

Constructing a Four Generation of Christian Ecological Motifs and the Need for African Traditional Ecological Knowledge as the Fifth Generation

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Introduction: Analyzing the Generations of Christian Ecological Motifs

In a continued response to the environmentally challenging situations, numerous interdisciplinary conferences, seminars and workshops have been held and the current anthropocentric attitude to nature has often been blamed on many factors including the influence of Christianity's teachings on nature.¹ Critics of Christianity have two fundamental premises. First, bible and Christianity are very anthropocentric and thereby teach that human beings are divinely ordained to rule over and dominate nature. Second, many Christian writings and theologies denigrate nature and matter generally in comparison to the divine, which is equated with the spirit alone.² The main thrust of this paper is to examine these accusations, to see how Christianity has articulated some classical theological thoughts about nature in its attempt to further develop an all inclusive ecological theology that seeks to protect the integrity of creation. This is done mainly by a literature survey of the evolution of Christian thoughts regarding nature by constructing four major components of eco-theological motifs collectively exercising a formative influence on Christianity at different periods in its history emerges.

The First Generation:³ Dominion Thinking

Allegedly, the Christian creation account (Genesis 1:28 ff.) erroneously understood as absolute dominion over the earth, encourages ruthless and selfish exploitation of nature.⁴

¹ Sowunmi, Adebisi.A. 1995. "Giver of Life-Sustain Your Creation" in Hallman, David.G.1995(ed) *Ecotheology. Voices from South and North*. New York: Maryknoll. p.149

² Gosovic, Branislav. 1992. *The Quest for World Environmental Cooperation*. London and New-York: Routledge. p.xii, see Hessel, Dieter and Rasmussen, Larry. 2001. (eds) *Earth Habitat. Eco-Injustice and the Church's Response*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.p.101-121.

³ The use of four "generations" of ecological motifs is not strictly to be viewed in historical sequence, but as a continuum. Each "generation" builds on the weakness of the previous one. However, as a new generation comes into place the thinking of the older generations remains. This means that any given time there are always Christians who hold on to the different views represented by the previous generations.

The creation story acknowledges that the non human world share in the *nephehs*, the breath of God which serves as the invigorating life force.⁵ Although both humans and non-humans share the *nephesh*, there is certainly a clear distinction according to the interpretation of the creation account between them- only humans are made in the image of God. Early writers- St. Augustine and Boethius have presented this sharp distinction between humans and non humans in terms of reason, intelligence and the ability to be aware of oneself.⁶ According to St. Augustine, there is no place for nature in the kingdom of God- kingdom has only to do with spiritual beings, with eternal souls.

This distinction,-the *imago Dei*, (Latin phrase for image of God) introduces dominion thought over creation.⁷ *Imago Dei* is fraught with controversies,⁸ but implies whatever quality that makes humanity and only them, an image of God. However, it is this picture of *imago Dei* that gave humanity the impression of having dominion and power over creation-earth. Dominion essentially carries with it a sense of authority to subdue and trample on the rest of creation. Thus after the creation, humanity was given the privilege to name the animals, thus establishing his dominion over them. Mackinnon and McIntyre, point to an erroneous impression that “God planned this dominion explicitly for man’s benefit and rule: no item in the physical creation had any purpose save to serve man’s purposes. And although man’s body is made of clay, he is not simply part of nature: he is made in the image of God”.⁹ Irenaeus, also opines that the whole purpose of the creation history is to provide a place for human life and to bless human life.¹⁰ Wingren Gustaf has therefore suggested that:

Irenaeus does not want to maintain that human beings are not only at home in the whole nature and in their bodies, in particular, but that the whole creation was made for the sake of human beings. Man was not made for its sake (the creation’s) he says in a characteristic utterance, but creation for the sake of

⁴ Elsdon, Ron. 1981. *Bent World. A Christian Response to the environmental Crisis*. p.11

⁵ Breuilly, Elizabeth and Palmer, Martin. 1992. (eds) *Christianity and Ecology*. New York: Cassel. P. 25

⁶ Markus, R.A. 1970. *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St. Augustine*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. P. 18

⁷ Breuilly, Elizabeth and Palmer, Martin. 1992. (eds) *Christianity and Ecology*. New York: Cassel. P. 25

⁸ Markus, R.A. 1970. *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St. Augustine*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. P. 18

⁹ Mackinnon, Mary Heather and McIntyre, Moni. 1995. (eds) *Readings in Ecology and feminist Theology*. Kansas City: Sheed and Ward.p. 30-31

¹⁰ Santmire, Paul.H.1985. *The Travail of Nature. The Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christian Theology*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.p41

man. *non enim homo propter ilam, sed condition facta est propter hominem.*

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The above suggests that humanity was privileged to share in great measure, God's transcendence of nature.

