Pharos Journal of Theology ISSN 2414-3324 online Volume 107 (3) Regular Issue (2026)
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Orthodox reflections on Environmental Stewardship for a Sustainable Environment

Prof. Angelo Nicolaides
Research Fellow
University of Zululand
KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa
Pythagoras13@hotmail.com
https//: orcid.org/0000-0002-2153-2853

https://doi.org/10.46222/pharosjot.107.3033

Abstract

This article explores the ethical foundations necessary for achieving a sustainable environment in the 21st century, a period marked by serious ecological crises and global environmental challenges. Although no specific Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) is labelled "environmental ethics," SDG 12, which promotes responsible consumption and production, and SDG 15, which focuses on protecting life on land, strongly reflect the principles of environmental ethics and sustainability. This study employs a qualitative descriptive-analytical design through a systematic literature review. The discussion draws on the perspective of the Orthodox Church as an important Christian approach to environmental responsibility. It also considers philosophical viewpoints on environmental sustainability through the ideas of influential thinkers such as Plato, John Locke, and Martin Heidegger. Environmental ethics is presented as the responsibility humans have to act morally toward nature and ensure the sustainability of the natural world. The article argues that the moral relationship between humanity and the environment is weakening due to factors such as rapid population growth, fossil fuel consumption, deforestation, industrialisation, and excessive capitalist greed. These activities are causing severe environmental degradation and threatening the biodiversity of the planet. Increased production and consumption of goods and energy continue with little concern for environmental protection, while humans fail to take sufficient responsibility for preventing ecological destruction. From a biocentric ethical perspective, all forms of life, including plants, animals, and even non-sentient living organisms, possess intrinsic value and deserve moral consideration. Therefore, ethical principles should guide human interaction with nature, which should be respected rather than treated merely as an object for exploitation. The article concludes that environmental care should be firmly integrated into Christian biblical and theological teachings, encouraging Christians to fulfil their God-given duty as responsible stewards of creation.

Keywords: Natural environment, bioethics, creation, stewardship, sustainability.

Introduction

Environmental ethics deals with the issue of responsible personal behaviour relating to the natural environment in its totality. It considers environmental protection and deals with problems related to the rights of interests of all sentient beings including humans, animals and even ecosystems that can possess rights that humans are obligated to respect. There is a distinction between the instrumental value and intrinsic value of the natural environment. In the former, things are valued as means to some end, however in the latter view, the value of things is predominantly as ends in themselves irrespective of whether they are also useful as

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means to other ends or not (Gonzalez, Atapattu & Seck, 2021). The environment cannot be viewed primarily in terms of its utility to human beings but must clearly also include human obligations to manage natural resources responsibly for future generations. Religious traditions have historically demonstrated varying levels of effectiveness in addressing environmental degradation and there are cases where they have in fact aid and abetted the destruction of ecosystems (Waters, 1995). This necessitates that humans need to develop virtuous character traits, including respect, humility, and demonstrating true care towards the environment. Corporations and individuals that serve them are urged to cultivate an ethical relationship with nature through ongoing virtuous actions and activities (Sandler & Cafaro, 2005). It is inconceivable that the concept of environmental ethics materialized as late as the1970s (Patra, 2014), since there should have been a solid moral relationship between human beings with the natural environment since creation. The World Commission on Environment and Development (1987) also referred to as the Brundtland Report, states that "Sustainable Development is the development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (World Commission on Environment and Development, Our Common Future, 1987: 43).

Adherents of the notion of Anthropocentricism take the position that humans are basically the most important elements in any situation and that humans must always think of themselves first and foremost (Sandler, 2007). An anthropocentric ethic thus asserts that humans are the focus of ethics and nature is merely instrumental to their interests. However, there are those who oppose this idea and maintain that the whole of creation has intrinsic worth (Milstein & Castro-Sotomayor, 2020). The reality is that humans cannot be at the centre of creation, since without nature they have nothing. An anthropocentric and egotistical environmental ethics is leading us on a self-destruct path and change is urgently needed. Humans are not greater than nature and we live in world where we need to find equilibrium between nature and how we use it and where we are ecologically mindful (Gottlieb, 2006; Kreider, 2019). Consequently, the prevailing anthropocentric worldview within modern society and predominates the eco-theological conscience of even Orthodox believers is totally unacceptable since the value of nature and animals is not merely in existence to satiate the physical needs of men and women (Negrov & Malov, 2021). We need justice for the Earth and all therein.

Considering environmental ethics for a sustainable future requires a brief consideration of some important moral theories.

Subjectivism does not always lead to morally justifiable environmental actions This is due to variability in perspectives, and it also highlights the importance of dialogue and inclusivity in seeking to address environmental challenges. Only in this way can societies work towards more universal and flexible solutions to the major sustainability issues posed (Rachels & Rachels, 2012).

The **Ethical Egoism** that is pervading society is highly destructive as it promotes only the self-interests of an agent. Ethical egoism maintains that actions are morally right if they promote the individual's own good. It thus implies that individuals should prioritize their own needs and desires and do not have a moral obligation to benefit others unless doing so serves their own interests. What is needed is a moral attitude toward nature, and respect for nature, which has central place in the foundations of a life-centred system of environmental ethics (Taylor, 1981).

Cultural Relativism argues that diverse cultures have distinct interactions with the natural environment, and these are usually grounded in historical, geographical, and spiritual contexts. Some indigenous cultures consider nature to be a sacred and integral part of their identity, while others may well see it as a resource for exploitation and economic development. For example, the practices of slash-and-burn agriculture or hunting endangered species may be perceived negatively from a Western environmental perspective but in other perspectives they could be considered to be culturally significant and sustainable. Such beliefs could make

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global environmental sustainability efforts very difficult. A balance needs to be found in which there is respect for cultural diversity and yet effective environmental protection and sustainability based on shared solutions to mitigate environmental challenges. (Rachels & Rachels, 2012).

In terms of **Social Contract Theory** humans should adhere to rules that are needed for social living. Environmental protection is part of a social contract, in which governments and individuals agree to preserve the earth's natural resources for the common good. Environmental rights are fundamental to the social contract, safeguarding that future generations have access to a healthy and sustainable natural environment.

