

# Inter-religious Discourse on Climate Change

## Roman Catholic and African Traditional Perspectives

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### Abstract

*The future of our planet poses many challenges for our generation, possibly more than ever before. Overpopulation, rapid industrialization, heightened consumerism, unrestricted technologies, and other human activities are affecting every region of land and water, and causing environmental degradation on an enormous scale. Indeed, not only are we altering the climate and radically undermining life, but we are also triggering a mass extinction of species and putting future generations in a predicament. The Catholic Church values this world and believes that the transcendent creator and an immanent Spirit dwell deep in the created world and that one finds God when one loves the world God has created and redeemed. Any activity that demeans and devalues creatures demeans the creator, as much as reverence for and joy over everything and every person becomes the sign of the love for God. Human sinfulness is doubtless the major cause of the environmental crisis. Consequently, this contribution argues that through the ritual of prayer that weaves humans into the rhythm of natural cycles, the Catholic Church can lead to changing people's hearts and contribute to restoring the environment. The essay also argues that in order to effectively fulfil its role of changing people's mindsets toward the environment, the church must dialogue with African Traditional Religions.*

In *Gaudium et Spes – On the Church in the Modern World* – the Second Vatican Council stated, “The joys and hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men [sic] of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of the Church” (no. 1). The “griefs and anxieties” of this age doubtless include, among other things, the deterioration of the global

environment, ecological pollution, climate change, depletion of natural resources, water shortages, and the loss of biodiversity. Unless we change our perception of nature and our conduct, this generation is likely to experience ecological catastrophe.

The magnitude of ecological problems does not allow religion to confine itself to the recipes of prayers or immediate duties of charity. As John Mary Waliggo points out,

Genuine religion anywhere should be holistic, able to cater for the whole person: body, soul and mind; the whole community in all its human dimensions. It should be liberating and transforming and having a clearly positive impact on society and all its people and its environment. Religion should enable every human person to realize all his or her God-given potentials for the protection and promotion of life, people, communities, development and the values of love, justice, peace, integrity and the preferential care for the poor and vulnerable.<sup>1</sup>

The stress caused by unchecked human activities must find Christians ready to examine their conscience not only about wrongful deeds or disastrous omissions, but also about the attitudes and ideologies that might help to explain the deeper causes of the symptoms.<sup>2</sup>

Our generation needs to learn from history and make radical changes. As Bernard Häring reminds us, some ancient great empires, nations, and tribes destroyed themselves due to neglecting the environment:

The aggressive Mesopotamian culture disappeared almost completely because of the ecological decay they caused, while the ancient Egyptian and Chinese cultures showed a much more gentle and respectful attitude towards their environment, and therefore could last longer. The Roman Empire, marked as much by exploitation as the Sumerians, caused its downfall by extreme materialism that did violence to nature – for instance, by far-reaching deforestation.<sup>3</sup>

To effectively address ecological challenges, the Catholic Church must dialogue with African Traditional Religions (ATR). The Catholic Church considers inter-religious dialogue not only as one of the expressions of mission but also as a way of solving other human problems. On the other hand, ATR are deeply rooted in the lives of the people, irrespective of their religious affiliation. This essay suggests that dialogue between these two religious traditions can usher in positive change. Such dialogue must be based on the conviction that salvation comes from God, rather than religion. As Michael

<sup>1</sup> John Mary Waliggo, “The African Social Religious Reality,” in *Spirituality for Another Possible World*, ed. Mary N. Getui, Luiz Carlos Susin, and Beatrice W. Churu (Limuru, Kenya: Kolbe Press, 2008), 58.

<sup>2</sup> Bernard Häring, *Free and Faithful in Christ*, vol. 3 (London: St. Paul Publications, 1981), 173.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

Amaladoss ably points out, people may be saved in and through religion, but not by it.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, openness to God must be the basis of dialogue.