Based on the dominion motif, Christianity and Judaism have been accused of worse than anthropocentricity. For example, Lyn White and Ian McHarg argue that dominion in Genesis 1: 26 has been turned into domination and exploitation. White wrote that Christianity teaches that:

We are superior to nature, contemptuous of it, willing to use it for our slightest whim... We shall continue to have a worsening ecological crisis until we reject the Christian axiom that nature has no reason for existence but to serve man ...both our present science and our present technology are so tinctured with orthodox Christian arrogance towards nature that no solution for our ecologic crisis can be expected from them alone. Since the roots of our trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious, whether we call it that or not. ¹²

Ian McHarg, the well-known environmentalist similarly notes that:

In the history of human development, man has long been puny in the face of overwhelming powerful nature. His religions, philosophies, ethics and acts have tended to reflect a slave mentality, alternately submissive or arrogant towards nature. Judaism and Christianity tend to assert outrageously the separateness and dominance of man over nature ...these same attitudes become of first importance when man holds the power to cause evolutionary regressions of unimaginable effect or even to destroy all life. ¹³

This fundamental notion of human dominion over nature considers humanity no more as part of nature but rather as its lord; thereby emphasizing humanity's ability to use nature's

¹¹ Wingren, Gustaf. 1959. *Man and the Incarnation: a Study in the biblical Theology of Irenaeus*. Translated by MacKenzie. Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press See, Lawson, John. 1948. *The Biblical Theology of St. Irenaeus*. London: Epworth Press

¹² Elsdon, Ron. 1981. *Bent World. A Christian Response to the environmental Crisis*. p.11

¹³ Elsdon, Ron. 1981. *Bent World. A Christian Response to the environmental Crisis*. p.11

resources unsustainably. As a result, nature has been viewed as a raw material warehouse, a manipulative object and a means of achieving techno-economical ends.¹⁴

Added to the dominion accusation is the influence of Platonic Greek thought and continuing strands of Gnosticism¹⁵ in Christian tradition which had tended to “spiritualize” Christianity to the detriment of the world of matter.¹⁶ Both Plato and Descartes viewed the physical world of matter as a dim reflection of a shadow of a timeless world of ideals, which they conceived as existing in a higher reality. They acknowledged that within each person “there was an eternal spirit, which had an inherent urge to escape its earthly body and regain its original heavenly abode”.¹⁷ The spirit is distinct and separate from the body. The idea of two distinct bodies residing in one substance, (hypostatic union) explains Descartes notion of human beings as being two distinct essences combining to form one composite person.¹⁸ For them it may be said that the body is not essential, it is the spirit itself which is immortal, eternal, incorruptible and separate from the body.¹⁹ The influence of this philosophical doctrine produced a number of sects which caused conflict within the early church as it attempts to formulate a doctrinal position. Paul Santmire, one of the most respected eco-theologians of recent times, acknowledges that the influence of the Platonic dualistic tradition in the early ages of Christianity strengthened the anthropocentric stance for which Christianity was accused of.²⁰

In trying to absolve Christianity of anthropocentrism, attempts were made by apologists to construct better hermeneutics of the dominion thought by arguing that the verse does not suggest exploitation as the accusers had argued.²¹ Instead, it describes humanity acting as God’s representative. The problem with this is that it is still about humanity representing God in the exercise of authority over the rest of the creation. In this hierarchical structure, it is God, humans and then the rest. The logic here is that God who is pure spirit, is at the apex of this hierarchy, while non-spiritual beings which include plants, animals and inanimate

¹⁴ Ibe, Martin. Joe. 2003. *Environmental Ethics and Politics in Developing Countries*. p

¹⁵ King, Karen. 2003. *What is Gnosticism?* Cambridge: Harvard University Press. p.1

¹⁶ Leal, Robert. 2004. *The Environment and Christian Faith*. p.19

¹⁷ King, Karen. 2003. *What is Gnosticism?* Cambridge: Harvard University Press. p.4

¹⁸ Reith, Herman.1986. Rene Descartes. *The Story of a Soul*. Notre Dame: University Press of America. P.158-159

¹⁹ See also Magnus, Bernd and Wilbur, James.B. 1969. (eds) *Cartesian Essays: A Collection of critical Studies*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.p.93 See also

²⁰ Leal, Robert. 2004. *The Environment and Christian Faith*. p.19

²¹ Leal, Robert. 2004. *The Environment and Christian Faith*. p.13

objects, are at the bottom. Among the spiritual beings, besides God, are the angels and human beings. All other creatures below human beings in the hierarchy are non-spiritual beings. In this arrangement, human beings do not see themselves as part of the whole because of the dominion they were understood to be exercising over nature.

