesus Christ, there is such a union between a human reality and God that we can say that this human proclamation and offer is a reality of God. Here the human being and divine self-gift are united in a way that is unmixed, but inseparable and therefore irrevocable. Jesus is the definitive self-communication of God to human beings, and through them to the whole cosmos.

Karl Rahner is of the view that creation and incarnation are two related dimensions of God's self-communication to the world. Rahner situates his evolutionary Christology within the Scotist school of theology which sees the incarnation as the summit of the plan of creation rather than primarily as the restoration of a world order destroyed by sin. For Rahner, then there can be no separation between creation and redemption. There can be no theology of creation which is independent of a theology of redemption, and no theology of redeeming grace which is not related to the created world. Creation and Incarnation are therefore not envisaged as two disparate and juxtaposed acts of God "outwards" which have their origins in two separate initiatives from God.

It is a fact that God has freely chosen to create a universe in which the Word would become flesh. In this universe, every stage of self-transcendence stands as a free gift of God in relationship to the previous state, and this is true above all of the Incarnation. The definition of Chalcedon can be expressed anew, then, from within the cosmic and evolutionary context, in the following fashion: In God's self-bestowal in Jesus of Nazareth, first, *God accepts the cosmos definitively and irrevocably*; second, *the cosmos accepts God definitively and irrevocably*, and third, these two

acceptances are manifested in our history as *constituting a real unity in the one Jesus of Nazareth*.

D. GATHERING THE STRANDS

From the theological overview given above, it is evident that Eco-theology cannot be considered a “finished” product, but is rather to be envisaged as a science “in the making”. It is a creative attempt to retrieve some of the major insights of the Catholic faith in the light of the discoveries of science and with a view to ecological praxis. Hence, rather than present it analytically, it is perhaps more appropriate to articulate its core understanding thematically.

It can be said that Eco-theology has four fundamental focal dimensions around which the reflection has taken place, viz. the Trinity, Jesus Christ, the Human Person and Creation:

i) Trinitarian Dimension

The creative insight of Western Trinitarian theology which goes back to Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, which sees the Divine Persons as subsisting relations, is retrieved and enhanced. There tends to be a shift from metaphysics of Being to a metaphysics of Relationships. All reality tends to be seen as relationships. In the words of Walter Kasper: “The development of the doctrine of the Trinity means a breaking out of an understanding of reality that is characterised by the primacy of subject and nature and into an understanding of reality in which person and relation have priority”. This understanding is further enhanced by seeing the Trinity not only as Creator of all reality, but also as Exemplar.

ii) Christological Dimension

Situating the Christological focus of this science further in its distinctiveness, it was an apparently abstract question discussed during the Middle Ages that initiated the debate which had a major impact on this option, viz.: If Adam had not sinned, would the Son of God have become human? For the Franciscan School of Medieval Thought, this question did not arise because even if

Adam had not sinned, Christ would have become incarnate. Whereas, subjecting the Incarnation to Original Sin, (the Thomistic option) would, in a sense, have meant downplaying the supreme mystery of the Incarnation; and the plan of the Father to send His Son on earth would have then been envisaged only as a corrective measure to the failure of the first parents to obey God. In such a perspective, the primary end of God's operations ad extra no longer seems to be only the manifestation of the divine goodness, but rather the salvation of humankind. The Sacramental Tradition tends to opt for the former emphasis, found already in the New Testament, especially in Paul's letters to the Colossians and Ephesians.

Jesus Christ is seen as the definitive offer of God's love to the world, and likewise the definitive acceptance on the part of creation. Some scholars like Karl Rahner would situate this offer and response within an evolutionary vision of the world which wholly safeguards the primacy and role of God the Creator.

