

Christianity and Anthropocentrism within the Poems of Oodgeroo Noonuccal

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ABSTRACT: Lynn White, Jr. identifies Christianity as anthropocentric in nature. Before him, Max Weber, a German sociologist, tried to indicate a similar kind of interpretation of Judaism and Christianity. For him, the religion of the Bible was responsible for the ripping off the earth ‘from any religious, numen, significance—and holiness’ (Kunzmann 1). Carl Amery supported White’s view in *The End of Providence: The Merciless Consequence of Christinity* (1972). Later, Betsy S. Hilbert’s re-reading of Lynn White Jr.’s above discussed essay “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis” in her essay “Beyond “Thou Shalt Not”: An Ecocritic Reads Deuteronomy” gives the issue a new dimension. She tries to find out White’s design behind proposing St Francis of Assisi as ‘a patron saint for ecologists’. Throughout the essay, Hilbert gives ample examples from the *Bible* to illuminate our apprehension of human relations to the environment. Critics like Betsy say that Christianity has been misinterpreted by earlier critics as rendering humans the power of ‘domination of nature’. But a proper study of the Bible shows God’s original design in endowing special power to humans: to take the responsibility of showing respect for the laws of nature. This paper intends to probe further into the issue and find out the possibilities of Christianity spreading ecocentrism.

KEY WORDS: Anthropocentrism, Christianity, ecocentrism, ecological crisis

Lynn White, Jr. discusses the relation of man with the environment (as directed in the Bible) elaborately in his essay “Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis”. He observes, “Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen” (White 1996, 9). Unlike Greco-Roman mythology believing in a cyclical notion of time, Christianity introduced the concept of time as linear. It also introduced the story of creation of the world by the omnipotent God. He gradually created light and darkness, the heavenly bodies, the earth, and all the plants on it, animals, birds, and fishes. Finally, He created the first man, Adam, and then the first woman, Eve, to accompany Adam. It was man who gave names to all the other elements and thus established his dominance over them. It seems from Genesis that each and every item was created by God only to serve man’s purposes. They are planned particularly for man’s benefit. And above all, though man is also ‘made of clay’, he is not just a part of nature. He resembles God’s image, and hence shares the privileges of the Creator over nature. Christianity also insists upon God’s will that man should exploit nature for ‘proper ends’.

Even before White, the German sociologist Max Weber hinted at similar kind of interpretation of Judaism and Christianity. For him, the religion of the Bible was responsible for the ripping off the earth ‘from any religious, *numen*, significance—and holiness’ (qtd in Kunzmann 2014, 1). Carl Amery supported White’s view in *The End of Providence: The Merciless Consequence of Christianity* (1972). John Passmore justifies White’s accusation of the Bible in his *Man’s Responsibility for Nature* (1974). He argues that if humans are made in the image of God, then human’s relation to nature is equivalent to God’s relation to humanity, i.e., nature is the servant of humanity as humanity is of God’s. In 1981 came out Eugene Drewermann’s *Deadly Progress: The Destruction of the Earth and Humanity as Christian Legacy*. Paulos Mar Gregorios, the Eastern Orthodox, brings a more serious allegation to Genesis. He remarks that the idea of stewardship reduces nature to ‘nothing but an object into our hands for safe keeping and good management’ (Gregorios 1987, 88). Andre Collard, the radical ecofeminist critic, supports him while suggesting: “Genesis presents the view that God created everything and gave it to man[and not just in the generic sense!]

to dominate..” (Collard 1989, 17). Ian McHarg also states that the Bible “encourages the most exploitative and destructive instincts in man...here can be found the sanction and injunction to conquer nature...” (McHarg 1989, 26). Recently Norman Habel from the University of Adelaide refers to a threefold anthropocentrism in Genesis 1:26-28 in his “Introducing Ecological Hermeneutics”. First, the claim in genesis that humanity is made in the image of God gives it a privileged position compared to the other elements of the creation. Second, humanity is given the power to ‘rule’ over the rest of the creation. Finally, humanity is instructed to subdue the earth which, for Habel, reflects the exercise of force.