This image of hierarchical structure inherent in Platonic thought runs through the writings of some of the early Christian theologians. For example, Origen, posits that God created the world primarily as a kind of purgatory where fallen human beings are educated through trials and tribulations to return to the realm of pure spirit from which they have fallen.²² Origen's understanding of the relationship between humanity and nature is radically opinionated judging from his statement that "the world of flesh is the world of demons and that nature is a cage or prison and humanity's spiritual quest is to extricate themselves from it."²³ Similarly, Thomas Aquinas, though he lived nearly a thousand years after Origen reflected in his theology themes which are similar to Origen. Although Aquinas admitted that each being has integrity of its own, he emphasized the hierarchical nature of creation much like Origen. According to him, among living creatures, human being is the most spiritual, rational and sublime. He therefore concludes that:

As we observe ... imperfect beings serve the needs of more noble beings; plants draw their nutrients from the earth, animals feed on plants, and these in turn serve man's (sic) use. We conclude, then, that lifeless beings exist for living beings, plants for animals, and the latter for man.... The whole of material nature exists for man, inasmuch as he is a rational animal.²⁴

With the dominion understanding and the Greek dualistic thinking about the world, the seed of alienation from nature was sown. This alienation seed has grown and actually influenced many of the church writings from the pre-reformation to post reformation period. The writings of theologians such as Martin Luther and Calvin, especially in their thinking about salvation, attest to the above point. Similarly, Martin Ibe, accused Protestantism represented by Luther and Calvin of being responsible for the elimination of the notion of natural revelation to the extent that it focussed almost exclusively on the question of salvation of the

²² Santmire, Paul. H. 1985. *The Travail of Nature*:p.9

²³ Ibe, Martin. Joe.2003. *Environmental Ethics and Politics in Developing Countries*.p.45

²⁴ Ibe, Martin. Joe.2003. *Environmental Ethics and Politics in Developing Countries*.p.45

individual through personal faith at the detriment of the sacramental, instinctive and natural symbols.²⁵

The major weakness of the dominion motif is that it has made humans to become alienated from nature because of our anthropocentric thinking that we are superior and separate from it. Larry Rasmussen, identified the alienation thinking with the “apartheid habit” of distinguishing between humanity and non-nature, leaving the impression that we are an ecologically segregated species, that we are somehow separate, hence “apart” from the ecosystems in which we live.²⁶ This ‘alienation thinking’ has fuelled the quest to dominate, manipulate and exploit nature for human purposes especially in the advancement of science and technology.

The dominion, dualistic, and apartheid thinking significantly influenced the thinking of the Western society in many ways about, first the environment, and secondly about the less civilized people of the world including Africans. The slave traders, the colonizers and the apartheid perpetrators did not see Africans as fully humans enough.²⁷ They see Africans as people to be dominated and exploited because they are inferior and therefore apart from them, the colonizers.

The first generation has been heavily criticised and rejected, because of the above mentioned influences. More so it is not appealing to the Africans because it reminds them of their historical experiences-slavery and colonialism. As a result we move to the second generation of ecological motif in search of an eco-theological motif which does not emphasize domination over nature and which could be more acceptable to Africans.

The Second Generation: Stewardship

The attempt to re-create the doctrine of nature with lesser emphasis on domination, dualistic and apartheid thinking, lead us to the second generation analysis which introduced the idea of stewardship. This second generation seeks among other things to affirm the inherent worth, the goodness and the integrity of creation. Mc-Donough reminds us God’s command in Gen. 1:28 should be seen as a key text in re-shaping the human-earth relationship from

²⁵ Ibe, Martin. Joe.2003. *Environmental Ethics and Politics in Developing Countries*.p.46

²⁶ Rasmussen, L.L. 1996. *Earth Community. Earth Ethics*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books. p75-80

²⁷ Fieldhouse, D.K.1983. *Colonialism 1870-1945. An Introduction*. London: The Macmillan Press Ltd

the perspective of dominion to stewardship.²⁸ This mandate suggests that human beings as stewards have the role of managing and preserving the creation for God. In the biblical understanding and usage, a steward is one given responsibility for what belongs to another.²⁹ The Greek word that is translated as steward is *oikonomos*, one who cares for the household or acts as its trustee.³⁰ The *oikos metaphor* implying household, is used for God's household. Christians, then, are to be stewards of the whole household (creation) of God. *Oikonomia*, "Stewardship," is also the root of our word "economics." *Oikos*, also is the root of our modern word, "ecology." Thus in a broad sense, stewardship, economics, and ecology are, and should be, related.

Stewardship deals with how we bring all of the earth's resources at our disposal into efficient use in our participation in the saving activity of God.³¹ Environmental stewardship is one part of our work as God's stewards. As stewards of the natural environment we are called to preserve and restore the air, water, and land on which life depends. Moreover, we are called to see that all life has a sufficient share of the resources of nature.

