

A Philosophical Approach towards Conserving and Preserving Nature: A Comparative Study of the different concepts in Religion

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Abstract

Nature, has always been considered objective to man, detached from immediate existence and it is only a means towards his end rather an end in itself. Nature more like a physical object is comparable to a machine and it is different from the conscious being man. Moreover, Nature is seen more as a *provider* than a *sustainer*; Nature as a provider, is merely understood only in terms of how it gives, provides and supply rather than seeing it as a sustainer, it is a sanctuary of life. The genesis of destruction is to revive back an understanding of the environment as something which is sacred and nature of possessing a spiritual essence worthy of reverence. Eco-spirituality, as an area of study, focuses on spirituality of man towards nature as the latter being a manifestation of the spiritual connection between human being and the environment; the truth that man and nature shares an intimate and mutual relationship with one another. This study seeks to highlight the primary role of nature; the study of Natural Theology has focus on how nature manifest the divine existence. 'Eco-philosophy', on the other, concentrates on nature as a sanctuary, conserving nature comes with the feeling of fear of losing something, and Eco-anxiety highlights the concern that man has towards nature and this reverence also cause the fear of perceiving nature at its worst. The environmental concern from a philosophical standpoint not just seek a solution but rather to set in to motion a thought that man shares a symbiotic relationship with nature one which is not subordinate to the other.

Keywords: Provider, Sustainer, Natural theology, Eco-spirituality, Eco-philosophy, Eco-Anxiety

Introduction

Man have dwelled in the midst of nature and nature nurtures and pervades his existence. For years this symbiotic relationship between man and nature has been identified and perceived unilaterally only in terms of nature being 'serviceable' for one end or another. Identification and understanding of

importance of the environment and safeguarding it, has usually been relegated under the purview of Science, Ecology and Environmental study but with the growing needs nature has become an epicenter of focus in many other fields as well. Nature and environment have for years been overlooked where it is seen only as a means to an end for humans,

rather than understanding reciprocity of relation. However, with growing crisis in the world towards nature many philosophers, theologians alike have concentrated on the significance of nature and its relationship with humans and all other beings. Nature, as viewed by many theistic religions of the world, is seen as the unique creation of the Divine or nature being the manifestation of the divine. Many charges have been levelled at Christianity as a religion that holds an anthropocentric and subjective worldview when it comes to nature or inanimate objects where man is looked at as the master who occupies the center over all the other creation. With these criticisms that Christianity have been facing, many theologians and philosophers have taken it into concern to show that nature and all other creatures that pervades creation are of equal importance and that man is not alien to nature but rather a custodian of nature and nature encapsulates within it, all the other creation. However, this particular view should not be taken inherently as a relationship of the parts and the whole. The relationship of man and nature *partakes* in the divine order of the world and not one being subordinate to the other. Recent studies have also highlighted on the importance of nature when it comes to Christianity and other theistic religion. This in no way undermines that nature is not a locus, it however reestablishes the notion that nature is indeed a core and a divine emphasis for revelation.

Natural Theology and Nature

Any religious experience is a matter of Divine Revelation, which can also be said, to make any other religious experience possible. The disclosure that has taken place unveils the Divine and this is the concern of religion, that is, unfolding the divine to the receiver. Hence, revelation is understood to be at the center of

religious experience. Natural theology, as a doctrine of revelation, explains the existence of a deity based on reason and ordinary experience of nature.¹ Rodney D .Holder in his article on “*Natural Theology*”, opines, ‘*natural theology is concerned with what we can know about God purely by being human and thinking about the world,*’ apart from any special revelation, and science has often been a resource for this discipline. Other than the concept itself we can even look at the Design Argument put forth by William Paley where he argues that the natural world is as complex a mechanism, and as manifestly designed as any watch. Simply for Paley by looking at the world (creation) we can ultimately know about the existence of God (designer) thereby the world is a matter of divine arrangement. In the sense of Natural Theology, nature although manifesting God’s divine existence through it, its importance cannot be withdrawn because in nature there is a divine manifestation which is a key aspect of that revealing and disclosing focus only on the divine manifestation of God to humans. Even though the emphasis of Natural Theology is on the use of reason and reasoning, but the use of reason is understood in a sense of appreciating the aesthetic beauty of the world or the sublime nature and ultimately acknowledging the existence of God who has made divine arrangements of everything. Nature, therefore, becomes a ground of revelation itself. Natural Theology as a doctrine also involves ‘nature’ in the act of revealing and the act of revelation is possible not only through a mutual disclosure between man and god. That is why, Nature cannot be disregarded when it comes to the question of divine occurrence and manifestation.

