

Building an Eco-Just Society in Myanmar from an Evangelical Baptist Perspective

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Eco-“In”justice in Myanmar

Myanmar, formerly known as Burma, is a resource-rich country with a strong agricultural base. It also has vast timber, natural gas, and fishery reserves and is a leading source of gems and jade. The most productive sectors will continue to be in extractive industries, especially oil and gas, mining, and timber with the latter especially causing environmental degradation. Building eco-justice in Myanmar is an urgent need.

Under the British administration and until the early 1960s, Myanmar was the wealthiest country in Southeast Asia. It was once the world's largest exporter of rice. While under the British rule, Myanmar supplied oil to the world through the Burma Oil Company. Myanmar also had a wealth of natural and labor resources. It produced 75% of the world's teak and had a highly literate population. The country was believed to be on the fast track to development. But it is now one of the poorest nations in southeastern Asia, suffering from decades of stagnation, mismanagement and isolation.

Myanmar is also the largest country in mainland Southeast Asia, with a land area of 676,578 sq km (261,227 sq mi), the 40th-largest in the world (Zambia being the 39th). A wide variation in altitude, latitude and climate creates high diversity of habitats and species: nine of the WWF Global 200 Eco-regions lie wholly or partly in Myanmar, and the World Resources Institute (WRI) has described the Indo-Burmese region as one of the eight hottest hotspots of biodiversity in the world.

The country is blessed (or some would even say cursed) with a wealth of natural resources. Its extensive forests, perhaps the largest intact natural forest ecosystem in the

region, contain commercially-valuable and increasingly rare timber such as Burmese teak (*Tectona grandis*), Pyinkado or ironwood (*Xylia dolabriformis*), Padauk or rosewood (*Pterocarpus macrocarpus*) and Kanyin (*Dipterocarpus* spp.). Natural resources are concentrated along the frontiers with Thailand, China, Bangladesh and India, regions mainly inhabited by Myanmar's numerous minority ethnic groups.

Unfortunately, these forests are now being methodically and relentlessly destroyed, while Myanmar's fisheries are being stripped. New agricultural policies imposed by the ruling State Peace and Development Council (known from 1988-1997 as the State Law and Order Restoration Council, or SLORC) force farmers to double and treble crop rice, ignoring the traditional wisdom of crop rotation and opening the way to potentially disastrous soil depletion and pestilence. Mining and oil and gas operations are being rapidly expanded with dangerous disregard to environmental impact.

This destruction of Myanmar's environment has been documented in several international reports. But Myanmar's peoples today have absolutely no say in how their country's resources are developed. The military closely guards all information, allows no public discussion or dissent, and punishes anyone who dares question its development priorities or other policies.

Broad swaths of rainforest, especially highly-prized teak forests, were opened to Thai loggers to earn foreign exchange and quickly denuded. Forests that for centuries provided the livelihood and cultural milieu for many ethnic minority peoples are being destroyed at an alarming rate exceeding that of Amazonian rainforests. The massive deforestation is causing new problems of erosion, floods, and landslides. It is also threatening some of the last habitats on earth for endangered animals such as the clouded

leopard, gaur, silvered leaf monkey, tapir, tiger, Asian elephant, and Asian rhinoceros, which even vigorous reforestation projects can never re-establish. There is no indication that this logging is slowing.

Tragically, none of these issues receives any recognition, discussion or publicity in the media, which are totally state-controlled. Equally disturbing, the environmental consequences are largely bypassed in intergovernmental, regional and trading debates on Myanmar's precarious economic development. Yet, the country's social and ecological crisis is deepening, evidenced by the growing poverty of the people and the new phenomenon of "environmental refugees" fleeing their homes.