It seems apparently very surprising that Oodgeroo, a poet belonging to a highly ecocentric race and herself a great admirer of this attitude, refers to Christianity (such an anthropocentric religion) time and again in her poems with great respect for the religion. And when she talks of Christianity or of God, it never seems that she is at all bothering about such an allegation to the religion. In “Colour Bar”, a poem protesting against racism, Oodgeroo reminds the white people of God’s design at the time of creating the universe. She says that He created all of us as equals. He never intended to make any differences among his children. But the whites who brought Christianity to Australia are acting in a way just the opposite to the instructions of the Bible. In this way, the poet thinks, the Christianity they talk of so much becomes meaningless to them: “The Christianity you hold so high/ Is but a lie” (15-16).

The most poignant satire upon such hypocrites is found in “God’s One Mistake.” To show the disgust that God feels at man’s behavior Oodgeroo quotes from Genesis 6, where God says: “It repenteth me that I have made man.” Humans, in search of knowledge of the whole universe, have ignored the most simple things of life. Too much knowledge has made them feel less. They are forgetting the basic lessons of life taught by God:

That hate is wrong,
Injustice evil.
Pain there must be and tears,
Sorrow and death, but not
Intolerance, unkindness, cruelty. (11-15).

Instead, they have chosen the ‘mean and base’ (17), which was never intended by nature. Men alone on earth have chosen such evil things. As a consequence he is now lonely on earth, unhappy. Moreover, their selfish activities have caused disaster to the other lives on the earth too. Oodgeroo anticipates that this error/fault in selection might be the reason that God is repenting for creating mankind. He created mankind with the special gift of ‘reason and free will’ so that they can live life of their own will. But now he feels that such a precious gift was imparted to someone utterly/completely unworthy of it. They couldn’t utilize it for the benefit of the world. Their insensibility has turned bliss into a curse. Their lack of wisdom has led them to choose unhappiness as a consequence of their activity.

Oodgeroo refers to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ in “White Man, Dark Man”. The poet here accepts that the whites had something more to be proud of than the blacks. Jesus Christ was born in their place and enlightened their people with his sermons. But then, it was the same white people who couldn’t value Christ. They were unable to realize the significance of his preaching of loving everyone. And they crucified him. This is an extremely shameful act. Christ here becomes a symbol of innocence. The crucifixion of Christ stands for the crucifixion of the whole biosphere, including the blacks who are inseparable from nature. The sermons of love preached by the Bible are still unintelligible to the whites. They are still incapable of giving proper reverence to Jesus Christ and his words. In “White Australia,” Oodgeroo again addresses the same issue.

The mindset with which the Europeans crucified Christ has not yet changed much. In “Verses VIII,” Oodgeroo apprehends that if Christ returns among us today, he would meet the same treatment as before. He would be looked upon with equal suspicion. He might even be suspected to be a communist, a non-believer in the existence of God. Here I would like to remind that Oodgeroo herself was an active communist in her political life. Her sound knowledge of Marxism helped her to find out the resemblance of the two ideas. Particularly Marx’s concept of the proper utilization of the natural resources with ‘mastery over nature’ may have appealed to her. And probably, she could see within it the reflection of what God may have intended while attributing special qualities to humans.

Betsy S. Hilbert's re-reading of Lynn White Jr.'s above discussed essay "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis" in her essay "Beyond 'Thou Shalt Not': An Ecocritic Reads Deuteronomy" (2001) gives the issue a new dimension. She tries to find out White's design behind proposing St Francis of Assisi as 'a patron saint for ecologists'. She opines/thinks, "White pointed the way for contemporary rethinking about religious attitudes towards environment, seeking the strands within traditional religions that have persistently avowed human responsibility for the care of creation" (Hilbert 2001, 31). Throughout the essay, Hilbert gives ample examples from the Bible to illuminate our apprehension of human relations to the environment. Hilbert observes, "from its first words, spoken in and from the wilderness, Deuteronomy is suffused with the theme of connection to the landscape; it consistently expounds the idea that human beings, in their intricate connections to the earth and to one another, bear the responsibility of justice and righteousness as a condition of their continued survival in the places that give them nurture" (Hilbert 2001, 29).