The dimension of exemplarity plays a major role in this stance. An exemplary cause is the pattern, model or exemplar according to which something is made. The Word is the Exemplar for all things. This means that all creatures must be understood as revelatory signs of God. They are the works of art produced by divine Wisdom. He tells us that "every creature is of its very nature a likeness and resemblance to eternal wisdom. This is not an accidental property of creatures, but something that belongs to their very substance. It is an intrinsic characteristic of creatures that they represent and vie expression to the Wisdom of God. For Bonaventure the universe is a book which can be read, a book whose words reveal the Creator.

iii) Anthropological Dimension

In the history of Western thought, reflection on the issue of 'identity' has often been closely linked to the understanding and the consequent application of the 'principle of individuation'. The question regarding the "Who" or "What" of a reality tended to be identified with the question: "What is it that individualises

or distinguishes that reality from other realities?" Different solutions have been forthcoming, which, by and large, adopted either of two approaches: positing the principle of individuation either in the being itself, or one of its constituent elements, or situating it in some extrinsic principle.

However, this entire mode of procedure has raised a prior consideration which has had its impact on the ecological issue. Can individuality ever be an answer to the question "Who"? or does it only respond to the question "What"? Exemplifying the issue, can the question regarding the identity of a human being be posed in terms of individuality at all? Individualisation considers reality as a sample of a species, whereas, in order to respond to the "Who" of a being, one needs a comprehension which stresses *uniqueness*.

Any overview of the history of Western Philosophy would underscore the fact that the concept of "person", has to a large extent, emerged as a response to this need. It emphasises uniqueness and refers to the core of the identity expressed by the "name" - the authentic "I", which is real only when situated within a concrete network of relationships, i.e. a *relational* identity. However, this is not to deny the aspect of the "bodiliness", which is equally constitutive of the human being.

Consequently, in Eco-theology, the human person is situated within creation and at the same time transcends other infra-human beings.

iv) Cosmic Dimension

As mentioned above, the two strands of thought which have been largely used to articulate an Eco-theology are the Covenant Tradition and the Sacramental Tradition. Both trends manifest an openness to the world of nature. As far as the Covenant Tradition is concerned, among the more important covenants, mentioned in the Old Testament are those God made with Noah (Gen 9:8-17) where God makes a "covenant" with human beings and with all creatures, and with Abraham where God promises Abraham and his posterity (Gen 15:7) the possession of the land.

However, among the several Old Testament covenants, a pre-eminence and pride of place was given to the Sinaitic Covenant, concisely expressed in the oft-repeated Old Testament assertion: "You will be my people and I will be your God" (Lev 26:12), which has constant references to the Promised Land. The Sacramental Tradition, on the other hand, stresses the fact that all created reality in some way reveals the presence of God.

E. ECOLOGICAL PRAXIS

Eco-spirituality as a perspective on the spiritual and material fabric of the cosmos is an established part of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Eco-spirituality is a response to the need to deepen our relationship with God. It is to realise that the cosmos is a reflection of the divine, to view the universe as a sacrament of God. Eco-spirituality is a response arising out of a sense of moral responsibility. Eco-spirituality is a response to our vocation to promote God's Kingdom of justice. Justice in the Bible can be described as being faithful to the demands of a relationship.

The uncritical view, held at sometime in the past that everything revolves around human beings and is at their disposal, has had disastrous results. In more recent times, this overly unilateral and anthropocentric vision has at times been used to justify environmental depredation. But, there is an alternative view, at times put forward in an unsystematic way, which suggests that human beings are simply one species among many others, and have no more dignity or rights than any other creature. Such an "equalising" view leads to equally untenable positions. It tends to remove the moral imperative which gives priority to the oppressed poor of the Earth and runs the risk of isolating ecological concerns from concern for social justice. What is needed is a way of seeing the human person which avoids both a mindless anthropocentrism and the undermining of human dignity. In the light of the above, one can speak of certain practical imperatives which arise from Eco-theology.¹⁶

In short, Christian ecological praxis is founded on the understanding that creatures have ethical value not just because they may be useful to human beings, but because they have intrinsic value in themselves. For this reason then, Christian ecological praxis respects the unique value of the human person and gives priority to the poor of the earth. It is essential that reverence for all forms of life is a guiding norm for Christian ecological praxis, founded on the understanding that creatures have ethical value not just because they may be useful to human beings, but because they have a certain value in themselves.