Utilitarianism stresses the notion of maximizing the general happiness and minimizing suffering for humans. This principle may be applied to environmental issues by evaluating the harms and benefits of human actions on the well-being of current and future generations when there is a sustainable environment this will contribute to long-term human happiness by delivering clean air, water, adequate food supplies for the earth's burgeoning population, which threatens the practicability of planetary life-support systems (Ehrlich &Ehrlich, 2009; Rachels & Rachels, 2012) and needed resources, as well as preserving biodiversity and maintaining the needed ecological balance. Humans thus need to carefully consider the consequences of their actions on the environment and society in general. All policies that lead to environmental ruin, including inter-alia climate change (Nanda, 2011), deforestation, reducing carbon emissions and pollution, and farming methods are unethical if they cause more harm than good. Non-human animals and ecosystems must be cared for by contemplating their capacity for suffering and well-being (Palmer, 2003). Protecting animal habitats and inhibiting species extinction conserves biodiversity and promotes ecological health, which are critical for human survival and well-being. Utilitarianism is important if it presents practical frameworks for addressing environmental challenges.

From a **Divine Command theory** perspective, humans should act according to God's will as expressed in the Holy Scripture. Christian tradition asserts that humans are distorted or even plagued by basic flaws and in need of correction and healing and live in a sadly fallen and immoral and evil world (Waters, 1995). Thus, the incarnation, death and glorious resurrection of Jesus Christ signifies God's redemptive interaction with all creation, enabling it to attain its purpose, but this requires a cosmic reordering of all creation (Beker, 1980 cited in Waters, 1995). The Churches of the world need to more vigorously promote far greater awareness of the consequences of the actions of the governments relating to the environment in countries where they operate relating to planetary sustainability. A primary issue to drive is that of population growth and mitigate the rampant consumerism the world is facing. Churches by their nature are well situated to lead the pursuit for seeking urgent solutions to pressing environmental problems besetting us. We are part and parcel of nature and must thus strive to find creative solutions to earn the title of being 'good' stewards of the earth and restore it to its intended purposes.

Research method

This study employs a qualitative descriptive-analytical design through a systematic literature review since it explores ideas, values, ethics, and theological perspectives rather than empirical data. A conceptual research approach focused on analysing environmental ethics philosophically and theologically. The extensive systematic literature review/document analysis, was undertaken using books, journal articles, religious texts, and philosophical writings as sources. A purposive sampling technique was applied in order to ensure the relevance and quality of sources. A descriptive-analytical method was used to explain ecological crises and interpret ethical viewpoints The work also reflects a comparative method, comparing philosophical perspectives with Orthodox Christian teachings. Philosophers such

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as Plato, John Locke, and Martin Heidegger were analysed to support ethical arguments. The study used a theological interpretation method to discuss Christian stewardship and biblical teachings on nature. An ethical research framework was used to guide the discussion by evaluating what humans ought to do regarding the natural environment. Thus the study is qualitative, theoretical, literature-based and grounded in literature review and theological as well as philosophical analysis. It is also interdisciplinary, combining philosophy, theology, and environmental ethics**.**

A Bioethics perspective

A Bioethical approach is also important to consider. The current levels of greenhouse gas emissions and also other types of pollution are ringing bells that humanity needs to be far more careful in how resources are used and abused. It is indeed a fact that the huge environmental damage we are experiencing is mainly due to the actions of the wealthier developed nations. What one nation does ultimately affects the rest of world in a range of ways. When developed nations perpetrate environmental degradation the impose severe economic pressures on the poorer nations. What is needed is that "The basic connection is made through the denial of human superiority. Once we reject the claim that humans are superior either in merit or in worth to other living things, we are ready to adopt the attitude of respect" (Taylor, 1991: 15).

Bioethics, the natural environment, and the Holy Bible overlap in many intricate and ways. Bioethics essentially deals with the study of ethical issues arising from advances in biology and medicine. It deals with pressing issues and questions relating to the boundaries of life, the moral standing of human beings and all other living organisms, the responsibilities of medical professionals, and the implications of biotechnology. The natural environment incorporates all living and non-living natural entities. These include all the global ecosystems, biodiversity, and the sustainability of the earth's natural resources. In the book of Genesis 1:26-28, humans are given dominion over the earth and all its creatures and thus are called to care for it in all ways.

Rheeder (2021) states that when creation was brutally harmed because of the selfish deeds of humans, there were reverse events such as the great flood. Humans had become immoral and that their thoughts were evil (Genesis 6:5-7, 12) and they grieved God, which led him to destroy the human and creation by a flood (Genesis 7:21). Despite this, God protected the faithful humans and creation as part of the covenant. There were animals in Noah's ark, thus God protects and interconnects humans and creation including animals. Then a covenant was made with the human beings and all living creatures showing the interconnectedness of existence and the right for nature to be care for (Moltmann, 1999, cited in Rheeder, 2021). The welfare of the animals and sentient and non-sentient creation must also be considered at all times. A Biocentric perspective asserts that all life forms have immense value and need to be cherished, respected and treated accordingly. The entire eco-system, biotic and abiotic nature have great value for humanity and future generations. Ethicists need to speak up and not remain silent on the pressing issues faced by the Earth through human misconduct. We can only improve the lives of humans through a constructively engaged environment and by protecting and caring for God's gift to humanity. Holy Scriptures tell us not to abuse creation in any way (Deuteronomy 20:19; 22:4). Lundberg (2011) advises that for humans to be in God's image we need to care for creation. Lundberg argues that Jesus Christ gave humans responsibility towards the interests of 'the least' including nature (Matthew 25:31-46). Christ came to thwart destruction (Romans 8:21).

We need to dependably oversee and care for the environment while there are those who construe this to mean that humans have the full right to exploit natural resources as they desire, irrespective of disastrous consequences. Both Bioethics and Environmental Ethics support the notion that the well-being of humans is connected to the health of the environment and the

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humans possess an ethical responsibility to future generations which incorporates protecting the natural environment by dispensing natural resources astutely. All humans and non-human creatures, including the sentient and non-sentient require love and care. The sentient beings such as inter-alia humans, animals of all species and marine creatures and perhaps even insects have consciousness and can experience sensations and have feelings and emotions. The non-sentient such as plants and micro-organisms etc react to biological processes and stimuli-response mechanisms and lack consciousness but have huge ecological and instrumental value. Each of these perspectives indicate that an ethical approach to bioethics and environmental issues should be holistic and respect the well-being of all of creation and align with the stewardship principles as found in the Holy Bible (Khoruzhii, 2016).