Critics like Betsy say that Christianity has been misinterpreted by the earlier critics as rendering humans the power of 'domination of nature'. But a proper study of the Bible shows God's original design in endowing special power to humans — to take the responsibility of showing respect for the laws of nature.

Genesis has been alleged to be anthropocentric chiefly for two reasons: 1) the use of the words like 'rule' and 'subdue', and 2) the reference to the creation of humans in the image of God: "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness" (Genesis). This reference has been misinterpreted by critics to render some extent of dominion to be given by God to humans over the natural world. Moo suggests: "The creation story, true to its tendency to present God's creation of the world in polemical interaction with other ancient creation stories, "democratizes" the image of God language, asserting that all human beings are created in God's image and therefore serve as his agents, or vice-regents, in governing the world as created" (Moo 2006, 10). So the 'Christians conforming to the image of God' (Moo 2006, 11) actually indicates towards a wise and loving stewardship of the earth by humanity.

In his attempt to defend Christianity from the allegation of anthropocentrism, Michael R. Stead traces the meanings of the original Hebrew words used in Genesis for 'rule' (*radah*) and 'subdue' (*kabas*) in his essay "To 'Rule Over' and 'Subdue' the Creation". He sees that the word *radah* 'doesn't intrinsically carry the connotation of despotic rule' (Stead 2010, 2). He finds out another word (*perek*, 'harshness') in Biblical Hebrew corresponding to despotic rule. He again finds out that when Psalm 8:7-9 alludes to Genesis 1:26, it replaces the word *radah* with *mashal*. After analyzing the connotations and usage of all these words, Stead comes to the conclusion that "the kind of 'rule' over creation that humanity is given is to be patterned after God's 'rule'—that is, a rule that protects and nurtures, not a despotic rule that exploits" (Stead 2010, 3). Steve Bishop also concentrates on the original Hebrew words for 'rule over' and 'subdue' for proper understanding of the issue. He suggests in his "Green Theology and Deep Ecology: New Age or New Creation?" that "Yet, despite the strength of these words they do not provide humanity with a mandate to dominate or conquer nature. The meaning of these two words is best seen, not in their derivations, but in their context" (Bishop 1991, 4).

The concept of 'managing' the earth for its 'true owner' (Moo 2006, 10) is echoed by most of the critics defending Christianity from the allegation of anthropocentrism. White's accusation chiefly rests upon the existence/occurrence of the two words 'rule over' and 'subdue' in Genesis 1 and 9 to show that humanity is the steward of God's creation, not the owner. He remarks, "God expects us to treat our animals with the dignity that they deserve as God's creatures" (White 1996, 5). Humans are responsible and accountable for their treatment of the non-human world. Steve Bishop also supports the concept of 'stewardship' and says that "the earth has been given to humanity because of God's love and concern for nature" (Bishop 1991, 7). C.F.D. Moule introduces the term vice-regent or sub-manager for man's role as lord under God in his book *Man and Nature in the NT*. He sees man as responsible steward, not an independent tyrant. According to Moule there was nothing like unlimited freedom and right for Biblical man. Moule compares humanity with the operator of a beautifully functioning machine.