An appreciation of the concept of stewardship is the recognition that it has at least shifted from the strong anthropocentric position inherent in the first generation of ecological motif. However, even if it is granted that our care for God's property is to be viewed from the context of managerial premise, its anthropocentric emphasis still persists. Apart from the picture of God as an absentee landlord with humans as the landlord's steward, the relationship of humans to the rest of nature can still be construed as one of management. Stewardship responsibility in this regard, is therefore, not enough to provide us with the notion of the inherent worth, the goodness and the integrity of creation. This is because the stewardship motif is still not able to counter the flawed interpretation of *imago Dei*, the thinking and belief that the human person being made in the image of God is the steward of the earth, and therefore acting on God's behalf as God's vice-regent. The stewardship motif is reflective of the hierarchical dualism that perpetuates the vision of humanity as superior to other life forms. Human superiority reflected in the stewardship motif is fundamentally

²⁸ Gitau, S. K. 2000. *The Environmental Crisis*. Nairobi: Action. p.61

²⁹ Fretheim, Terence E. 2005 *God and the World in the Old Testament, A Relational Theology of Creation*. Nashville: Abingdon. See Naess, Arne. 1989 *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle*. Translated by David Rothenberg. New York: Cambridge University Press.

³⁰ Kaufman, Gordon D. 2000 "Response to Elisabeth A. Johnson." in Hessel, Dieter T and Rosemary Radford Ruether. (ed) *Christianity and Ecology, Seeking the Well-Being of Earth and Humans*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. P. 23-27

³¹ Moltmann, Jürgen. 1993. *God in Creation*. Minneapolis: Fortress.

flawed because it made the exploitation of the rest of nature possible in the first place. According to Ruth Page “stewardship, even when enlightened by modern knowledge, chastened by past excess, and Christianized, is still basically about manipulation of the natural world...”³²

From the above therefore, it is apparent that a major weakness of the stewardship motif is that much of the ecological theology and secular ethics, values in nature and the ethical obligations are articulated in languages and categories that reflect only human perspectives, capacities and experiences.³³ The inherent and intrinsic worth of nature is in most of these eco-theological discussions relegated to the background. As a result, humans still see themselves as being at the top of a hierarchy rather than as simply a part of the web of life created by God. This arrogant attitude which makes humanity to feel ‘in charge’ of nature has contributed to the exploitative attitude of humanity towards nature .The exploitative attitude expressed in the view of ‘human-centered-ism’, has led Christopher Southgate to refer to stewardship as the “default position” of our time for persons concerned about the environment.³⁴

Another major criticism of the stewardship motif has come from Ruth Page and others who apply a feminist hermeneutic approach to the stewardship interpretation of *imago Dei*. They draw attention to “a danger of one-sidedness in the exclusive use of the (managerial) stewardship model” to paternalistic thinking.³⁵ The problem with the assumption that only humans are made in the image of God is that humans, therefore, are bestowed with a God-ordained superiority over creation. “That superiority, even if exercised in the form of benevolent stewardship, may be but a mere reflection of a concept of God that envisions the divine primarily as a transcendent sovereign acting from a distance, present to creation only when God chooses to intervene, either directly or indirectly through appointed emissaries”.³⁶ To counter anthropocentrism, including that of the stewardship model,

³² Page, Ruth. 2006 “The Fellowship of All Creation.” in Berry, R. J.(ed) *Environmental Stewardship: Critical Perspective-Past and Present*. London: T & T Clark International. p. 97-104

³³ Lisa, H. Sideris. 2003. *Environmental Ethics, Ecological Theology and natural Selection*. P.168

³⁴ Southgate, Christopher. 2006 “Stewardship and its Competitors: A Spectrum of Relationships between Humans and Non-Human Creation.” in Berry, R. J.(ed) *Environmental Stewardship: Critical Perspective-Past and Present*. London: T & T Clark International. p. 185-95

³⁵ Page, Ruth. 2006 “The Fellowship of All Creation”. p.89

³⁶ Ruether, Rosemary Radford. “Toward an Ecological-Feminist Theology of Nature” in Mackinnon, Mary Heather and McIntyre, Moni. (eds)1995. *Readings in Ecology and Feminist Theology*. Kansas City: Sheed and Ward.p.89-91

ecofeminists draw attention to the connection between patriarchy and androcentrism directed toward women (and to others of secondary status on the basis of race and class) and to that directed to Earth's other kind. There is therefore a need for continued search. This leads to the third generation analysis.