Environmental Ethics

Environmental ethics seeks to present ethical justifications and solid moral motivations for the need to have environmental protection. It criticizes the worldly, pleasure-seeking and consumerist attitude of rampant capitalism, and calls for a 'green lifestyle' that is balanced with what nature can offer (Toadvine & Brown, 2002). Unsustainable economic systems and excessive consumerism contribute significantly to environmental degradation Every action (or inaction) towards the environment has weighty ethical significance. All actions we perpetrate that adversely affect the Earth and its sentient and non-sentient beings, also affects humanity. To have a sustainable earth requires all humans having caring dispositions. We need to give Earth opportunity to recover from mindless human actions and have a sustainable attitude that safeguards that we continue to respect what God has endowed us with to care for. The needs of the environment are essential to protect as this impacts on the quality of human life going forward (Moltmann, 1999). Therefore, humans have an ethical and also a liturgical spiritual obligation to avert an ecological and total environmental disaster from happening (Meleshko, 2013). For us to have real ethical environmental leadership assumes that people place great value on a balanced ecosystem (Helm 2016). Environmental ethics is crucial since it generates greater ethical awareness of the often undiscriminating and immoral human actions in nature on a daily basis. We cannot live in harmony with the natural environment without greater ecological awareness which will guide us on the path to conserve and sustain our environment and nature. We cannot continue to exploit the Earth as we are currently doing. We all have a duty to preserve the ecosystem of our fragile planet (Khoruzhii, 2016).

Heidegger influenced a number of environmental philosophers, such as Arne Næss, who developed deep ecology, a movement that promotes having an extreme shift in how humanity views and relates with the natural environment. Næss (1973) speaks of the "shallow ecology movement", which is the "fight against pollution and resource depletion". Its key idea is to support the health and affluence of people in the developed countries. The "deep ecology movement", by way of contrast, advocates for biospheric egalitarianism, which promotes the notion that all living things are alike in having value in their own right, independent of their usefulness to others. The deep ecologist advocates recognize the intrinsic value of caring for nature in all activities undertaken by humans. Preserving the natural environment is our duty if we desire to preserve humanity. The 1997 Kyoto Protocol was an important international treaty which built on the earlier United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC-1992) and was adopted at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. The UNFCCC recognized the urgent need for international cooperation in tackling climate change and it importantly recognised that human activities were the key contributing factors to the excessively high rise in global temperatures. The Kyoto Protocol imposed a set of legally binding obligations on the industrialized nations to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions in order to inhibit hazardous intrusion concerning the global climate changes.

There was also a Paris Agreement of 2015, but the Kyoto Protocol remains a fundamental case of concern relating to environmental diplomacy aimed at mitigating disaster. It however fell short as it has only papered over the cracks concerning growing global emissions

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demonstrating a narcissistic attitude by especially the USA as the world's largest emitter of greenhouse gasses (Bassetti, 2002). "The industrial world has already used much of the planet's ecological capital. Global inequality is inter alia the planet's key environmental problem and it remains the dominant main development problem (WCED 1987, Overview, paragraph 17).

Some current international agreements and plans now appear to indicate a stronger commitment to preserving the environment concentrating on climate change and pollution. In April 2024, there were Global Plastics Treaty Negotiations in Ottawa which engaged on the issue of creating a legally binding international treaty to tackle plastic pollution in mainly marine ecosystems. The treaty seeks to set up a final agreement by November 2024 (UNEP - UN Environment Programme, 2024). UNEP plays a core role in developing international environmental agreements and standards, such as the Montreal Protocol relating to materials that exhaust the ozone layer. It seeks to encourage sustainable development, promotes biodiversity and conservation, and calls for drastic climate action (UNEP - UN Environment Programme, 2024).

One of UNEP's key initiatives includes the UN Environment Assembly (UNEA), the world's highest-level decision-making body on the environment, where representatives from all UN member states meet to set global environmental priorities and policies. Additionally, UNEP is instrumental in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, particularly the environmental dimensions of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). There are currently a number of international endeavours on track to implement the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework. These comprise the Bern III Conference in January 2024, which concentrated on developing stronger cooperation among biodiversity-related conventions. This collaboration aims to strengthen global efforts in biodiversity conservation (UNEP - UN Environment Programme, 2024). There is certainly an urgent need to keep seeking workable initiatives to tackle all the environmental challenges posed through needed sincere, ethical and concerned international cooperation and legally binding agreements. Environmental destruction cannot continue as is including inter alia devastation of jungles and forests, damage to freshwater resources, shrinking biodiversity and negatively altered climate change. Global sustainability and also environmental justice must take precedence (Gonzalez, Atapattu & Seck, 2021).

Key role players need to seriously tackle the issues that if left unattended to will lead to the earth's destruction. All the governments of the Earth and the public and private sector including mega corporations, must seek workable solutions to the mega challenges posed by adverse human activities relating to the environment. Environmental policies must be workable and not merely 'feel good' statements. Sustainable development is needed in which all economic development considers all the natural resources of the Earth which are of course finite. UNESCO confirms that humans and the natural environment coexist naturally and are essentially interdependent. People are part of the natural environment (UNESCO 2008). What humans do has value for nature and what transpires in the environment has an effect on humans. The human being is thus clearly an ecological being (Rheeder, 2020).

Sustainable development needs to possess a balance between economic growth, environmental protection and social equity. This encompasses using resources in a way that meets present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs in what is termed intergenerational justice based on good stewardship. Conservation is also critical as it involves the sustainable use of natural resources, and preservation is crucial as well as it essentially focuses on protecting nature from abusive behaviours, maintaining ecosystems and keeping biodiversity intact. Singer, (1991), taking a humanist perspective, argued that nature must be protected as a legacy for future generations because it has been inherited from human ancestors and should be passed down to future generations.

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Environmental ethics necessitates human a having a moral responsibility towards the environment for both a sustainable ecology and society. Nature must be conserved and protected. There is a need for ecological integrity and the maintenance of a healthy and functional global ecosystem (Brady & Phemister, 2012). This involves protecting biodiversity and all natural processes, as well as the resilience of ecological systems. There is of course also a dire need to protect vulnerable communities from environmental harm and ensure equal access to natural resources (Almiron & Tafalla, 2019).