## A Catholic Perspective on Prayer and Its Impact on the Environment

### The meaning of prayer in the Catholic tradition

Prayer in the Catholic perspective is described as “raising the mind and heart to God.”<sup>5</sup> It is a communication or dialogue whereby people praying share their thoughts and feelings and receive feedback from God.<sup>6</sup> According to Karl Peschke, prayer is the means to draw near and know God, and although God’s presence is felt in every heart, a person comes to know God better and more closely only through prayer.<sup>7</sup> People pray in order to become more sensitive to the reality of God. Prayer is primarily addressed to the Father, but it can also be directed toward Jesus Christ, particularly by the invocation of his holy name. Analogically, prayer is like telephoning God: through prayer one addresses the heavens and God responds.

### Forms of prayer

There are different forms of prayer in the Catholic Church: vocal, meditative, contemplative, thanksgiving, doxological, and intercessory. Prayer can also be individual or common, informal or formal.<sup>8</sup> There are prayers at different times through the day. Each event of human life has its form of prayer: for example, prayers for mothers expecting and prayers after birth. There are also prayers for different cycles of the month, seasons, and year, and prayers during the drought and rainy seasons. Along with prayers for human beings, there are also prayers for the environment and for animals. The Catholic Church stipulates three stances for prayer: attention, reverence, and humility and trust.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Michael Amaladoss, “The Pluralism of Religions and the Significance of Christ,” in *Asian Faces of Jesus*, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2005), 90.

<sup>5</sup> Gerard W. Hughes, *God in All Things* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2003), 48.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Zanzig, *Understanding Catholic Christianity* (Winona, Minn.: St Mary’s Christian Brothers Publications, 1988), 264.

<sup>7</sup> Karl H. Peschke, *Christian Ethics: Moral Theology in the Light of Vatican II*, vol. 2 (Bangalore: Theological Publications, 2010), 144.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

## Purpose of prayer

For Catholics, praying expresses people's discernment of the will of God. Its purpose is to recognize and honour God. People turn to God to express their dependence and need for God. In situations of crisis – for example, during drought – people pray for divine intervention because they recognize their inability to escape or overcome it. Prayers of petition – for example, praying for rain – are founded on the faith that God is present in the world, attentive to the needs of the people, and acting on their behalf. It is thus not surprising that some philosophers regard prayer as the opium of the people or as fetish/magic on which they rely. They consider prayer as people's expression of immature illusions and the desire to escape a reality that they are not willing or able to confront.<sup>10</sup>

In the Catholic perspective, prayer helps us to develop intrapersonal relationships: that is, self-realization. It empowers us to know how to relate to our own inner selves, to know our moods, feelings, emotions, and mental state.<sup>11</sup> Without intra-personal relationships, we cannot live as moral persons, as the source of human behaviour lies in our thinking and feeling. How people relate to themselves governs how they relate to others and the environment.<sup>12</sup> Prayer makes us more human, and the more human we become, the more we recognize the humanity of others.<sup>13</sup> I strongly agree with this analysis because we cannot expect people who do not respect their own lives to respect the lives of other people or to care for the environment.

Catholic prayer is also interpersonal: that is, it is unitive. It binds people among themselves. The interpersonal aspect of prayer means that prayer deepens a person's relationship not only with their immediate family members, friends, or relatives, but also with the entire human family. To pray is to seek the coming of God's kingdom and the achievement of its values in the society in which you live. As Häring elaborates,

If, in prayer, we ask that God's name be hallowed, then those in the street who have no name are recognized as our brothers and sisters. Finding our own unique name, we shall not use others as a means, as political fanaticism and terrorism do so frequently and as political powers are constantly tempted to do. If, in prayer we are truly longing for God's kingdom to come, then we are also desiring that all people and the environment may experience its coming by being drawn to each other in this experience of faith.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Sarah K. Pinnock, *The Theology of Dorothee Soelle* (New York: Trinity Press International, 2003), 56.

<sup>11</sup> Hughes, *God in All Things*, 43–44.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>13</sup> Nisbert Taisekwa Taringa, "Possibilities and Limitations for Intercultural Dialogue from the Perspective of Ubuntu Philosophy," *Swedish Missiological Themes* 95:2 (2007).