The Third Generation: Eco-theology

It is because of the excesses of anthropocentrism inherent in the second generation-stewardship motif, that eco theology emerged to propose a "more modest, eco-centered attitude" to nature that will replace what Robert Leal calls anthropo-solism (human-only-ism).³⁷ The third generation stresses the idea of interconnectedness. Interconnectedness is what eco theologians think when they speak of "our own nature as constituted by our relationships with other living things".³⁸ Eco theology emphasizes that "all that exists, coexists".³⁹ This was implied by Larry Rasmussen's idea of 'earth community' to acknowledge the shift in science from the mechanistic to the relational understanding of natural systems,⁴⁰ to the affirmation of the doctrine of creation in theological connotation which emphasises that creation is a community in which the whole and its parts bear an integral dynamism and spirit both of which are expressions of divine creativity.⁴¹ Essential to the principle of earth community is the understanding that there ought not to be a distinction between human life and nonhuman life. Both share the same source of being. We are kin to all else because we share a common origin in divine creativity including an ongoing journey as *creation continua*.⁴²

A dominant thought in eco-theological discourse is that humans are kin with all other life-forms because of humanity's common genealogical heritage. In this sense interdependence as a biological continuum stresses human genealogical relationship, a shared genetic material with other organisms.⁴³ From eco-theological perspectives, interconnectedness is the fabric of nature's well being. It is used to express the eco-systemic relationships in which the activities and fate of one member of the system have consequences for all

³⁷ Leal, Robert. 2004. *The Environment and Christian Faith*. p.15

³⁸ Lisa, H. Sideris. 2003. *Environmental Ethics Ecological Theology and Natural Selection*. p.219

³⁹ Boff, Leonardo. 1995. *Ecology and Liberation*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books.p.36

⁴⁰ Rasmussen, Larry. 1996. *Earth Community, Earth Ethics*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books.p.324

⁴¹ Rasmussen, Larry. 1996. *Earth Community, Earth Ethics*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books.p.324

⁴² Edwards, Denis. 1995. *Tesús the Wisdom of God. An ecological Theology*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books.p. 143

⁴³ Nash, Roderick. 1989. *The Rights of Nature: A History of Environmental Ethics*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

others.⁴⁴ The idea of interdependence is offered as a corrective, a better alternative to relationships of domination, oppression and models of anthropocentric ideology that reinforce a mechanistic world view that objectifies nature. Interdependence promotes solidarity and expresses human similarity, our kinship with other life-forms and situates humanity within a larger network of beings.⁴⁵ Emphasis on solidarity serves as a remedial to the shortcomings of an anthropocentric stewardship interpretation of human superiority. Solidarity stresses that “the “right relationship” of humans with the Creator and with the earth is marked by the humble awareness, brought to our attention by biological and genealogical heritage, that like the rest of creation, we are made of elements found throughout the cosmos”.⁴⁶ A solidarity relationship to all other creatures of earth is not one of sameness but of mutual connectedness and interdependence. As such, every aspect of creation, alone and collectively, reflects the glory of the triune God. So long as these solidarity links are not damaged or severed, the ecosystem health would be ensured and all beings will generally flourish.

Though there has been a significant shift from dominion to stewardship and to co-existence expressed from the first generation of ecological motifs to ecotheology, its major weakness is that it is developed and championed from the global North by the rich. Much of the ecological theology and environmental ethics, are articulated in languages and categories that reflect a romantic attitude to nature.⁴⁷ It does not deal in pragmatic ways with issues of poverty and ethical responsibility of humans especially with regards to economic activities. This criticism becomes a relevant one from an African perspective where poverty is wide spread. From African poverty context it is difficult for Africans to take the issue of ecotheology seriously unless issues of economy are addressed. Until this is done, ecotheological discourse will remain distrusted as a white people’s (Western) romanticism for the earth. Bearing this criticism in mind, I now continue the search for an eco-theological discourse uncritical of unacceptable anthropocentric influences and able to deal with the reality of people in the South. I now move to an analysis of the fourth generation, *Oikotheology*.

⁴⁴ Lisa, H. Sideris. 2003. *Environmental Ethics Ecological Theology and Natural Selection*. p.219

⁴⁵ Lisa, H. Sideris. 2003. *Environmental Ethics Ecological Theology and Natural Selection*. p.219

⁴⁶ Johnson, Elizabeth A. 1993. *Women, Earth and Creator Spirit*

⁴⁷ Lisa, H. Sideris. 2003. *Environmental Ethics, Ecological Theology and natural Selection*. New York: Columbia University Press. P.168

The Fourth Generation: *Oikothology*

Oikothology responds to the criticisms made against the previous three generations. It is critical of the abusiveness that comes from dominion and anthropocentrism inherent in previous generations. While supporting the basic concerns of eco-theology, it seeks a greater relationship between ecology and economy so that the issues of the environment and poverty can be strongly related. In this section I now discuss *oikothology*.