First and foremost is the need to mitigate climate change which is causing immense destruction globally. The level of greenhouse gas emissions must be drastically reduced and the time has come to vigorously transition to renewable energy. Global industries and national governments must make sincere efforts to eliminate environmental damage caused by air pollution and strive to promote public health that benefits humans and nature and not capitalistic greed and industries. In the current era humans have lost the deeper metaphysical dimension of sustainability as we have misplaced what sustainable living entails (Nayak, 2008). Exponents of sustainable living intend to conduct their lives in a sustainable manner that aligns with the natural balance and are generally deferential concerning humanity‘s symbolic connection with the Earth‘s natural ecology (Zimmerman, 1994).

Workable strategies are needed to protect endangered species, and preserve all habitats so that the fragile ecological balance can be restored. Water must be conserved, jungles and forests and all sentient and non- sentient beings must be protected and animals should be treated ethically in farming enterprises and in the natural world (Rolston,1988). Environmental ethics affords us a necessary structure to address the persistent issues facing us. Thus, ethical principles that are Bible based and that align with the teachings other faiths, must be pragmatically used in our daily decision-making processes. Only in this way can we hope to have a more sustainable and just future for all beings. Broome (2019) and McKinnon (2014) shows that climate denialism exist based on defective reasoning to depict individuals as making no substantial contribution to climate change). Some may feel guilty over the human treatment of natural things and systems and thus deny there is anything wrong (Aaltola, 2021).

An Orthodox Christian Theological Reflection

At the outset, it is important to note that there are those who blame Judeo-Christianity for the environmental damage we see today. White (1967) contended that the main elements of Judeo-Christian thinking have stimulated the overexploitation of nature by maintaining the superiority of humans over all other life forms on earth, and by portraying nature as having being created for the use of humans. She believed that the Church Fathers and the Holy Bible itself, support an anthropocentric viewpoint that humans are the only beings on Earth that matter. In reality, if we carefully consider religions in general, it is apparent that they are the foundation of environmental stewardship drives.

The pressing ecological challenges faced mean that the Christian faith inter alia, has an obligation to offer moral leadership and lead by example in providing caring service to people and to all of God’s creation” (Oxford Declaration on Global Warming 2002). As guardians of God's creation, Christianity believes and demonstrates through numerous Biblical passages that human beings have a huge responsibility towards the environment. Human beings are created “in the image and likeness of God” (Genesis 1:26) and are thus called to know there is interdependence between themselves and the natural environment.

St. Isaac the Syrian advises us to be:

> ... humbling ourselves always and giving the glory to Him who works with us in everything and is the cause of our victory; and placing

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> ourselves in His hands in the struggle, saying to God, 'Thou art mighty, Lord, and Thine is the struggle. Fight and conquer in it, Lord, on our behalf'. Because the power that works with us is never defeated.

Numerous passages in the Holy Bible emphasize the importance of caring for creation, however only a few are stated below. For example, in Genesis 2:15 we read "The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it." Furthermore, we read that God is the owner Psalm 24:1: "The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it."

Concerning animals, we read in Proverbs 12:10: "The righteous care for the needs of their animals, but the kindest acts of the wicked are cruel." The book of Deuteronomy 22:6-7 instructs humans to provide humane treatment for all animals. It is evident from the Holy Bible that God has delegated human beings to play a major part in his care for the natural environment (Khoruzhii, 2016).

Chryssavgis (2013) asserts that Orthodox Christianity, Roman Catholicism and also Protestantism, the three major global Christian traditions, do indeed spread the message that environmental leadership and stewardship for God's gift to humanity are vital aspects to consider in daily activities. The Christian world generally considers the Cosmos as created by God, and humankind is thus liable to God for using its resources wisely. Consequently, humans have a responsibility and duty to use creation properly and to violate it is nothing less than abuse. Thus, humans need to care for each other (Matthew 25) and be cognisant of their duties relating to the natural environment (Deuteronomy 22 and 23). Furthermore, humans are to stray from all selfish and sinful behaviour relating to the natural environment because it has inherent purpose and integrity of its own. Creation speaks of God to all you are truly attentive (Romans 1:20). Humans must use their God-given talents and gifts to use nature in a proper fashion but more importantly care for it all the time (Genesis 1). Orthodox Christianity is particularly ecologically sensitive and has a huge aesthetic appreciation of nature and the Incarnation and sacramental tradition which emanates from incarnational theology (Harakas, 1993:217). Respecting creation is respecting God and demonstrating love for one's fellow human beings.

Gottlieb (2006) asserts that all religions are invariably associated with environmental issues. Grim and Tucker (2014) state that all global religions submit that humans need to be ethical and caring in their dealings with others including all sentient beings. Christians have a responsibility to do what they can in order to ensure that they are environmentally sensitive and liable (Florovsky, 1972). God as the creator of the cosmos makes humans accountable to Him for the use of the resources entrusted to them. Thus, the physical and spiritual authenticity of one's life is based on God's divine will and purpose. the world is not a holy place but it is rather a divine gift or consecrated space for habitation by humans and all living entities (Negrov & Malov, 2021). Matthew 25 calls on humans to care about creation while Deuteronomy (22; 23) advocate environmental wellbeing. God is essentially drawing humans to a redeemed future (Santmire, 1985; Moo, 2006; Theokritoff, 2017).

This asceticism aspect in Orthodoxy expects humans to restrain themselves so that they may live in concord with the natural environment. Humans need to exercise self-control, so as to safeguard that the earth's natural resources are bequeathed to later generations to enjoy.

