

## Environmental communication A South African perspective

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*The environmental crisis is a fundamental element of our lives on the globe today, and we cannot conceive of life in the next generation without at the same time engaging with and responding to that crisis. Just as important, however, is that responsible Christian thinking and communication about the earth crisis engage with Africa and with the people of Africa.*

In the first place, we know that the fundamental cause of the environmental crisis is the human economy, namely, the way we organise our production, distribution, consumption and waste. The global environmental crisis is a global economic crisis, which is why it is best that we speak of it as an 'earth crisis'. The crisis is not in spite of our economy, but because of it. It is the collateral damage of late industrial capitalism.

At the same time, Africa is like it is today because it too – in its people, its land, and its environmental bounty – bears the scars of collateral damage from the same economic system. First through the alliance between industrialization and colonialism, and then through the Cold War, decades of 'development', Structural Adjustment Programmes with their privatization and liberalization, and now neo-liberal globalization.

On top of this, scientists tell us that Africa will be the continent most affected by the impact of climate change. So responsible Christian reflection and communication about the environment needs to engage with this from an African perspective.

Secondly, if this is to be a theological response drawing from Christian traditions and rooted in Christian faith communities, then it needs to make sense for the people of Africa. This is so because the centre of gravity of Christianity is moving southwards, and Africa is fast becoming the most Christian continent on the globe. Christianity is an African religion.

So again, if we are to speak as Christians on the environmental or earth crisis, we need to engage with this reality. And as we do so, I suggest that there are three things that we need to be cautious of.

### **Human suffering**

Africa is a continent that bears witness to extremes of human suffering, some of it self-inflicted, but most of it imposed from without. An ethical perspective on African experience must begin with the reality of HIV and AIDS, poverty, ethnic rivalry, civil war, rampant asset stripping, gender-based violence, and hunger. *This* is what confronts Africans on a day to day basis, and *this* is what demands the attention of the church and all people of faith, for good theology is born in suffering. This puts the earth crisis into perspective, because it is not an immediate experienced reality in the midst of so much suffering.

Thus it is no surprise that current theological writing in Africa is dominated by two issues: HIV and AIDS, and poverty, and both with a strong gender perspective. Furthermore, it is worth reflecting on the fact that the experience of colonialism has been an experience of deep disconnect from the earth. We glimpse this in the fact that many of the struggles for liberation from colonialism were centred on getting the land back, but always as 'land', never as 'earth'. Land functions as a symbol, a 'storied space', a foundation for national identity.

I am not trumpeting this fact, just noting that in Africa there is little time for reflection on ecological issues. The experience of human suffering in a post-colonial world raises a deep ethical question mark against those who are myopically focused on the environment.

### **African humanism**

Second, there is a rather romantic notion that African traditional spirituality is a deeply environmentally aware spirituality. There is some truth in this, but this environmental concern is always in the service of human life. For fundamental to African spirituality is African humanism, the celebration of human life, human community, human striving, human arts. The spirit of *ubuntu* is 'I am because we are', or 'a person is a person through other people'. As much as people celebrate such

a perspective in the midst of Western individualism, we need to note what it is not saying: It is not saying anything about the earth, about animals, water, plants, air.

African humanism has been expressed in many ways, but its greatest exponents have been the first generation of post-colonial leaders, people like Kenneth Kaunda, Julius Nyerere, Robert Mugabe, Jomo Kenyatta, and Nelson Mandela. Many of them made some bad political decisions, but all of them understood that the fundamental African perspective on life concerns the flourishing of human life, humanization, human freedom.

This is not a sign of anthropomorphism shaped by the industrial revolution, but rather something very deep in African culture, born in the midst of agricultural and pastoral cultures, namely the concern that all things exist for the benefit of humanity. And while they are to be used with extreme care, shepherded and nurtured with responsibility, they are ultimately secondary.

There is a second concern to bear in mind. For Africans the experience of slavery and colonialism was a profound experience of being treated like ‘animals’, part of the ‘natural world’ rather than the world of human civilization; and in many cases African humanity was intentionally denied. The struggle against these evils was a struggle to be human. Now, to be told by people from the former slave owning, colonial powers, that – once again – Africans should not think of themselves more highly than creatures of the earth, or even the earth itself, is offensive.

Again, I am not trumpeting this position in reaction to concerns about the earth crisis. I am simply providing a reality check so that we proceed with caution.

### **African Evangelicalism**

Africa is a strongly Christian continent and having post graduate students from 22 African countries in our School of Religion and Theology provides me with enough anecdotal evidence to claim that common to all Christian expressions in Africa is a thing called ‘African Evangelicalism’. It is found amongst Anglicans, Methodists, Presbyterians, Lutherans, Pentecostals, Baptists, and even Catholics.

It may be that having roots in pre-literate culture has led to the reverence of the Holy Book as a religious fetish that has a numinous power in itself, possibly akin to the way medieval Catholics revered the elements of the mass. Anyone who has tried to engage in the debates about homosexuality and homophobia from a Christian perspective will have some sense of what I mean! It is impossible to get there without some kind of appeal to ‘The Bible’.

At first glance, this seems to be a natural bed-fellow of other forms of Evangelicalism and Christian fundamentalism, and certainly alliances have been forged on this assumption. But the African way is to absorb and to embrace, rather than to juxtapose and separate out, and so it will never knowingly deny its links to any other Christian tradition.

African Evangelicalism is *African*, and not European or North American or Korean, and it has its own logic and drives. It has its own languages that pre-date the arrival of missionaries and so carry a religious depth that is different to other forms of evangelicalism. It cannot be read through that lens.