Only very recently did Christian leaders and theologians in Myanmar begin to address the environmental and ecological issues from a Christian perspective. Dr. Samuel Ngun Ling, Director of the Judson Research Center at the Myanmar Institute of Theology, Yangon, voices the feeling of the people when he says: "Indigenous people in Asia, particularly ethnic peoples in Myanmar have experienced bitter suffering in our land such as Western colonization, slavery and subjugation, social and religious discriminations, internal exploitation of the minority groups by the dominant and majority Burman society. In fact, in our search for liberation from oppression and suffering, to protect our land and natural resources is very crucial and central."¹

The words of Dr. Ngun Ling echo the view of an indigenous Indian Christian theologian, K. C. Abraham, who strongly advocates the preservation of mother earth, saying that "our ecological crisis should be seen as a justice issue. Political and social justice is linked to ecological health. We shall not be able to achieve social justice

¹ Samuel Ngun Ling, "World Environmental Day Message," *Engagement: Judson Research Center Bulletin*, Vol. 8 (June, 2007), 45.

without justice for natural environment. We shall not be able to achieve justice for nature without social justice.”² Dr. Ngun Ling tries to bring to our attention the fact that “the ethnic conflicts in Myanmar cannot be handled properly and peacefully without referring to our environmental issues such as deforestation, land degradation, water pollution, species extinction, and climate change. Justice to the land is the key to liberation and human dignity.”³

As pointed out by Ken Gnanakan, concerns of eco-justice are deeper than preserving nature or solving human conflicts. There are at least three areas of concern, the first of which are matters relating to our personal relationships, which deal with issues where individuals or communities exploit powers, pervert justice and deprive the poor of their basic necessities. The next concern deals with issues relating to countries or communities that exploit the poverty of another country. The third concern is a matter of a just relationship between human beings and creation itself: a call to check our exploitation of nature.⁴

The Term “Eco-Justice”

“Eco-justice” means the well-being of all human kind on a thriving earth. As a goal, it retains and reinforces all of the church's longstanding commitment to justice in the social order, and it adds a major new insight of our time: that justice to human beings is inseparable from right relationships with and within the natural order. Eco-justice

² K. C. Abraham, *Liberative Solidarity: Contemporary Perspective on Mission* (Tiruvalla: Christava Sahtiya Samithi, 1996), 114.

³ Samuel Ngun Ling, “World Environmental Day Message,” *Engagement: Judson Research Center Bulletin*, Vol. 8, 45.

⁴ Ken Gnanakan, *God's World: A Theology of the Environment* (London: SPCK, 1999), 136-137.

includes social and economic justice and, by combining it with ecological awareness and appreciation, profoundly affects the way it is to be achieved. Eco-justice means justice to all of God's creation.

In this spiritually grounded perspective, all beings on earth make up one household (*oikos*), which benefits from an economy (*oikonomia*) that takes ecological and social stewardship (*oikonomos*) seriously. Eco-justice provides dynamic frameworks for thought and action that fosters ecological integrity with social-economic justice.⁵ Eco-justice applies the concept of justice to the environment. The primary argument of eco-justice is that the natural world must be included in an evaluation of ethics or morality. Many supporters of eco-justice also support sustainable development throughout the world. But, suggested Rasmussen, the vision, aim and framework should not be that of “sustainable development,” the way to go is “sustainable community.”⁶

Is Christianity or Its Lack of Teaching the Root Cause of Ecological Crises and Injustice Today?

Just over forty years ago, in 1966, Lynn White, Jr., in his lecture⁷ in UCLA, California, laid the blame on Christianity and its teaching about nature as the cause of our ecological crisis. He argued that it is the Christian teaching that “it is God’s will that man exploit nature for his proper ends” which contributed largely to present-day ecological crisis. He declared that Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has ever seen and that the exploitation mentality is built on this religious outlook. And

⁵ Dieter T. Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Christianity and Ecology*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 2000), xxxvi.

⁶ Larry L. Rasmussen, “Global Eco-Justice,” *Christianity and Ecology*, edited by Dieter T. Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 2000), 525.