> We believe that Orthodox liturgy and life hold tangible answers to the ultimate questions concerning salvation from corruptibility and death. The Eucharist is at the very center of our worship. And our sin toward the world, or the spiritual root of all our pollution, lies in our refusal to view life and the world as a sacrament of thanksgiving, and as a gift of

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> constant communion with God on a global scale. We envision a new awareness that is not mere philosophical posturing, but a tangible experience of a mystical nature. (His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew 1997), http://www.patrarchate.org/

Orthodox churches are alarmed when it comes to ecological challenges in the world. and they regularly urge their adherents to preserve the integrity of humankind's God-given creation by striving to sustain and restore the life of the earth. The Orthodox Church demonstrated its awareness to environmental challenges based on Holy Scripture and Holy Tradition. Kurzynski (2016) posits that despite clear indications that ecology is vital in Christianity, human beings are far to anthropocentric and do not consider the impact of their actions on society as required when it comes to environmental protection. A Church Father, Saint Maximus the Confessor (580-662 C.E.) in his *The Cosmic Liturgy* confirms that creation celebrates God and is required to be restored to its envisioned state with the Creator. Saint Maximus views creation as a God-given gift and as the location of humankind's spiritual growth. Humans are called to make creation holy, and creation guides on in their quest for salvation (Bordeianu, 2009; Dewhurst, 2014).

From and ethical perspective no generation has the right to exploit nature in an unrestricted fashion at any time or place. Organizations and people in general, have a moral responsibility to carefully monitor and control all economic activities so no harm is done to the environment. In cases where damage is done, of which there are thousands, we have a moral responsibility to remedy the situation (Harakas, 1993).

Considering a sample of important Orthodox Church Hierarchs on Nature and Man

At the outset it should be stressed that the Teachings of the Holy Fathers and Orthodox scholars are in alignment with the teachings all Holy scripture.

Saint Gregory of Nyssa (335-395 C.E.) Saint Gregory of Nyssa did not explicitly address environmental ethics issues, but his profound spiritual principles suggest a very deep respect for the natural world and a human responsibility for its protection. His views on creation, human stewardship, and the interconnectedness of all beings provide a foundation for an ethical approach to environmental care. He maintains that the central work and goal of each human being is to share in the life of God (St Gregory of Nyssa, 1893). Gregory considered all of creation to be an expression of God's will and intelligence. He considered that the natural world mirrors the glory and goodness of God who is our Creator. He thus had a huge respect for the earth as part of God's magnificent creation (Gregory of Nyssa, 1954).

Humans have been created by God to live in fellowship with Him and are called to be custodians of His creation. Saint Gregory argues that there is good news in that humans are no longer outsiders nor barred from God's Kingdom but rather God's subjects and custodians of their God-given world (Gregory of Nyssa, 1954). Christ's sacrifice makes possible a human's ascension to the Father through the work of the *Paraclete* (Holy Spirit). Everything in the Cosmos is connected in a harmonious arrangement, and this exhibits the unity and assortment of God's wondrous creation.

Saint Gregory's viewpoint promotes a holistic view of necessary environmental care, in which the value and purpose of all creatures are appreciated and they need to be cared for. Humans have been given a special dignity and responsibility which implies they need to be ethically driven and care for the natural environment. "From the foundation of the Christian faith, the Orthodox Church has fully understood the message of salvation which Jesus Christ affords humanity. We are called to strive for *Theosis*" (Nicolaides, 2021). Thus, every Christian must be invariably involved in a movement toward God (*Theosis*) or deification and this means

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caring for the environment and nature in general. *Theosis* or attaining godliness, is generally understood to involve a human's spiritual pilgrimage in which one strives to attain perfection and greater holiness. In the Orthodox faith, salvation and redemption are based well within the milieu of *Theosis* (Migne, *Patrologia Graeca,* vols. 44 – 46).

The parallels between the divine and human natures stretch all the way down to the evidential source for the existence of the human *nous* which is free. The *nous* relates to one's intellect or intelligence to comprehend things that are authentic such as for example knowing that degrading the natural environment puts humans on a self-destruct pathway. Gregory maintains that the freedom of the *nous* emanates from the freedom of God and is essentially created in God's image (St Gregory of Nyssa, 1893). Humanity as a key part of the created order, is bestowed with reason and the competence to identify and respect God's presence in the natural order. St. Gregory also promoted a life of simplicity in which humans are required to exercise self-restraint, thus minimizing harm to the environment through over consumption. This basically promoted the notion of one living a spiritual life of moderation promoting the idea of sustainability (Herbermann, 1913).

St. Gregory also had strong eschatological views containing the notion of the fundamental restoration of all of creation which is damaged by human ignorance and greed. He believed that in the Apocalyptic era, the whole Cosmos would be rehabilitated and restored to its originally intended state of concord and immense beauty. The optimism he had for cosmic restoration highlights the significance of working towards the healing and preservation of the earth at the present time of intense degradation (Azkoul, 1995; Ludlow, 2007).

Saint Basil the Great (330-378 C.E.) the Great Hierarch in Orthodoxy, also designated humans as beings who have received a command to become god-like and thus a humans life is only fulfilled when it grows in divinity. He defines the handiwork of the Creator as "everywhere in creation" and investigates the reasons for the manner in which creation is organised. He calls on humans to be communally oriented and care for the ecological wellbeing of the planet for the welfare of all creatures (Constantelos, 1981). He presents a Christian cosmology that he maintains existed before even time. Furthermore, he argues that it way beyond human understanding and has no spatial limitations. It is super-designed and is methodical and deliberate. Thus, it is essentially perfect and a "supreme icon" of the Christian faith that educates and guides humans on getting to know God better (Danielou, 1997). Basil urges us to remembrance that there is indeed a God through His wonderful creation, and we should infuse this into our very souls. "A single plant, a blade of grass or one speck of dust is sufficient to occupy all your intelligence in beholding the art with which it has been made." (Hexaemeron, Homily V.2-3). He notes that God through his creative energies gave existence to the non-existing and sustains all that does exist, but humans destroy creation (St. Basil the Great, Migne, P.G. 32, 101).

St. Basil the Great asserted God protects the whole cosmos and His preservative actions extend to each and every one of the creatures independently. The preservation of species is obtained according to their different natures and that of minerals and inanimate creation is completed by cooperation between divine providence and the laws of nature. God preserves different species of plants and animals because they also have important roles to play in the conservation of the His dominion. God intervenes both directly and indirectly and strengthens humans through providing food that is offered by means of plants and animals and He gives life to all of nature. Humans as stewards thereof, need to care for it wisely (Lampadarios, 2006).