Christian ecological praxis recognises the interdependence of living creatures. A Christian praxis which respects the intrinsic value of all creatures involves a commitment to an ecologically sustainable economic and political system and to a lifestyle congruent with sustainability. The praxis of Christian discipleship involves a change of mind-set and lifestyle and calls for the retrieval of a new era of the Franciscan theology of companionship and family relationship between human beings and other creatures in the one Earth community. A Christian ecological praxis that values the integrity of all creatures goes beyond specific decisions. It is a matter of worldview, emotional commitment, conviction and lifestyle. It is a matter of spirituality, and abiding recognition that other creatures are companions before God in an Earth community, children of the universe.

3. PNEUMATOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

In the context of overlapping feelings of worries and anxieties over the current ecological catastrophe of human beings, we as Christians ought to raise a fundamental question: What brought all these crises? What broke down the strong bond between humans and nature and turned the relationship of partnership in harmony into that of mutual hostility? It is all about human greed. The main cause misleading us to the blind pursuit of profit away from life is the Mammonism which Jesus sternly condemned, denouncing it as never being compatible with God (cf. Mt 6:24).

From a biblical and theological perspective, God's Spirit created the universe and the whole world in a beautiful and abundant way. But today we are living in a world shattered by the paradoxical realities. Scientific technologies are developing rapidly and even boisterously. But still it is so often that we hear the news of various crisis on this planet. There comes an inner doubt: Is this real development? Or is this a rush toward a self-destructive end?

We believe that God never turns away from human sufferings and He Himself suffers with those people who suffer. We reflect on this theme through a theological proposition of 'the universal presence and activity of the Holy Spirit': "The Spirit of the LORD fills the world, is all-embracing, and knows whatever is said" (Wis 1:7). This refers to the abundant presence of the Holy Spirit which is communicated to humans by God's love. This Spirit is present to all of us who are suffering today. And it is through this Holy Spirit that the Word of God in heaven has been conceived into the womb of earth 'for us and for our salvation' (cf. DH 150). In other words, the mystery of the Incarnation, which constitutes the climax of the divine self-communication and self-giving of God, was achieved 'by the power of the Holy Spirit' (cf. Mt 1:20; Lk 1:35). "The conception and birth of Jesus Christ are in fact the greatest work accomplished by the Holy Spirit in the history of Creation and Salvation" (St. John Paul II, *Dominum et Vivificantem*, n.50).

St. Paul describes the pains and sufferings of the creatures on earth in the following way: "We know that all creation is groaning in labour pains even until now, and not only that, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, we also groan within ourselves as we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies." (Rom 8:22-23)

For us, it is the most appropriate moment to sympathise with and reflect on the words of St. Paul with our whole beings, since both human and nature are groaning in suffering and pain. Super typhoons caused by 'global warming' may be the sharp and desperate groaning of Mother Nature. We hear more

groaning from victims who suffer from 'unnatural' natural disasters. The outbreak of 'mad cow disease', 'avian influenza' and 'swine influenza' may be the sound of groaning and sighs coming from the deep lamentation and the bitterness of Mother Nature. We also hear the groaning of the patients with diseases. Human greed has deformed the relationship between human and nature into a hostile one in which both sides become wounded victims.

Therefore, today, facing this global ecological crisis, believing in and searching for the presence of the Holy Spirit in this world is a must. As we confess that the Holy Spirit is the God who is present with us when we suffer and believe that God the Spirit suffers like us, we reflect on the words of St. Paul: "The Spirit too comes to the aid of our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit Itself intercedes with inexpressible groanings." (Rom 8:26)

The Holy Spirit may not practically solve all our ecological problems right away. But the Holy Spirit is there with us as God who is suffering and groaning deeply for us. So we firmly believe that the groaning of all creation paradoxically implies a new hope, since it is a groaning for a new birth, and a longing for a new Creation and reconciliation in Christ: "Whoever is in Christ is a new creation: the old things have passed away; behold, new things have come. And all this is from God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Christ and given us the ministry of reconciliation." (1 Cor 5:17-18)