⁷ Lynn White, Jr., “The Historical Roots of the Ecological Crisis,” *Science*, Vol. 155 (1967), pp. 1203-1207.

indeed, modern science traces its roots to this very doctrine of “dominion” for which White accuses Christians for the ecological crisis we are facing now as a historical root. But White’s critique and accusation of Christianity as the root cause of environmental crisis need further analysis and study in the light of the Biblical teaching and the history of the church.

Simon Pau Khan En, a prominent Christian theologian and church leader in Myanmar, does not blame Christianity per se for our present ecological crisis. But he lists four reasons as the basic causes of the present-day ecological crisis: (1) Inadequate treatment of Pauline theology, by which he means that “the emphasis of human salvation had watered down the cosmic and universal aspect of salvation in the whole structure of Pauline theology.”⁸ (2) The bifurcation of theological emphasis at the great schism, by which he means that after the great schism of the church, the Eastern Church had embraced the doctrine of *ecological soteriology* or cosmic salvation while the Western Church from which all major churches today descended emphasized *anthropological soteriology*, the salvation of human beings only. (3) The partial emphasis of Reformed theology, especially the three *solas* : *sola-scriptura*, scripture alone, *sola gratia*- grace alone, and *sola fide*- faith alone of Martin Luther, which Dr. En says, could well serve to counter the Roman Catholic Church’s doctrines of that time but had accentuated the *anthropological soteriology*.⁹ (3) Revival movements in the history of the church with their emphasis on personal conversion of individuals, which inspired believers to anticipate heaven for the future rather than empowering them to have concern for the nature and environment in the present. His charge is that “this inadequate and defective

⁸ Simon Pau Khan En, “Building An Eco-Just Society,” *Engagement: Judson Research Center Bulletin*, Volume 4 (June, 2005), 55.

⁹ *Ibid.*

theological position emphasizing only human salvation does not only make Christians irresponsible to care for the earth and nature but makes them to abuse and exploit the whole creation of God.”¹⁰

Is Christianity really deficit in its teaching about nature and our need to care for it, and thus responsible for our present ecological crises? Francis Bacon used to be one accused for advocating the view that human dominion over nature is the God-given right. Writing in 1620, at the dawn of modern science, Francis Bacon said, “Only let the human race recover that right over nature which belongs to it by divine bequest, and power be given it.”¹¹ But this is not simply true. Norman Geisler points out that “the celebrated statement for Bacon is misunderstood by his critics, for in the very next sentence, after noting that man’s rights over nature are of divine origin, Bacon carefully adds, ‘The exercise thereof will be governed by sound reason and religion.’”¹² McGrath observes that White “was completely right when he argues that human self-centeredness is the root of our ecological crisis; and completely wrong when he asserts that ‘Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen.’ The most self-centered religion in history is the secular creed of twentieth-century Western culture whose roots lie in the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century and whose foundation belief is that humanity is the arbiter of all ideas and values.”¹³

It is true that Christianity is the mother of modern science and technology. But it is unfair to blame it for the ecological crisis we are facing today for several reasons. Even though the Judeo-Christian concept of creation is at the root of modern science, it is

¹⁰ Ibid., 56.

¹¹ Francis Bacon, *The New Organon*, ed. Fulton H. Anderson (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merril, 1960), 119.

¹² Norman L. Geisler, *Christian Ethics: Issues and Options* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), 308.

¹³ Alister E. McGrath, *The Reenchantment of Nature* (New York: Doubleday, 2002), 54.

wrong to claim that this gave rise to the exploitation of creation. One of the central Christian doctrines is the teaching that in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth to which Christian theology traces the origin of the universe (Gen. 1:1; Ps. 147:1). The earth is the LORD's with all its fullness (Ps. 24:1). Not only the earth, but also the heavens declare the glory of God (Ps. 19:1).