Now this is our third point of caution. If Africa is the largest Christian continent on the globe, and if African Christianity is characterized by this kind of Evangelicalism, then any responsible Christian reflection about the earth crisis will have to be rooted in biblical language. Otherwise it will become a theology of and for the elite, cast into a space only inhabited by North American and European theology.

I have identified three matters that require that we proceed with caution, and on each occasion I offered the point that I was not trumpeting or celebrating these concerns, but rather offering them as a reality check. The environmental crisis is not negated by these concerns. Rather, Christian theologians and communicators are called to creative engagement.

### **Finding integrating themes**

The first way to be creative is to work on the environmental crisis by focusing on integrating themes. By this I mean that we have to find ways of grounding the wider concerns of the environment into the lived reality of ordinary people so that they can understand the connections between human life and the impact of the earth crisis. Three such themes suggest themselves to me.

The first would be to focus on *food security and food sovereignty*. Food is at the intersection between human life, human dignity, human community on the one side, and the earth, nature, climate on the other. Responding to the earth crisis would, and should, mean nurturing the earth

even as we are nurtured by it, and therefore it has to involve food. This kind of approach would have an immediate connection into communities in Africa, for it would speak to matters of human suffering around hunger brought on by famine, drought, floods, pestilence and war.

In addition, HIV and AIDS has a predatory relationship to food security, knocking out the farmers and 'bread winners' whilst at the same time requiring nutritious food to supplement medical therapies. Food, of course, is also a religious, communal, and cultural item, and so it enables us to integrate a range of concerns.

A second integrating theme is *water and sanitation*. We know that the most devastating impact of climate change and ecological damage will be around access to safe water. Water is life. We cannot live without water, and so a collapsing water system will have devastating impact upon ordinary people. Water is crucial also for sanitation, and this points us to the environmental concerns around waste, pollution and sewage.

We cannot afford to think that we humans live in a boundless universe, for the reality is that we live on a constricted planet. We all live downstream, and our inability to deal with our sewage in creative and sustainable ways will come back to haunt us. In the African context this points to the integration of matters of the environment with matters of good governance, engineering capacity and the use of appropriate technologies.

When sanitation goes wrong then we face the kinds of cholera crisis that we see in Zimbabwe today. When food is hard to come by then we see malnutrition and weak bodies. This suggests that a third integrating theme is *public health*. At the heart of African humanism, African Christianity and African community life is a focus on healing, making whole, and restoring relationships with both the living and the dead. It also includes relationships with the land and crops, and with animal life, particularly cattle.

Often the thinking about health focuses on curative interventions, but a responsible Christian engagement would point to the wider dimensions of *public health*, indicating the links between the environment and ecological systems and human wellbeing. The point is simply this, that even where there is a strong element of anthropocentrism, the links to the environment have to be made clear.

### **Biblical resources**

Because of the strong links to the Bible in African Christianity, any attempt to communicate about the environment has to engage with biblical resources. Here again I want to suggest three creative resources.

The first is to think of the earth as our *home created by God*. This makes the earth our *oikos*. The Greek word *oikos*, meaning home or household, is the root word for both economics (*oikos-nomos*: rules of the house) and ecology (*oikos-logos*: wisdom of the house), and so provides us with an integrative vision that seeks to balance the struggle for humanization with the struggle for earth-keeping.

Thinking of our one earth as our one home, reminds us that the way we structure our human economy in terms of our production, consumption and waste, has to be in harmony with the ecological logic of the earth. As humans we simply cannot afford to work against what God has set in place, and we need to find a greater harmony between our human economy and God's economy, God's rules of the house.

A second biblical image has to do with the *Land of Promise*. Christian ecological ethics naturally drifts towards the first chapters of Genesis to find a biblical basis. There is good reason for this, but in terms of what has been said above, there is a weakness with it as well. The Genesis stories image an almost romantic world before sin, whereas our ecological vision has to be driven by the reality of sin, of what we humans have done to the earth.

Also, Genesis seems far removed from the concerns of oppression, injustice and liberation that find a resonance in the Exodus story and later prophetic tradition. Here is where a focus on the Land of Promise, as visioned in the last chapters of Deuteronomy, is helpful for it speaks to people freed from slavery who must take responsibility for the land they are about to enter. We are called to choose life against death.

A third theme emerges from the Land of Promise context, and has to do with the idea of *honouring the Sabbath*. Sadly, in most popular forms the fourth commandment is truncated to read 'Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy', forgetting that the way in which we keep it holy is to respect our workers, our neighbours, our cattle and the land. The fourth commandment is the

commandment that says that human beings are not machines – they are not simply part of the equation of production to produce commodities.

Human beings are human beings created in the image of God and given the talents to be co-creators with God. Therefore they need the space to rest and enjoy the produce of their labour, much like God on the seventh day. Furthermore, the day of rest is also a day of rest for the earth. It is a reminder that the earth produces food out of its own graciousness, and therefore that we need to respect it. Ultimately, also, the Sabbath of Sabbaths, the Jubilee calls for a whole year of rest, for restoring the land to its owners, for the release of debts.

### **Conclusion**

There is a desperate need for Christian thinkers and communicators to engage with Africa around the theme of the environment. I have pointed to some matters that call for caution, and have also suggested some integrating themes that will make the environmental crisis meaningful to the human concerns of people in Africa, and some biblical resources that will do so in an overtly Christian way. Engaging with both of these realities is crucial at this time.

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