As long as the operator follows the instructions left by its maker, the machine runs without problem. But with the violation of the rule he invites destruction both to the machine and to himself. Andrew J. Hoffman and Lloyd E. Sandelands, both from Stephen M. Ross School of Business at the University of Michigan reflect in their Working Paper “Getting Right with Nature: Anthropocentrism, Ecocentrism and Theocentrism” that “This mutuality [of God’s love] animates the role of steward by balancing the Genesis mandate for dominion with the challenge of restraint and replenishment. Man may press nature into his service, but himself must also serve nature, to preserve her integrity and, where possible, to improve her” (Hoffman and Sandelands 2004, 23). Pope John Paul II remarks in the Encyclical Letter, *Contesimus Annus* (1991): “Man thinks he can make arbitrary use of the earth, subjecting it without restraint to his will, as though it did not have its own requisites and a prior God-given purpose, which man can indeed develop but must not betray” (Pope 1991, 56). Moo suggests to interpret human dominion from the perspective of Christ’s own sacrificial ‘rule’. Douglas Hall, after studying extensively over this topic reflects, “If Christology is our fundamental premise both for theological...and anthropological...doctrine, then ‘dominion’ was a way of designating the role of Homo Sapiens within creation can only mean stewardship” (qtd in Moo 2006, 10). Bishop goes on with his argument over the creation story and suggests that the creation was never meant for humanity; it exists for the glory of God. It has its meaning only in God. He further argues that as creation is theocentric, it can never be anthropocentric.

Armerding (1973) also echoes the same thought in “Biblical Perspectives on the Ecology Crisis”. For Armerding (1973, 8), “a Biblical worldview is really theocentric rather than either anthropocentric or biocentric”. Martin Ashley, from the University of the West of England, asserts that in traditions like Judaeo-Christian where God is at the centre of things, humankind cannot be and hence denies the allegation of anthropocentrism. Stead refers to Exodus 23:29, where God explains his intention of giving his people the Promised Land in stages so that the inhabitants of the land would not be driven out from their place. He also places limitations upon the Israelites regarding the use of nature (like the fields are not to be reaped to the border

[Lv 19:9, in Bishop], harvesting allowed from trees five years old [Lv 19:23], the land is to lie fallow regularly [Lv 25:1-12] and so on). These laws clearly indicate towards God's concern for the sustenance of the whole creation. Betsy S. Hilbert begins her essay "Beyond "Thou Shalt Not": An Ecocritic Reads Deuteronomy" by mentioning the Biblical story of Moses and the Promised Land. The Israelites were to pay the price for their continuance in the Promised Land and the price was "social justice—justice not only among themselves but for every other occupant: human, animal, and the land" (Hilbert 2001, 29). For her, Deuteronomy speaks of ethics and ecology, warfare and social justice. The story of Noah, the concepts of the Sabbath year (rest year for the land) and the year of jubilee (Sabbath year of Sabbath year) are the further testimonies to God's care for the land and animals. Douglas J. Moo, author of "Nature in the New Creation: New Testament Eschatology and the Environment", remarks: "The OT then pictures the promised land of Israel as a renewal of the Garden; and therefore, included in the Mosaic law are many provisions for the care of the land itself" (Moo 2006, 10). This attitude leads to the 'fundamental consideration' (Moo 2006, 10) of humanity as merely the 'manager' of the earth 'on behalf of its true owner' (Moo 2006, 10) i.e., God.

But then the deep ecologist Arne Naess objects to the concept of human's role as 'steward' of the earth. He thinks, "The arrogance of stewardship consists in the idea of superiority which underlies the thought that we exist to watch over nature like a highly respected middleman between the Creator and the Creation. We know too little about what happens in nature to take up the task" (Naess 1995, 237). In this respect, Moo suggests that wisdom is needed for proper conservation and development which are integral aspects of human 'rule' of the world. And for acquiring that wisdom we need to gather knowledge starting from the scripture and then supplemented by modern science about the created world. He says, "Christians should seek the best information available about the earth over which we have been appointed stewards" (Moo 2006, 13). According to John Stek, "We can fulfill this vocation [as stewards of the earth], fulfill the very purpose of our being, only as we rightly know both God and Creation" (qtd. in Moo 2006, 13).

It seems that the Aborigines of Australia could, from the very beginning, realize this ecocentric spirit of Christianity. The misinterpretations could never mislead them. Possibly they saw within it the reflection of their own age-old tradition that teaches the human connection with the environment. Maybe this is one of the reasons that in spite of disliking the Europeans and their ways of living, they didn't hesitate to adapt Christianity from the core of their hearts, which has well been reflected within the poems of Oodgeroo Noonuccal.

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