All these definitions focuses on Nature as a medium through which the Divine could be comprehended and perceived. The existence of

the Divine is based on nature making it as the core for understanding the divine. It places the human faculty of reasoning at the core of revelation. Furthermore, the concept of Natural Theology explains the ways by which creation in the form of nature manifest or reveals the divine. Nature forms an integral part in the process of revelation which ultimately discredit the view of nature and non-human from an anthropocentric perspective. Nature, here, is not merely a means but an agency whereby revelation takes place and this view of the act of God's revealing and manifesting through nature emphasizes on how nature is of prime importance; man therefore is not a master but a custodian of nature and nature a sustainer. Man as master to nature is entirely different view from man as a custodian of nature as due emphasis is given more on the '*guardianship*' of man. The sense of reverence and awe towards nature comes with the latter perspective, that is, seeing nature as one with man rather a separate entity and it is upon man to look and care for nature. Therefore, Natural Theology is not limited only to man's appreciation of nature but concerns an awareness of taking care of nature because nature is a medium that makes man relationship with God possible. The divine realization is not possible only with man's ability to reason but also with man's nature participation. Divine-Nature-Man connectedness reflects the importance of nature and the aesthetic essence that nature has which causes both divine and man into a circle of relationship. Nature is to God and nature is to man that which is purely *holy* in its essence that it is not something to be mastered by man. Nature not just reflects god but it shows the presence of divinity in it and the beauty that is so unique to it alone that gives it a sense of divine reflection and knowledge. The sense of reverence and love towards nature could be best understood through Eco-Spirituality.

Man, God and Eco-Spirituality

Natural Theology, as a doctrine shows nature as a ground of revelation, a medium through which the divine communicates with the receiver and man's relationship with nature has been understood only subjectively, that is, nature serves a purpose and conserving and preserving it will benefit the future. This underscores a relationship that is more of needs and requirements rather than on emphasizing the affection and attachment that human shares with nature. However, more than the extrinsic relationship that man shares with nature that primarily focuses more on improving and changing the look of nature because it is perceived as merely serving a purpose, it is more about the affection which man has, and Eco-spirituality as an approach talks about the spirituality of man towards nature and seeks to bring religion and environmental activism. Eco-spirituality has been defined as a "manifestation of the spiritual connection between human being and the environment."² Reverence towards the object of faith has been seen in individual's life as it impacts his day-to-day living. Man is taught to show his obeisance and deep reverence towards the object of faith and this is what lead his life or we can even say that morality is taught to him from a religious perspective and how this governs his day-to-day living.

Spirituality, in our everyday usage, as we understand it is a way of living one's life where there is a search for that ultimate end in life, it can be the divine or any ultimate reality and this ultimate union of the divine/ultimate reality with man gives a sense of gratification and contentment stirring his passion and the commitment involve in it. Spirituality can either be religious or non-religious. Spinoza believed that God is "the sum of the natural and physical laws of the universe and certainly not

an individual entity or creator”³ Spinoza brings a distinction between nature *Naturans* and *Natura Naturata* in his ethics” (By) *Natura Naturans* we must understand what is in itself and is conceived through itself, or such attributes of substance as express an eternal and infinite essence, that is... God, insofar as he is considered a free cause. But by *Natura Naturata*, we understand whatever follows from the necessity of God’s nature or from God’s attribute, that is, all the modes of God’s attributes insofar as they are considered as things which are in God, and can neither be, nor conceived without God.” Considering that Nature is an indivisible, eternal or self-caused, substantial whole—in fact, it is the *only* substantial whole. Outside of Nature, there is nothing, and everything that exists is a part of Nature and is brought into being by Nature with a deterministic necessity. God is Nature and Nature is God. Here, the sense of spirituality can be drawn through the relationship that is shared by humans with God or Nature. We are all part of nature, occupied within nature. There is a shift here from God who is a perfect being devoid of all negativity to God as nature who embraces all beings. There is a kind of spirituality whereby man dwells in God (nature) and this view can be compared with Ramunaja’s view of *Prakriti* where he believes that nature is the dwelling place of the soul and, through it, of God himself. Nature, is thus, alive with God. (Hiriyana, 1983) The spirituality that can be understood is one of reverence and the sense of belonging that connects human with nature and this reverence emerge as a deep understanding of nature. This connection leads to an understanding of the indwelling in nature reflecting on the profound interconnectedness between human being and nature. In essence, the idea of indwelling nature discern nature not as a separate entity but an integral part of one’s existence.