***Oikos* as the link between Ecology and Economy**

Within the notion of *oikos*- theology, is the etymological link between ecology and economy. Ecology was first used by the biologist Ernst Heckle (1834-1919) to refer to the scientific discipline that concerns itself with relationships between a living thing and its outside world.⁴⁸ It is the study of organisms in relation to the place in which they live (their habitat) and the interaction among and between the living and non living components of the place being studied (the eco systems). Ecology studies the conditions of existence of living beings and interactions of all kinds between them and their environment.⁴⁹ Ecology combines two Greek words, *oikos* and *logos*. *Oikos* means house or home (family) and *logos* means word or study. In this sense, ecology may be defined as a study or the ‘logic’ of one’s house or home. It relates to the dynamic relationship that constitutes the total life of the household. It could also be expanded to include the whole resources, life-forms and all the supporting systems available to the ecosystem. Here, life or life-form is understood in a more comprehensive and non technical form, to refer to what biologists classify as non-living, rivers, landscapes, ecosystems in general.⁵⁰ Economy on the other hand, relates to laws or rules (*oikos-nomos*) for the household or the art of administering the household.⁵¹ Larry Rasmussen suggests that economics implies “knowing how things work and arranging these ‘home systems’-ecosystems, so that the material requirements of the household of life are met and sustained”.⁵²

The word *oikos* is also the root of *oikoumene*- the whole inhabited world. This is used broadly and interchangeably by different ecological theologians. For example, Schubert

⁴⁸ Ibe, Martin. Joe. 2003. *Environmental Ethics and Politics in Developing Countries*.p.9

⁴⁹ Gottlieb, Roger. 1996. (ed) *This Sacred Earth: Religion, Nature Environment*. New York: Routldge.p.151

⁵⁰ Garrison, Glenn.G. 1994. *Moral Obligations to Non-Human Creations: A Theocentric Ethic*. Ph.D. Dissertation, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. p.276

⁵¹ Conradie, Ernst. M. 2005. *An Ecological Christian Anthropology. At Home with Earth?* p.7

⁵² Rasmussen, Larry. 1996. *Earth Community, Earth Crisis: Ecology and Justice Series*. New York: Maryknoll. p.91

Ogden opines that “because God’s love itself is subject to no bounds and excludes nothing from His embrace, there is no creature’s interest that is not also God’s interest and therefore, necessarily included in the redeeming love of God”.⁵³ Konrad Raiser, reminds us that human history is bound up with the history of all living things and the human household is incapable of surviving without being related to the other households which are its natural environment.⁵⁴

The relevance of this term is appreciated in its ability to integrate economy, ecology and the entire world order as a holistic entity. It advocates a comprehensive notion of justice which is capable of speaking to both economic injustice and ecological degradation. Janet Parker and Robert Richards had similarly criticized the prevailing economic dogma based on abstractions and reductions which conflate human well-being with increasing GNP and a reductive view of the human person as *homo economicus* whose essence is unlimited wants. Rather, they argue that relationships-to other individuals, to community, to the land, are at least as important as possession of commodities, and these relationships are often destroyed by growth-oriented economies which alienate individuals from their human and natural communities.⁵⁵

The Emergence of *Oikos* as Eco-Theological Concept

In Christian ecological theology, the concept of *oikothology* recently propounded by Warmback and popularised by Alokwu, is fast gaining ground as the ideal eco-theological orientation and model of relationship which humans ought to exhibit in the utilization of ecological resources to advance economic growth. Fundamental to *Oikothology* is the conceptualization of ideal human relationship to earth as our ‘home’ which humans inhabit together with multiple other forms of life.⁵⁶ The idea of “home for all” expressed in *Oikothology* includes the material as well the non material entities as belonging to the bigger family of God. It includes a wider family setting (especially in the African context),

⁵³ Mary, Evelyn Tucker and Grim, John. A. 1994.(eds) *Worldviews and Ecology. Religion, Philosophy, and the Environment*. New York: Mary Knoll. p.80

⁵⁴ Raiser, Konrad. 1991. *Ecumenism in Transition: A Paradigm shift in the Ecumenical Movement?* Geneva: WCC publications.p.85-88

⁵⁵ Parker, Janet and Roberta, Richards. 1996. in Dieter T. Hessel (ed) *Theology for Earth Community. A Field Guide*. New York: Mary Knoll.p.128

⁵⁶ Conradie, Ernst.M. 2005. *An Ecological Christian Anthropology. At Home with Earth?* p.221 Warmback, Andrew. 2005. *Constructing an oikothology: The Environment, Poverty and the Church in South Africa* *Constructing an oikothology: The Environment, Poverty and the Church in South Africa. p 180*

extended family members, ancestors, friends, neighbours, visitors, foreigners. It also includes domestic animals and is extended to other life forms.