St. Basil the Great states we are:

> "…ordained to command beings without reason and soul…. If we are penetrated by these truths, we shall know God, we shall adore our

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> Creator, we shall serve our Master, we shall glorify our Father, we shall love our Sustainer, we shall bless our Benefactor, we shall not cease to honour the Prince of present and future life, Who, by the riches that He showers upon us in this world, makes us believe in His promises and uses present good things to strengthen our expectations of the future. Truly, if such are the good things of time, what will be those of eternity? If such is the beauty of visible things, what shall we think of invisible things? If the grandeur of heaven exceeds the measure of human intelligence, what mind shall be able to trace the nature of the everlasting?" (St. Basil, Hexaemeron VI.1, 1989).

In Homily 21, St. Basil states "…creation lies outspread, an exercise ground for virtue. For him the law was made, commanding the imitation of the Creator in accordance with his powers and a reproducing upon earth as if in rough outline, of the good order of heaven."

St. John Chrysostom (347 – 407 C.E.) crafted some highly though provoking texts including his homilies on various books of the Holy Bible. He accentuated benevolent behaviour in life and was primarily concerned with the spiritual and earthly needs of the poor. He was totally opposed to the exploitation of wealth and personal property and was concerned about environmental care and sustainability. On the environmental ethics side he considered the natural world to be a gift from the Creator. It was thus created for the benefit and pleasure of human beings' but the latter have a duty to appreciate and care for the natural environment which is as also then part honouring God's creation bestowed on humanity (Attwater, 1939). St. Chrysostom maintains that humanity's status as God's image-bearers is mirrored in humanity's authority and the control it wields over the natural world. People need to care intensely to preserve the earth as their God-given gift (Lewy, 1997). They are failing miserably if we consider inter-alia the pollution of the seas, global warming and a myriad of other activities which are destroying the planet. St. Chrysostom states "God created the human being as having control over everything on earth … nothing on earth is greater than the human being, under whose authority everything falls" (Attwater, 1939). Creation should not be abused, and this infers that all our natural resources should be allowed to recover from abusive actions (Exodus 20:10-11; 23:12, Deuteronomy 23:10). If we fail to heed the need to be conservation oriented and ecologically sensitive, we will have huge challenges to deal with (2 Chronicles 36:20-21). The Cosmos cannot exist without Divine Providence and preservation by humans as stewards of Creation on Earth. God brought everything from nothingness into being, but His Divine Providence and preservation sustain the Cosmos, and this attests to His Almightiness (St. John Chrysostom, Migne P.G. 49, 113).

St. Theophilus of Antioch stated that God is termed the *Pantocrator* since He upholds and sustains everything. He gives us inter alia light and rain. (Theophilus of Antioch*, 1 Autolycus).* Orthodoxy, according to Nicolaides (2021) has a characteristic teleological approach to environmental and other ethics and teaches that the *telos* of human life is divine–human communion which commences on earth and endures into eternity. We are created in the *Imageo Dei* and need to act from an ethical basis in how we treat mother earth. St. We can gain invaluable insights on sustainability from St. Chrysostom who completes most of his homilies with ethical ideas and he rebukes and is totally against how humans are sadly abusing God's gift to them to take care of the earth, and it is exploited negatively every second that passes. Humans have become irresponsible and egocentric and an ethic of self-preservation is first and foremost in most human actions, any care for our God-given home is clearly a secondary consideration. Humans are called to exhibit, ethical and morally sound behaviour at all times and in all places (Harakas, 1993).

Responsible care for the environment is to be a "stabilizing influence" in our lives, forcing us to look beyond ourselves toward the well-being of our broader world with all its varied inhabitants (Allen & Mayer, 2000). To exploit and generally misuse the natural environment is

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essentially to be defacing God's own image in us. St Chrysostom accentuated the idea of stewardship. He taught that all humans are entrusted with critical role of stewardship and caring for the earth. Like the other hierarchs of Orthodoxy, he argued that all people have a responsibility to use natural resources wisely and not exploit them for selfish gain as is the case in excessive capitalism. This idea supports sustainable practices that preserve the environment for future generations (Baur, 1959). Corporations and individual people have a great responsibility to preserve and sustain the planet (Nicolaides, 2018; Nicolaides & Vettori, 2019).

The Church Fathers, and especially St John Chrysostom advocated for a life of simplicity and temperance. He condemned excessive wealth and opulence, and any lifestyle promoting spiritual over material wealth was his absolute ideal. This attitude encourages a believer to live an exemplary life aligning with principles of sustainability (Stephens, 1883). St Chrysostom equally condemned greed and the unjust distribution of resources. His call for charity and equitable resource distribution echoes the concept of environmental justice, which pursues ensuring that all people have access to the basic needs of clean air, water, and land. Essentially how humans treat the God-given natural world reflects their relationship with the Creator and points their moral character. This drives the notion of ethical conduct and the need to live a virtuous and faithful life (Chrysostom, 1986).

All creatures possess intrinsic value and the interconnectedness of the natural world. (Stylianopoulos, 1997). St. Chrysostom asserted in various writings that every part of creation has a purpose and reflects God's wisdom (Chrysostom, 1986). This view supports a holistic approach to environmental support, acknowledging the magnitude of preserving biodiversity and our ecosystems (Stephens, 1883). All creatures are special to God and must be the recipients of attentive care on the part of Humans who are God's image-bearers. Failing this we are on a self-destruct path. Orthodoxy teaches that by limiting our consumption, and adopting *encratia* or self-control, we can help to safeguard that natural resources are also left for other future generations in the world to enjoy.

Nicolaides (2021) asserts that human salvation is the kay purpose of human life in Orthodox practice, and the approach must always be soteriological and Christological. This implies that is totally dependent on the belief in a Trinitarian Godhead and it is this belief that fashions the way in which people relate to nature and to others around them in the broader community and society in general. Most Orthodox authors accentuate the notion that the resolution to various ecological issues is ultimately rooted in solid spiritual transformation which makes humans as stewards of the planet cognisant of the need to conserve the natural creation (Bokotey et al. 2016). Humans possess at least some rational, moral and spiritual capability, are called by the Creator to play a meaningful part in sustaining their inheritance from Him.