Our faith never dwells in one place as a fixed practice. Rather, faith means optimistic and dynamic spiritual efforts to search for God's will and signs, following the guidance of the Holy Spirit. In this chaotic world dominated by the logic of *Mammonism*, we are being called to become genuine Christians through pure enthusiasm of faith in the power of the Holy Spirit. As we live in the Spirit, we must always try to follow the Spirit and produce Its fruits of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (cf. Gal 5:22-25). We thus have to know concretely how to live and what to do in this

world. In this sense, we need to reflect on what the prophet Isaiah and Jesus said: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord" (Lk 4:18-19). In fact, we do not belong to the world but to God, since we know the 'Spirit of truth' (cf. 1 Jn 4:5-6). And this 'Spirit of truth' that we know will finally set us free (cf. Jn 8:32; 14:17).

Moreover, we have to pray that the Holy Spirit, God's breath which covers the whole world, will renew all our broken, cracked and distorted beings on earth through Its mysterious presence and activities, just like the event of Pentecost (cf. Acts 2:1-13). "Exalted at the right hand of God, He received the promise of the Holy Spirit from the Father and poured it forth, as you see and hear" (Acts 2:33). So, now it is time to pray for a new Creation, that is, a full recovery of the relationship between human and nature so that they can overcome the mutual hostility and move forward to the new relationship of partnership in harmony and 'the very first status of peace' (*shalom*) at the time of the Creation. And it is time to pray for a powerful and compassionate renewal and for a joyful growing of communion with God through the healing breath of the Holy Spirit: "When you hide your face, they panic. Take away their breath, they perish and return to dust. Send forth your spirit, they are created and you renew the face of earth" (Ps 104:29-30).

4. ETHICAL PERSPECTIVE

The Biblical promise just considered provides one of the most profound, comprehensive, and warranted frame of references for working out a scheme of Christian ethical response for any contemporary social problem or issue. Christian environmental ethics have to have explicit as well as implicit reference to this biblical matrix. A biblical world view offers a holistic methodology and approach to solving all human dilemmas, including ecologic crisis. It treats environmental crisis basically

and fundamentally as a problem of religion. True religion establishes and upholds a triple harmony — between the divine and humanity, human beings among themselves, and human beings with nature. On the other hand, the psychology of alienation wields its force by inducing unnatural and unethical dichotomies in every existential reality. Thus, mind is divorced from matter, flesh is seen to be revolting against the spirit. Man goes about directing and dividing all life and matter to the extent that nature is cut into bits and pieces and atoms and particles. When nature is dissected to this extent, it loses its sacredness and life thus death and decay set in. And in the process, man is totally alienated from nature.

The problem of the environment has therefore to be viewed in relation to all other human and social issues. All these must be seen as those that emerge from the most fundamental of all problems — the problem of human failure to maintain the triple harmony — harmony between the divine, humanity, and the world. The pragmatics of the biblical world view offers a way out from the impending doom and cosmic catastrophe.

At the outset, we need to establish the fact that the environmental ethics of Christianity begin with affirming a belief in the historical person of Jesus Christ and His redemptive work. Christ is the source of all creation. In Himself, Christ who was both God and Man, unites every natural and historical process, all forces, forms, and elements both material and spiritual, and all life both animate and inanimate. Christian ethics are therefore anchored to the central axiom of Christianity -- the Christ of faith and the Christ of history.

Secondly, biblical theology also sets a great deal of emphasis on and recognises the intrinsic and inalienable rights of humankind. The God of Israel is seen as the great liberator God from Egyptian slavery. This experience brought a heightened sense of social awareness which became the hallmark of Jewish social practice and societal life. And the intention to be fair and just towards ones' neighbours, strangers, servants, and slaves was an integral part of Jewish social thought, practice, and ethos. The

Jewish religious practice of the observance of the Sabbath day and Jubilee years exhibits a remarkable sense of fair play and justice. Eco-social philosophers tell us that there is a corresponding relationship between human oppression and injustice and ecologic crisis. In some ways, it is accurate to say that the exploitation of nature and exploitation of fellow human beings go hand in hand since the rebellion against God (Creator) is also rebellion against nature.