Oikothology provides a dynamic framework which does not only challenge our current life styles and the global economic system that undermines nature; it also provides individual Christians and the society at large with a praxis that fosters environmental integrity and the struggle for social and economic justice. It is “a cry for the church to proclaim its relevance to the society that has lost its way environmentally and economically”.⁵⁷ It critiques the current global anthropocentrism, utilitarianism and the capitalist system and further expresses the idea that certain things should not be done to nature and that wanton acts of despoliation or cruelty or over-exploitation of natural resources, should be avoided as exceeding the legitimate role of humanity will be disastrous to itself and the environment.

The Need for a Fifth Generation: African Traditional Ecological Knowledge

We have spent a great deal of time trying to understand the series of generations of Christian ecological motifs in Christian ecological engagement from the first generation to the fourth generation. Like the previous three motifs, *Oikothology* has key weaknesses, namely that within the African context it is not fully accessible to African Christianity. It is also laden with Western terminologies. This is because its proponent, Andrew Warback, is particularly of English origin who lacked the African cultural orientation, knowledge of African cosmology and terminology (proverbs and idioms) to drive home the fundamental issues which oikothology is dealing with in the African way. Furthermore, it uses a lot of ‘white’ personalities as its reference points, its appeal and accessibility to African Christians remains doubtful. This is not a criticism of the work done by Warback, but rather a challenge to others to take up the task of relating and situating Oikothology within the African cultural context. In spite of its weakness, especially from African cultural perspective, oikothology still appears as a better eco-theological model so far. It is based on the above understanding that we seek to strengthen the concept of *oikothology* to provide us with a conscience that seeks the common good of the *oikos* and to abhor actions against the environment. In recognition of the fact that *oikothology* is not a stand-alone concept, we propose to synthesize it with African indigenous ecological ethics to provide a

⁵⁷ Leal, Robert. 2004. *The Environment and Christian Faith*. p.12

comprehensive model of ecological theology suitable for African theology in general and African Christianity in particular.

In doing this, the perspective of African culture on the environment has to be reflected. The importance of making *oikothology* an integral part of the ongoing ‘African eco-theological engagement’ is underpinned by the need to use indigenous ethics and theologies to connect to the gospel in a more creative and appealing manner. My argument for the indigenization of *oikothology* is that it is a creative way of responding to ecological challenges in an African Christian way since *oikothology* uses Western terminology to articulate its appeal. African indigenous ecological ethics uses idioms, storytelling and proverbs which unlike the Western terminology is reflective of African culture and hence more appealing to the African mind.

Furthermore, the need for this dialogue has become compelling because of some negative influences of the Western traditional Christianity on African cosmology.⁵⁸ Before the advent of Christian religion in Africa, Africans had a well articulated cosmology and particularly ecological ethics which served their time and age. The African cosmology had for many distant centuries as far as one could dig into the past, presented a concept of the world which is diametrically opposed to the traditional Western cosmology.⁵⁹ One could argue that the influence of the Western cosmology and particularly Western traditional Christian thinking, together with modernity, is to a certain extent at the heart of the current moral erosion and hence ecological chaos in Africa. Friday Mbon critiques Africans’ unreasonable copying of Western ideology when he observes that:

One of the greatest social as well as religious problems facing contemporary Africans is that they are too easily susceptible to borrowing ideologies and *mondus oparandi* from other cultures usually without thinking carefully and critically enough about the possible consequences and implications of what they are borrowing. Africans borrow, for instance, Western political and economic schemes, Western academic programmes, Western religious models of worship, alien criteria

⁵⁸ Olupona, Jacob. 1991. (ed) *African Traditional Religions in Contemporary Society*. New York: Paragon House, p.26. see Ray, Benjamin. 1976. *Religion, Symbol, Ritual and Community*. New Jersey: Englewood Cliffs, Westerlund, David. 1985. *African Religion in African Scholarship: A Preliminary Study of the Religious and Political Background*. Stockholm: Wiksel International

⁵⁹ Fred Lee Hord (Mzee Lasana Okpara) and Jonathan Scott Lee. 1995.(eds) “I am Because We Are” *Readings in Black Philosophy*. United States of America. The University of Massachusetts Press. p.49

for judging what is right or wrong-in other words, they even borrow alien ethics. That kind of uncritical borrowing has led many Africa countries to what Joseph Kenny has called “identity fluctuation” by which he means the assimilation of new or outside values.⁶⁰

As a result of the erosion of “African morality” which I vehemently argue, has resulted in the current environment and poverty challenges, we need therefore, to intensify efforts at re-discovering African cultural values in general and ecological ethics in particular by inquiring and rediscovering those ecological resources which restrained exploitation of the environment as well as protected the poor in African societies over the centuries. This inquiry is vital, because if our forebears in Africa had lived in their environment over the centuries without degrading it or depleting its resources unsustainably, and if poverty is not a phenomenon that was not widespread as we experience it today; then there is obviously a need for the children of Africa to drink from the ‘well of morality’ and ‘wealth of ecological knowledge’ of our fathers and mothers which had sustained them and their environment.