> We believe that our first task is to raise the consciousness of adults who most use the resources and gifts of the planet. Ultimately, it is for our children that we must perceive our every action in the world as having a direct effect upon the future of the environment. At the heart of the relationship between man and environment is the relationship between human beings. As individuals, we live not only in vertical relationships to God, and horizontal relationships to one another, but also in a complex web of relationships that extend throughout our lives, our cultures and the material world. Human beings and the environment form a seamless garment of existence; a complex fabric that we believe is fashioned by God. (His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew 1997), http://www.patrarchate.org/

Humans should exercise restraint so that they may exist in congruence with the natural environment. "The overriding aim is to seek viable responses to the biggest dilemma of our

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times: reconciling our aspirations for the good life with the limitations and constraints of a finite planet" (Jackson, 2017:3). Greed must be absent in the lives of humans and they need to strive to serve humanity in general through living a simple life. Over consumption estranges humans from a spiritually meaningful life, and therefore from God. God requires us to "be fruitful, increase and have dominion in the earth" (Genesis 1:28).

Consequently, Orthodox Christians are called to repentance and to serve as stewards of the earth while they promote the notion of conserving nature and being positive role models of desired behaviours. In addition it affirms that God is very active and is a redemptive participant in *creatio continua* where He interacts and sustains creation to fulfil its divine purpose towards a teleological dimension in Christian eschatology and a redeemed future for believers (Waters, 1995).

> to commit a crime against the natural world, is a sin. For humans to cause species to become extinct and to destroy the biological diversity of God's creation... for humans to degrade the integrity of Earth by causing changes in its climate, by stripping the Earth of its natural forests, or destroying its wetlands... for humans to injure other humans with disease... for humans to contaminate the Earth's waters, its land, its air, and its life, with poisonous substances... these are sins. (His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew 1997), http://www.patrarchate.org/

God place humans "…in the Garden of Eden to cultivate it and to guard it" (Genesis 2:15). He thus made humans the stewards of the earth (Blanchard, 2014). We also need to remember that humans foresee a new creation in which they will exist in a redeemed relationship with their fellow human beings, nature and the Creator (Chryssavgis, 2003). Additionally, Christ is the first-born of all creation, but he is also the first among countless others (Gunton, 1992), thus His care, compassion and healing should be followed in all issues related to environmental ethics. Humans must be envoys of the promotion of an ecological ethic that reinforces the notion that creation is not ours to use recklessly for our own selfish interests or ease. Nature is God's gift to humanity and requires careful safeguarding.

The earth as our gift from the Creator needs to be "set free from bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the sons of God" (Romans 8:21). First and foremost, we need to tackle the huge population growth that we are experiencing. We should heed to words of Thomas Malthus, who speculated that population tends to surge geometrically while food resources increase only arithmetically, and this means that demand for food will eventually outstrip the current supply (Milgate & Stimson, 2009)

The Churches of Christians and all other religions need to be at the vanguard when it comes to seeking local solutions to the numerous environmental problems posed. New technologies must be created to help promote environmental conservation and restore the natural order. In any event, in Orthodoxy and Christianity in general we are called to be a witness today to our faith in the Jesus Christ our Saviour sine His resurrection is merely a prelude to the resurrection of history and also nature (Moltmann, 1990).

Philosophical Platonic, Lockean and Heideggerian vantage points on environmental ethics for a sustainable future

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Plato: In classical Greece there was not much concern regarding environmental challenges, since very few existed during that epoch. Plato had a predominantly anthropocentric apprehension relating to the preservation of the earth as a necessary resource for humans. He nonetheless believed in the significance of balance and accord in the human soul as well as in society and nature. (Stone, n.d.). He considered the universe to be a harmonious and systematic system, indicating a respect for the nature and its fundamental order (Carone, 1998). In his work *The Republic* (Plato, 2004), Plato criticises excessive consumption and excessive interest in extravagance and over-indulgence, which are essentially unsustainable practices. He calls on fellow Greeks to value moderation and have self-restraint. These notions align well with current thoughts relating directly to sustainable living, environmental conservation and an eco-centric approach to life (Rist, 1997). Thus, humans should consume only what is required. Plato was cognisant of the value of the environment for human well - being and he was against deforestation and its consequences. He viewed environmental sustainability from a justice vantage point and argued that a just society needs to wisely use its natural resources to provide the needed goods for all in society. He viewed the earth as a living entity, He called on people to be wise, virtuous and courageous and act in moderation, concerning nature. Plato's first two book in his Republic provide good understanding of how a sense of justice leads to environmental sustainability. He argued that people ought to live well within the limits of what their natural resources offer. Justice in society is a virtue and should leads to enhanced environmental sustainability (Goldin, 1997).

John *Locke (1632-1704 CE)* the English philosopher and physician, who is regarded as one of the most significant of Enlightenment thinkers and who is frequently referred to as the "father of liberalism", was a deist and deserves special mention. He maintained that the nature of God's will for humanity must be discovered by humans through reason and that the general good should be pursued through precepts of morality and ethical action. Furthermore, God penalises or rewards humans based on their conduct. Locke's notion of man began with the belief in creation, and he associated natural law with biblical revelation (Waldron, 2002; Wolterstorff, 1994). The existence of God as the Creator and lawgiver is manifest and can be proved by reason and is also a self-evident proposition, thus humans should do what God commands them to do - care for Earth as its stewards. Locke based the central concepts of his political theory on texts in the Holy Bible. This was especially the creation accounts as stated in Genesis 1 and 2, the Decalogue, the Golden Rule as proclaimed by Jesus during his Sermon on the Mount and termed by him as the second great commandment to "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you", the teachings of Jesus throughout Holy Scripture, and the numerous letters of St. Paul (Waldron, 2002). He was of the opinion that the Decalogue places a person's life, character and assets under God's protection. Locke considered that the most elementary human law of nature is the preservation of humanity. To that purpose, he argued that individuals have a right and a duty to preserve their own lives and by extension, protecting nature does that. Locke was greatly inspired by the Holy Scriptures (Olmstead, 1960). In his work *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, (1695), he affirmed that the miracles of Christ proved the divine nature of biblical messages. He perceived the Holy Bible as being in accord with human reason (Olmstead, 1960). Locke believed that when humans deny God's existence this ultimately destabilises the social order and the result is chaos and unethical behaviour (Waldron, 2002; Yolton,1969). He viewed humans as the selected species with distinct privileges granted by God one of which was to care for creation (Sætra, 2020).