Thirdly, the religion of the Old Testament has a deep sense of commitment and faith in the continuity of the human race and the reverence for human life. Life on earth was always lived in the light of the generations yet to be born. The responsibility towards unborn future generations has become an ethical issue. For the first time in history humanity is faced with the real danger of being completely wiped away from the face of the earth. Besides, this present generation has already used up more natural resources during its lifetime than all the resources ever consumed since homosapiens appeared on the scene.

Modern society is aptly called the “now” generation. Unborn humanity has been denied its inalienable rights of existence, survival, and perpetuation. If the continuity of the human race is to be assured, there is no getting away from giving up the secular attitude of the modern scientific mind-set; instead, we must go on to rediscover the sacredness of nature and restore to it its original status. For this reason, Old Testament ethics admonish that the land and the cattle which are in the service of man are to be treated as those that have their own intrinsic value and unique destiny. The implicit understanding of this exhortation was that the world of nature is sacred, and it belonged ultimately to the creator God. All plants, animals, minerals, water, air, the world, and universe belong to the same family of God’s creation as that of humanity. The Bible recognises the intrinsic right of all living beings to be fruitful and multiply their kind. Man has no right to prevent any part of nature from fulfilling its rightful role.

Although Scriptures do not explicitly articulate or advocate animal or biosphere rights, the essence of eco-ethics are to be found in cultic observances like Sabbath Day and Sabbath year. Biblical ethics recognise the rights of animals and land and offer them the same treatment meted out to human labour. Just as human labourers need to have a day of rest once every seven days, the land too is to be allowed to rest and lie fallow for one year in every seven. All farm animals are to be assured of the day of rest and are not to be used for work. Not only farm animals, but also wild animals are to be assured of their quota of food (Exodus 23:11). Since all creatures have their unique God-given role to fulfil, man has no right to eliminate them or exploit them for his eccentric ends. These prescriptions laid down thousands of years ago are truly incredible and have no parallel in any other religion.

The problem is that man perceives human rights at cross-purposes with that of the biosphere and animal rights. Ultimately human rights are thought to be preponderant over the rights of other species and the biosphere. The solution to this problem will be found only when humanity as a whole comes to recognise and acknowledge the intrinsic rights of every element and life in nature -- rights on par with the rights of humanity.

And finally, Biblical theology recognises the ethical teleology of the whole of nature and universe, that the world of nature and the whole cosmos will share in the final triumph and liberation of humanity from death and decay to eternal life. This destiny of nature and the universe is inseparably linked with that of human beings. This view is expressed in St. Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome (Romans 8:19-22). This is indeed a mystical and profound statement. St. Paul looks forward to a time when nature will share in human destiny and liberation. We will not discard this universe and migrate to another eternal habitat. Rather, this cosmos will be so transformed that it will become the most perfect habitat for both God and humanity to share their eternity together.

A new Christian ethics of liberation is necessary. We can go back to our roots and the Bible and read afresh about a loving God who is involved in continuously re-creating the whole universe and liberating it from death, decay, and disintegration caused by humanity's sins and failure. Christians are called upon to join hands with this God of creation and thus share in the privilege of becoming co-creationists in recreating this universe and preparing both humanity and nature for meaningful participation in the coming new age.

5. THEOLOGICAL CONCERNS

The first theological concern is about having a proper understanding of the concept of **STEWARDSHIP**. In other words, it is about being respectful and responsible with the resources and the gifts that God has given us in His creation. It's about sharing in God's appreciation for the world which He called "very good" (Genesis 1:31), and recognising, "From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded" (Luke 12:48). The belief that God is the creator of the whole universe is found in not just the Bible but also in all Sacred Books of other religious traditions. The entire world is God's creation, and its continuing life and preservation are thoroughly dependent upon God. Likewise, man who is part of God's creation is also dependent upon Him for his life and survival.

The Creation accounts in the Book of Genesis affirm the goodness of God by affirming the goodness of everything He has created. God is good in Himself and good in everything He desires and does for His creatures – humankind and the world. God's goodness is attested in on-going creation. The creation story also tells us how humankind and the world may individually and collectively participate and share in this divine goodness. Psalm 104, more than anything else, speaks about this inter-dependent order and relationship. The Christian concept of stewardship is well captured in the words of Teilhard de

Chardin who said that God evolves the universe and brings it to completion through the instrumentality of human beings.