White's statement in the form of blame on Christians for our present ecological crisis shows his ignorance of the history of the church and its theology. The doctrine of creation has been the theme of many Christian theologians and philosophers throughout the history of the church. Francis of Assisi (1181-1226) has always been referred to as "the patron Saint for" environmentalists not without sufficient reason. To him, "all nature became a sign of the love and generosity of God: the whole of God's creation was touched by the new life brought about by Christ."¹⁴ Bonaventure (1217-1274) instructs the soul journeying toward God to see the universe as a wonderful work of art in which one can trace its Maker: "Whoever is not enlightened by the splendor of created things is blind; whoever does not praise God for all these creatures is mute; and whoever after so much evidence does not recognize the First Principle is an idiot (*stulus est*)"¹⁵

Modern Christian theologians and writers have stressed that, far from being the enemy of ecology, the Christian doctrine of creation affirms the importance of human responsibility toward the environment. The noted Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall can be taken as a representative who, at the invitation of the National Council of Churches' Commission on Stewardship, wrote in a study on human responsibility on nature, entitled *Imaging God: Dominion as Stewardship*. He summarizes his viewpoint

¹⁴ Ken Gnanakan, *God's World: A Theology of the Environment*, 92.

¹⁵ Bonaventure, *The Mind's Journey to God*, trans. Lawrence S. Cunningham (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1979), chapter 1, no. 15.

thus: “My thesis, stated in the most rudimentary manner, is that the vocation of the human being within creation is to image God, and that the imaging of God (*Dominus*) described in the tradition of Jerusalem would mean exercising the dominion of stewardship.”¹⁶

The influential German theologian Jürgen Moltmann, noted for his concern to ensure the theologically rigorous application of Christian theology to social, political, and environmental issues, argues that the exploitation of the world reflects the rise of technology and seems to have little to do with specifically Christian teachings. Moltmann stresses the manner in which God can be said to indwell the creation through the Holy Spirit, so the pillage of creation becomes an actual assault on God.¹⁷

The Evangelicals, who have had least interest in the environment until the recent past, have changed these days. The 1994 “Evangelical Declaration on the Care of Creation,” brought together many of the leading representatives of the movement in a common affirmation of the legitimacy of ecological concerns for evangelicals. It states at the outset of the Declaration: “As followers of Jesus Christ, committed to the full authority of the Scriptures, and aware of the ways we have degraded creation, we believe that biblical faith is essential to the solution of our ecological problems.”¹⁸

Modernization and Eco-Justice

When asked to give a detailed assessment of our time the Venerable Samdhong Rinpoche, a prominent Buddhist intellectual and present Prime Minister of the Tibetan Government in Exile, follows Mahatma Gandhi in using the Hindu word “*kaliyuga*,” or

¹⁶ Douglas John Hall, *Imaging God: Dominion as Stewardship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 60.

¹⁷ Alister E. McGrath, *The Reenchantment of Nature* (New York: Doubleday, 2002), 31.

¹⁸ <http://www.creationcare.org/resources/declaration.php>, accessed on November 9, 2008.

“black age” to describe modern civilization, which is self-destroying and according to the teaching of Mahatma this could be considered as a Satanic Civilization. For Samdhong Rinpoche the five basic challenges facing human society are economic disparity and the exploitation of the poor, population increase, the direct violence of wars and armed conflicts, ecological degradation, and the abuse of religion. Like most Asian thinkers interviewed he traces the root cause of problems Asian society is facing to the fundamental Enlightenment assumptions and values of the modern West.¹⁹ Modernization also encourages individualism and competition.²⁰

The Enlightenment desire to dominate nature was realized with the rise of science and technology which backfires in the manipulation and exploitation of nature at many levels. While the western world prided itself in the advances made in science and technology, Romano Guardini (1885-1968), an Italian philosopher, reflected on their impact on environment and lamented in his famous *Letters from Lake Como*. As a Christian philosopher, Guardini was deeply concerned over the failure of technology to respect boundaries.²¹

Paracha Hutanuwatr’s critique of modernity is focused on five major elements which, he believes, are destroying Asian values: (1) the belief in a linear kind of progress and the associate summary dismissal of traditions; (2) the belief in science as the only or primary valid way of knowledge; (3) a skeptical attitudes toward religion and spirituality;

¹⁹ Paracha Hutanuwatr, “Modernization in Asia: Ecological Crisis and Alternatives” *Engagement: Judson Research Center Bulletin*, Vol. 4 (June, 2005), 74.