In Locke's judgement the cosmological claim was valid and proved God's reality. He thus promoted a sense of devotion out of gratitude to God the Creator for giving humans the ability to reason on issues including environmental protection, ecology and conservation (Wolterstorff, 1994). Locke argued that "nature teaches all things" the principle of self-preservation and that God did not leave unacceptable principles. Furthermore, he endowed humans with rules to protect the earth for future generations (Locke, 1969). In some ways Locke viewed humans

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as being separate from nature with special status, but he nonetheless also considered people to be stewards with an important responsibility in caring for the earth. For him the central law of nature and God is the preservation of humanity and thus creation (Locke, 1969; Dunn, 1984). In some ways Locke's approach to environmentalism is anthropocentric but it nonetheless promotes the notion of "sustainability and scientific conservationism" (Sætra, 2020:1).

Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) did not directly tackle the notion of environmental sustainability, however his philosophical ideas present an outline for rethinking humanity's relationship with nature and advocate a more sustainable manner of living (Carman, 2003). Heidegger reflected on especially Plato and other ancient Greek philosophers and sought to reconstruct the "history of Being" to demonstrate how the diverse periods in the history of philosophy were governed by different thoughts on the idea of Being. He essentially sought to regain the original understanding of being as portrayed in early Greek philosophy (Inwood, 1999). He speaks of *Dasein* 'in' the world in the sense of "residing" or "dwelling" in the world and attending to something and looking after it, and making use of things (Heidegger, 1962). His highlighting of dwelling, being, and the critique of technology advances the idea of having a shift from exploitative practices toward a more considerate and sustainable interaction with the natural environment. In his *Kehre des Denkens* (the reversal of thinking), critical thought should be used to resettle an unsettled humanity whose existential dilemma is profound, and this ultimately leads it from an unauthentic to an authentic manner of existence. Heidegger states that humans are involved in projects and through these, they project themselves towards diverse possible futures that define our existence. We thus need to err on the side of caution and seek an authentic existence and appreciate our existence more.

Heidegger guides humanity to always be on the move to Being which is relentless in humanity's very existence (Rauche, 1989; Carman, 2003). There is clearly an interconnectedness of all life on earth and thus humans need to have a strong ethical relationship with nature. There must be no exploitation and domination of the resources on earth but rather strong efforts to be sustainable. Man is between earth and heaven and has a destiny to be a guardian of the earth. Heidegger's theory of Being is in essence a truth perspective based on humanity's existential dilemma.

Heidegger rejected the anthropocentric worldview that puts humans at the centre of the universe. He was thus in ways supporting the notion of being rational on ecological issues and reinforced the notion of a holistic and sustainable consideration on environmental matters. He was not a Christian but called on people to rethink the meaning of their existence. Heidegger conceived of Truth as *aletheia*, and it is that which is revealed to man (Krell, 1975). *Aletheia* points to the earth needing great efforts to be sustainable failing which there will be an annihilation of life therein. Man must build a new house to live in and create a novel sustainable and ethical culture relating to the natural environment.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that environmental ethics can be meaningfully enriched through dialogue between philosophy and Orthodox Christian theology. The article argues that ecological sustainability requires not only political and economic reform but also moral and spiritual transformation. Orthodox Christianity provides a valuable theological framework for environmental stewardship by emphasizing humanity's responsibility toward creation. Integrating ethical, philosophical, and theological perspectives may contribute to more sustainable environmental practices and a deeper respect for the intrinsic value of nature.

No individual should think of themselves in isolation from the rest of God's creation. Humans need to be illumined by the light of faith to become more responsible and perceive truth and

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care for nature. Humans cannot continue to wander in the path of ignorance and evil activity and require moral and spiritual upliftment. Christologically viewed, humans created in the image of God means that all of creation has to be treasured and safeguarded. Thus, preservation of our earth is inherently a form of service to God. From an ethical biblical dimension, a sustainable ecology and society is essential, but the rights and needs of human beings must take precedence but love for animals and plants is also morally imperative. We require greater ecological sensitivity. Nature and animals are valuable simply because they are created by God (theocentric value).

Many humans recognise that we are not the all-powerful masters of the laws of nature but merely creatures and part of the created world. We cannot treat the natural world as if it is our property to do with as we please. We need to comprehend that we often make huge errors in discerning the difference between immoral and moral actions relating to our treatment of nature and need to be far more ethically oriented by basing our decisions on the teachings of the Holy Bible and the Early Church fathers and by developing a theocentric outlook. Laws cannot enforce what is best for the Earth and the common interest.

What is needed is greater awareness of the immense dangers inherent in treating creation like garbage. We need far more meaningful agendas and far greater public participation in the decisions that affect the natural environment as well as environmentally responsible lifestyles and sound governmental policies. Anthropocentrism is destructive and we urgently need an ‘ecological economics’ that overtly integrates an ecological ethic into how we manage the planet which is God’s creation (Washington & Maloney, 2020).

Concern for nature and the environment possesses its own integrity but is essential and needed for the wellbeing of humans as well. We have a moral obligation to monitor all our activities relating to the environment and if we break down the order of nature, we are committing an ecological violation of our responsibility as Christians and caring people of all faiths. We wander on the paths of ignorance and apathy. We must use nature and not abuse it. We have no right to be exploiting nature without severe restrictions and must strive to conserve and protect our God-given earth as its stewards. We cannot continue on a path of serving our ego and confusing our conscience through greed. Attaining the desired likeness to God, requires divine grace and redemption from destructive actions.

We need to regain our lost moral and spiritual orientation and strive for moral excellence. In short, we need to reconsider our life as one that expresses love through good works. Whatever the future may hold solving the problem of climate change will be crucial for global sustainability and the future of all life as we know it. While humans are created in God's image, the Holy Bible tells us that we are not to exercise our power in any manner that shamelessly abuses nature and its life forms. Humans as stewards of the earth possess a special responsibility to act on God’s behalf towards nature and society in general. They also require an ethically and morally sound socio-political realism based on sacred scriptures and practical reason that underscores the notion that creation care is essential and non-negotiable, and that drastic action is needed to protect the natural environment. While the Sustainable Development Goals, embody a framework for realising a more sustainable and ethical world, the Holy Bible accentuates the issue of environmental stewardship as a fundamental feature of the Christian faith, depicting humans as needing to be responsible custodians of God's creation. This invariably includes protecting all ecosystems, conserving natural resources, and reducing the levels of destruction to the environment, as it echoes God's power and glory.

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