The second theological concern is about **JUSTICE** and **CHARITY**. It is about recognising that it is not right when a small proportion of the earth's population exhaust its resources and the rest have to face the brunt of the consequences.,. This is especially true when the God you worship, serve, and follow is described as a God of justice, and when you're encouraged to "do justice" (Micah 6:8). In this context then, the poor, those who have not, are often the hardest hit by the excesses of those who have. The writer of Proverbs said, "Those who oppress the poor insult their Maker" (14:31), and even if we're not directly treating them badly, such an injunction should at least make us think twice about how we live. The gospel story of the rich man and Lazarus probably depicts well the indifferent attitude shown by many people towards ecological concerns.

Closely related to the concept of justice is the understanding that the purpose of creation is to proclaim God's glory. The divine life is actively manifested in and through the created world. Therefore it would not be right to deal with the world of nature merely in unjust materialistic terms. Nature has its own intrinsic value, teleology, and destiny, and humanity is called to recognise this fact and respond to it with respect and reverence.

The third concern is about **RELATIONSHIP**. The communal relationship between nature and mankind is so integral to our Christian faith. This concern is about harmonious and healthy interaction not only with the people around us, but with the world around us, realising that what we do with the latter will always impact the former at some level. Jesus said that loving one's neighbour was akin to loving God (Matthew 22:36-40), so if we love God as we claim to, we will love those with whom we share in the gift of God's creation. In other words, human life and human dignity must be in the forefront of environmental theology.

The problem of environment has therefore to be viewed in relation to all other human, social and relational issues. All these

must be seen as those that emerge from the most fundamental of all problems – the problem lies in human failure to maintain the triple harmony – harmony between the divine, humanity, and the cosmos. At the outset, we need to establish the fact that the Christian eco-theology must begin with affirming a belief in the historical person of Jesus Christ and His redemptive work. Christ is the source of all creation. In Himself, Christ who was both God and Man unites every natural and historical process, all forces, forms, and elements both material and spiritual, and all life both animate and inanimate. Christian eco-theology therefore must be anchored to the central axiom of Christianity -- the Christ of faith and the Christ of history.

The forth concern is about **CONTINUITY**. We need to understand that this destiny of the cosmos is inseparably linked with that of human beings. As expressed in St. Paul's letter to the Romans: For what can be known about God is perfectly plain to them, since God has made it plain to them: Ever since the creation of the world, the invisible existence of God and his everlasting power have been clearly seen by the mind's understanding of created things (Romans 8:19-20). In fact, St. Paul looks forward to a time when nature will share in human destiny and liberation. We will not discard this universe and migrate to another eternal habitat. Rather, this cosmos will be so transformed that it will become the most perfect habitat for both God and humanity to share their eternity together.

The above four theological concerns are codified in the Catechism of the Catholic Church and in reference to respect for the integrity of creation states: *The seventh commandment [thou shall not steal] enjoins respect for the integrity of creation. Animals, like plants and inanimate beings, are by nature destined for the common good of past, present, and future humanity. Use of the mineral, vegetable, and animal resources of the universe cannot be divorced from respect for moral imperatives. Man's dominion over inanimate and other living beings granted by the Creator is not absolute; it is limited by concern for the quality of life of his neighbour, including generations to come; it requires a religious respect for the integrity of creation (CCC 2415).*

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

What then are our recommendations having seen the challenges from this theological perspective? At the very outset, the Christian faith must promote a theology of responsible stewardship. The idea that man and woman are co-creators with God must permeate Christian theology. This understanding is not only Christian but also exists in all religious traditions found in Asia. This is a commonality that can be encouraged to promote even greater dialogue and harmony between the different traditions. In solidarity with all peoples, this “crisis” can be confronted. An appropriate model of stewardship must lead the call for human care of the environment.

Apart from a theology of responsible stewardship, the Christian faith must also rediscover a spirituality that considers creation as God’s gift that is to be cherished by all. This is not something new but something which has always been present in our understanding of God. The Book of Psalms is filled with expressions of the relationship between humanity and the cosmos. “Aware of the value of prayer, we must implore God the Creator to enlighten people everywhere regarding the duty to respect and carefully guard creation” (Common Declaration of Environment Ethics 2002).