²⁰ I do not think it is right and wise to blame the Western democracy and capitalism as the cause of modern social problems and exploitations as Kark Marx used to attack them since we have witnessed what devastation communism and socialism had brought to countries in East Europe and Asia. Myanmar (Burma) itself has known it by experience how the “Burmese Way to Socialism” had isolated it from the rest of the world and plunged it into utter poverty while her neighboring countries made astounding economic growth during the 60s and afterwards.

²¹ Alister E. McGrath, *The Reenchantment of Nature*, 94.

(4) a tendency to embrace materialism and over-emphasize individualism; and (5) a belief in human supremacy over nature and the right to conquer and subdue nature.²² He believes and so do many Myanmar and Asian thinkers that the adoption of Enlightenment world view is one of the root causes of ecological crises and injustice in Myanmar and Asia.

Building Eco-Just Society From Myanmar Christian Perspective

The theme of this brief paper is simple and practical: building eco-just society from Myanmar Christian perspective. Having seen the root causes of ecological crisis and injustice in the society, it is easy now to see the need for building an eco-just society based on the teaching of the Bible. How should we proceed with the practical aspect of putting the Biblical teaching of Christian principles in building an eco-just society in countries like Myanmar?

Dr. Pau Khan En puts forward several suggestions as to how we can build an eco-just society in Myanmar. The first of which is to restructure a new theology in ecological perspective, by which he means a holistic biblical view of redemption to recapture the all-embracing understanding of the world and redemption as the transformation of individuals as well as society.²³ He also suggests to formulate relevant spirituality from two sources: (1) the spirituality of the church fathers like John Chrysostom and Francis of Assisi who were very close to nature, and (2) the relevant spirituality from primal

²² Paracha Hutanuwatr, "Modernization in Asia: Ecological Crisis and Alternatives" *Engagement: Judson Research Center Bulletin*, Vol. 4 (June, 2005), 78.

²³ Simon Pau Khan En, "Building An Eco-Just Society," *Engagement: Judson Research Center Bulletin*, Volume 4 (June, 2005), 61.

religion called “Nat” worship in which every object is believed to be inhabited by different “nats.” His third suggestion is that of inter-faith cooperation among the world’s religions in combating the evils of modern society and building eco-just society in its place.²⁴ It is difficult to accept some of his views and proposals to be compatible with the core teaching of the Bible, especially when he suggests that Christians should do well by borrowing concepts from primitive religions.

Does the Bible say anything about eco-justice on which we can build our theology? Is there a clear teaching of the Bible? The Bible definitely has much to say about justice in human relationship to one another and to God’s creation as well. “Like everything else, Christian ecology flows out of Christian theology. Our view of the world flows out of our world view.”²⁵ The prophets constantly cried out against exploitations in their community and time (Isaiah 28:17; 30:18; 42:1; 42:4; Amos 5:15, 24 etc.). “While it was social justice that the prophets addressed, the framework has today been appropriately widened to ecological justice or eco-justice.”²⁶ Jesus’ teachings reflect His concern for justice in all human relationships.

Calvin B. D. Dewitt, a University of Wisconsin professor of environmental studies who founded the Au Sable Institute for Environmental Studies argues in an important paper in 1995 that four fundamental ecological principles can readily be discerned within the Christian Bible:

1. The “earth-keeping principle”: just as the creator keeps and sustains humanity, so humanity must keep and sustain the creator’s creation.
2. The “sabbath principle”: the creation must be allowed to recover from human use of its resources.