Eco-Spirituality and Eco-Philosophy

Having discussed about Eco-Spirituality as that which brings in the sense of reverence towards nature, Spirituality being the desire of a person to attain the ultimate reality or to obtain an intimate relationship with God (nature) this lead one’s spirit to get involve with the sublime in the form of God (nature). Understanding the relationship that man shares with nature can be understood in different ways other than understanding it as a doctrine and a will and spirit towards nature Eco-Philosophy viewed the world as a ‘sanctuary’. (Skolimowski, 1993) The world perceived as a sanctuary, it is therefore the duty of a humans to be its guardian, a shepherd and a responsible priest who maintains the sanctuary. There is a compatibility here between Eco-Spirituality and Eco-Philosophy, whereby one leads to the other, however, the question arises does spirituality leads to eco-philosophy or eco-philosophy leads to spirituality? The concern of a ‘sanctuary’ and the spirit can be seen to be both an important instrument for realizing the value of nature. Humans as guardians and custodians of nature have this feeling of awe and reverence towards nature. The concern here is not because of the realization of the need to preserve the environment but it arises as a moral sense of duty towards the environment and this sense of duty originates from a sense of belongingness. Eco-Philosophy has played a major role in emphasizing the role of nature. This sense of reverence towards the environment, however, is accompanied by fear in the sense of losing nature, losing its sublimity. When nature and man shares a mutual relationship of reciprocity, there is a sense of gratification that emerges and in this way man fears to lose the benign nature. Eco-anxiety plays a major role in emphasizing the concern that man has towards nature and this reverence also cause

the fear of perceiving nature at its worst. Anxiety here brings nature to the forefront whereby man sees that nature is threatened. The awareness and concern for environmental issues reflects a growing recognition of the urgency and severity of ecological challenges. A sense of fear in the positive aspect channelled an environmental stewardship. This concept of Eco-Anxiety, Eco-Philosophy and Eco-Spirituality draws an analogy from the perspective of religion and psychology. Nature as a creation of God and nature as God's manifestation. Every religion emphasizes on the fact that man yearns for an infinite connection with the unseen. There is a sense of incompleteness within, a sense of fear and he seeks to complete it or to become one with the Divine. The object of religion gives a sense of fulfilment to an individual. Nature in another way gives a sense of fulfilment to an individual - from Natural Theology as a doctrine of revelation which unveils the existence of God through Nature using reason, to Eco-Philosophy which seeks to bring in harmony between an individual and nature to Eco-Spirituality which seeks to express a deep relationship shared between human being and nature. All these ways of perceiving the environment shows the emphasis on Nature. Nature as an integral part of the world is not overlooked but it is about understanding the intercourse that both of them shares.

Khasi and Nature

The Khasi of Meghalaya shares an intimate and a sacred relationship with nature. The relationship is symbiotic and nature is held close to one's being. In the words of H.O. Mawrie "*U Khasi u im bad ka mariang bad ka mariang ka im bad u,*" which literally translates "*A Khasi lives with nature and nature lives within him*", which reflects the way of life of a Khasi in one way or another. Nature is not apart of him but it is part of him.

Nature plays a big role in the religious and cultural domain among them and the rituals and practices are held in nature's surrounding. The forest, rivers, mountains reflect the divine presence in it, hence there is a communion between man-nature-god. The Khasis also believe in an unconditional relationship with nature and often calls her "*ka mei-ramew*" or "*ka mei-mariang*" which means "*mother-earth*" or "*mother -nature*". As a mother she embraces human being and not only provide but also sustains their living on earth fostering a sense of belongingness, oneness and an emotional bond with them. The folklore and folktales of the Khasis also exhibit the closeness that man shares with nature. The origin myth of the Khasis is also related and traced to "*U Lum Sohpetbneng*" or the "*Navel of Heavens*" which is a bridge where humankind was connected with the divine and this place till date serves an important purpose of a divine ground during rituals, this shows a deep affinity of the Khasi with nature. The concept of sacred groves or "*law-kyntang*" shows that human being are bound by nature's majestic power to command reverence upon the individuals. Nature has a sacred and a deep meaning and it manifest its holiness, purity, spiritual content and yet there also exist an aura of mysticism in itself which is beyond human awareness and consciousness which aligns an individual in the larger processes of nature.

Conclusion

The realisation of God through nature is an important perspective that commands reverence from man. Man's relationship with nature as understood in the religious realm helps him to realize many other things, for instance from Buddha sitting under the Mahabodhi tree which led to enlightenment shows that man and nature shares not just a subjective and objective relationship but a mutual relationship of awe, wonder and

appreciation. St Francis of Assisi, believes that nature helps him hear God aspiring to seek peace within himself, for him creation is a divine Plan of God and that looking at the world he seeks that inspiration. The sages and yogis who seek for spiritual enlightenment separate themselves from the world of humans and they live by the river banks or the mountain side with the believe that realization of the divine is possible in the stillness of nature. This different perspective only but shows the importance of nature not just a provider but as well as a sustainer.

Endnotes:

¹Chignell, Andrew; Pereboom, Derk (2020),” Natural Theology and Natural Religion”, in Zalta, Edward N.(ed.), *Metaphysics Research Lab*, Stanford University.

²Lincoln, Valerie. Eco-spirituality: Exploring the connection with Nature. *Journal of Holistic Nursing*,18(3),227-44

³Cannon, J. A. (2009, May 17). World in time of upheaval: Sources of enlightenment. *Deseret News*.

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