Catechesis at all levels can play an integral role in promoting a culture of respect for creation. This can also be further concretised when our liturgical celebrations can also celebrate this harmony with creation and also instil greater value for creation. Catechesis can also be in the form of cooperating with other organisations that foster the integrity of creation. The Common Declaration of Pope John Paul II and the Ecumenical Patriarch His Holiness Bartholomew I on Environmental Ethics (2002), states that respect for creation stems from respect for human life and dignity. It is on the basis of our recognition that the world is created by God that we can discern an objective moral order within which to articulate a code of environmental ethics. In this perspective, Christians and all other believers have a specific role to play in proclaiming moral values and in

educating people in ecological awareness, which is none other than responsibility towards self, towards others, towards creation.

The Church must be the prophetic voice in calling for justice, sustainable development, good governance and protection of the poor. The Church must not only be the voice, but more than ever, be the leading example for the rest of the world. A renewed lifestyle within the Church can go a long way towards the promotion of ecological sustainability. What is required is a radical rethinking of our consumer culture.

These are only some recommendations that can put us back on the right course. But underlining all these efforts must be a new Christian ethos of liberation which is of utmost necessity. This new ethics of liberation should acknowledge the inalienable rights of nature and work for its liberation from human oppression. Christians do not have to turn anywhere else to find it. We have to go back to our roots and the Scriptures and read afresh about a loving God who is involved continuously in recreating the whole universe and liberating it from death, decay, and disintegration caused by humanity's sins and failure. Christians in Asia are called upon to join hands with this God of creation and thus share in the privilege of becoming co-creators in recreating this universe and preparing both humanity and nature for a meaningful participation in this ethos of harmony.

Some Practical Suggestions:

- Eco-literacy (environmental awareness) at all levels – elementary schools, high schools, families, seminaries, religious houses of formation, on-going formation of priests, Basic Ecclesial Communities, Parish Ministries.
- Para-liturgies, reflections, meditations that highlight the creative nature of God and the presence of God in nature.
- Parishes to encourage the need to Reduce, Recycle and Reuse. Parishes can also be centres for recycling.

- Parishes, Catholic Institutions and Schools to adopt methods of being eco friendly.
- Eco-theology / Spirituality to be introduced as a subject in seminaries and houses of formation.
- Eco awareness camps to be organised for children and youth.
- Parishes to explore the use of solar energy.
- Programmes to teach people to conserve energy and respect the environment.
- To encourage Catholics to raise ecological issues with their parliamentary representatives.
- To engage, network and work together with other organisations (NGOs) who have dedicated themselves to the preservation of the environment.
- Bishops' Conferences can take the lead to vocalise environmental issues and call for its preservation.

VI. CONCLUSION

The discussions on ecological problems are never ending. However, every discussion and reflection must lead to some small effort towards some concrete action. As stated in the beginning of this paper, Asia has a great role in the overall preservation of the global environment. For this reason then, the Church in Asia can play an important role towards this goal. Reduce-Recycle-Reuse is not merely a tag-line that the Church in Asia is associated with, but it must also be seen as taking an active role in the preservation of God's creation.

In recent decades, there has been a significant growth in the interest towards environmental problems and also its preservation. There has been great emphasis on environmental virtue ethics where the most frequently mentioned virtues such as care, compassion, humility, respect, reverence, courage and love are stepping stones for creating awareness among the

peoples of the world. Promoting such positive attitudes and the desire for action is crucial for the sake of the future.

It is here that the Church in Asia can play an integral role. Having reflected in this paper the biblical, theological, and spiritual foundations that have been enriched by Asia's rich cultural heritage, it is our hope that this paper can provide an impetus for the Bishops, theologians, pastoral ministers, seminaries, houses of formation and all the peoples of Asia to work on a launch pad not only for greater and deeper discussion but also to instil a desire and conviction to work together for the preservation of the world that we live in – God's gift to humanity.

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