²⁴ Ibid., 62.

²⁵ Norman L. Geisler, *Christian Ethics: Issues and Options*, 302.

²⁶ Ken Gnanakan, *God’s World: A Theology of the Environment*, 139.

3. The “fruitfulness principle”: the fecundity of the creation is to be enjoyed, not destroyed.
4. The “fulfillment principle”: there are limits set to humanity’s role within creation, with boundaries set in place that must be respected.²⁷

Building right relationships is the key to building eco-just society. But on what principle should the right relationship between God, and humanity and the rest of creation be built? Of the several metaphors suggested in recent environmental and ecological writings, the principle of stewardship seems to be most appropriate as suggested by Hall:

The Steward is a particularly apt metaphor for humanity because it encapsulates the two sides of human relatedness, the relation to God on the one hand and non-human creatures on the other. The human being is, God’s steward, accountable to God and responsible for its fellow creatures.²⁸

In the New Testament usage, the “steward” is *oikonomos*, “the householder,” one who knows the house rules and cares for the life of the household members. It signals trusteeship, and means broad responsibility and wise management. Another *oikos* word is ecology (*eco+logos*) – “the logic of the house” or knowledge of the structures and dynamics of the household, how it has been configured and run. “Ecology thus means knowing from inside, the interrelated dynamics that make up the total life of the household and the requirements for living together. This is to respect creation’s integrity and live in accord with it.²⁹ Because “ecology is a good stewardship,”³⁰ stewards must be found faithful (I Corinthians 4:2).

Another Myanmar theologian, Dr. Samuel Ngun Ling, lays out his agenda in the following way:

1. Re-read the Bible from an ecological perspective

²⁷ Alister E. McGrath, *The Reenchantment of Nature*, 29.

²⁸ Douglas John Hall, *Imaging God: Dominion as Stewardship*, 36.

²⁹ Larry L. Rasmussen, *Earth Community, Earth Ethics* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1996), 93.

³⁰ Norman L. Geisler, *Christian Ethics: Issues and Options*, 306.

2. Re-visit exclusive church's traditions, doctrines, and theologies and practice
3. Re-examine human moral attitudes, especially towards environment and nature
4. Re-examine human moral attitudes, especially towards environment and nature.
5. Reform communities in order to build an ecologically sound and healthy community where people consume less, share equally, and live simply.³¹

Building eco-just society is not merely seeking solution to ecological problems; at the heart of ecological problems are basic ethical issues, which must be addressed. It must be based on right relationship between God, humanity, and God's creation. The right environmental³² and ecological theology must have God at its center as the Creator and Sustainer of the whole creation and the One who would bring all things to perfection. It must look forward to the future redemption of the whole creation as its consummation. The Biblical mandate for us to be stewards of God's creation must always be our motivating and guiding principle.

That political peace plays a very important role in achieving social justice without which there can never be ecological justice must be acknowledged. "This interdependence is the message implied by the biblical concept of *shalom*, and by The World Council of Churches' current theme, "Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation" (JPIC)."³³ As Paul exhorts us in his letter to Timothy: "I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone – for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and

³¹ Samuel Ngun Ling, "World Environmental Day Message," *Engagement: Judson Research Center Bulletin*, Vol. 8 (June, 2007), 46.

³² Nash prefers to use the word *ecological* rather than *environmental* to describe his treatment of the same issues. He says, "The latter often seems to have anthropocentric connotations, suggesting moral concern only for the *human* environment, rather than for the context of all life." See James A. Nash, *Loving Nature: Ecological Integrity and Christian Responsibility* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 21.

³³ *Ibid.*, 218.

holiness” (1Timothy 2:1-2 NIV). The best we can do in the current situations in Myanmar is hustle and hope!

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