The need for the above inquiry is important because indigenous ecological knowledge or traditional environmental knowledge (TEK) has a lot to offer to the modern Africa as a contribution to the struggle to deal with the challenges of poverty and environmental criticality. In this regard, TEK needs to be recovered not just in argument with Westerners, but for the sake of Africans themselves. The recovery of the indigenous ecological knowledge should not be seen as an attempt to reify “africanness”, but on the contrary to contribute to a global discussion on the environment by finding a language and cosmology that roots Christianity in African culture. In this way it could contribute significantly to the global environmental discussion on the current ‘earth crisis. Poverty and environmental criticality as fundamental issues of concern to Africa’s development needs to be tackled from the perspective of African indigenous ecological ethics. The process of the re-discovery of African morality mentioned earlier would provide this and as such strengthen and make *oikothology* an indigenous ‘property’.

We are not left in doubt that this ‘indigenous property’, the synthesis of *oikothology* and African ecological ethics, should be seen as a welcome development in the emerging

⁶⁰ Mbon, Friday.1991. “African Traditional Socio-Religious Ethics and National Development. The Nigerian Case” in Olupona, Jacob (ed) *African Traditional Religions in Contemporary Society*. New York: Paragon House.p.102 See Kenny, Joseph. 1984. “Religious Movements in Nigeria-Divisive or Cohesive: Some Interpretative Models” in *Orita: Ibadan Journal of Religious Studies*, xvi, no. 2

theological discourse on ecology especially one that deals with the response of the church in Africa.

Furthermore, this synthesis is also of significant importance for some theological considerations. There has been a growing concern, indeed a loud acclamation expressed by many African theologians on the need for African theology not only to be independent of theologies from 'outside' but also to take a giant lead in the world Christianity whose centre of gravity is gradually shifting southwards with Africa becoming the most Christian continent.⁶¹ These theologians and others have argued, and in fact, stressed the need for African theology to take the centre stage in the continent.⁶² African theology speaks to the historical situation of African people and seeks to relate the African personality to the Divine life.⁶³ Therefore, such calls coming from erudite theologians of African descent who contend that "a high proposition of the world's serious theological thinking and writing will have to be done in Africa, if it is to be done at all",⁶⁴ further motivates the need for indigenous eco-theological model.

With *oikothology* pulling the economic and ecological strings together, we can conclude without doubts that there is a real need for this indigenous eco-theological engagement in Africa where both economic and social issues are at the moment plaguing developmental efforts.

Conclusion

We have examined four generations of ecological motifs in theology, namely, dominion, stewardship, eco-theology, and now oikothology. We have seen how oikothology has

⁶¹ See Nwangwu, M.G. 2008. "Religious Vows in Traditional Context". *Africa Ecclesia Review*. 50 (1&2) 133-151, Nwalye, H. 1999. "Formation of Women Religious as Agents of Evangelization for the Church as Family of God" *Africa Ecclesial Review* 41 (1) 267-281, Lott, A. 1995. Inculturation of Religious Community Life in Africa. *Africa Ecclesial Review* 37 (1) 239-254, De Gruchy, S. Undated. *Caution, Creativity and Construction*. Unpublished Manuscript. See Bediako, Kwame. 1995. *Christianity in Africa. The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion*. New York:Orbis Books. P.114.

⁶² See Mugambi, J.N.K. 1995. *From Liberation to Reconstruction: African Christian Theology after the Cold War*. Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, Pobee, John, S. 1979. *Toward An African Theology*. United States of America. Parthenon Press, Ikenga-Metu, Emefie. 2002. (ed) *The God's in Retreat. Continuity and Change in African Religion. (The Nigerian Experience)*. Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishers Co. Ltd. p. 242, Walls, Andrew. F. 1976. "Towards Understanding Africa's Place in Christian History" in John Pobee. *Religion in Pluralistic Society*. New York; E. J. Brill. p. 182

⁶³ Ikenga-Metu, Emefie. 2002. (ed) *The God's in Retreat. Continuity and Change in African Religion.(The Nigerian Experience)*. Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishers Co. Ltd. p. 242

⁶⁴ Walls, Andrew. F. 1976. "Towards Understanding Africa's Place in Christian History" in John Pobee. *Religion in Pluralistic Society*. New York; E.J. Brill. p. 182-184

sought to consciously integrate the concerns of ecology and the environment with concerns of economics and poverty. It is a theological way of expressing the ‘olive agenda’⁶⁵ which seeks to integrate the brown agenda of poverty with the green agenda of the environment. For these reasons I recommend that Oikotheology as an important theological contribution to the earth crisis, should be synthesised with African indigenous ecological knowledge as a global input to the search for all inclusive and participatory response to the current earth and poverty crisis.

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⁶⁵ De Gruchy, Steve. 2007. “An Olive Agenda”

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