<sup>14</sup> Häring, *Free and Faithful in Christ*, 334.

In Uganda, human selfishness is one of the causes of environmental degradation. Neither leaders nor individuals seem to show concern for the next generation. Lakes, rivers, and other natural resources are exploited without regard for what will happen in future. In this case, the interpersonal aspect of prayer is very important, because it awakens our consciousness to know that we not only depend on others but are also supposed to be our sister's and brother's keeper. Prayer helps form believers' character, making them more human through the virtues of justice, hospitality, solidarity, sharing, dialogue, and empathy, among others.

The interpersonal aspect of prayer binds believers with God. The implication of this bond is that we come to understand God as the creator of both living and non-living beings, animate and inanimate beings. God did not make a covenant with human beings only, but with all creation. Prayer, therefore, increases people's sense of responsibility for God's creation. It also implies that contravening this relationship is destructive not only for human families but also for the environment. Consequently, the purpose of praying for rain is not only an invocation for divine intervention, but is also an occasion for people to recognize that their sinfulness is the cause of drought. It is a moment of self-consciousness and repentance, and an expression of willingness to restore our broken relationship with God and nature. In other words, a healthy relationship with God includes an increasing awareness of our inter-relatedness with all creation – with animals, plants, forests, rivers, and lakes.<sup>15</sup>

## Split Spirituality in the Catholic Church

Although prayer is the driving spirit through which the Catholic Church moves and rotates, prayer is also divisive because of the church's historical problem of dualism. As Vatican II observes through the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, the split between the faith that many Catholics profess and their daily lives reflects one of the more serious errors of our age (no. 43). Historically, the error of dualism fostered the dichotomy between the sacred and profane, body and soul/spirit, grace and work, religious and secular, and so on. In this regard, prayer was considered to be a moment for a person to enter the inner chamber of their mind: shutting out all thoughts save that of God. It was meant to empower humans to turn their minds away from social and economic problems and other worldly affairs.<sup>16</sup> Preoccupation with worldly affairs was seen as a distraction to the main business of the Christian life.

<sup>15</sup> Hughes, *God in All Things*, 46.

<sup>16</sup> Avery Dulles, "The Meaning of Faith Considered in Relationship to Justice," in *The Faith that Does Justice*, ed. John C. Haughey (New York: Paulist Press, 1977), 17.

Although the church officially teaches that the church and the world are truly and intimately linked, the format of some prayers seems to promote dualism. For example, recent changes in the liturgical prayers in the Catholic mass promote the separation of body and soul/spirit. In the format of salutation celebrated at mass in the past, the celebrant stated, “The Lord be with you,” and the congregation responded, “And also with you.” In the new translations, the congregation responds, “And with your spirit.” Similarly, the prayer after *Agnus Dei* used to be “Lord, I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word and I shall be healed.” Now it is “Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed.” These prayers seem to focus on the soul more than on the body.

The elements of dualism still exist in the split spirituality lived by many Catholics. A split spirituality implies the separation of God and the things of God from ordinary, everyday life. As Gerard Hughes points out, “God is confined to Church, religion, the sacred and the intangible.”<sup>17</sup> According to Hughes, a split spirituality can lead one to be religious but not spiritual. Being religious means being a member of a particular church, regularly attending church services, and adhering to the church’s regulations. On the other hand, being spiritual refers to the presence of God: the Spirit of God who is the Spirit of unity, love, and compassion within a person and in the community.<sup>18</sup>

In Uganda, the problem of a split spirituality is prevalent. Prayer has become a fashionable activity for many Catholics. The efficaciousness of prayer does not motivate many devout and committed Catholics to meaningfully participate in political, social, economic, and cultural issues that are not only relevant to living faith in God but also integral to their faith. As a result, although churches are always full on Sundays and weekdays, and places of pilgrimage are increasing, scandals of corruption, embezzlement of public funds, human suffering and human trafficking, selling of fake or expired products, domestic violence, and exploitation of the environment are rampant. Unfortunately, the people who actively engage in prayers are often the ones who carry out these shameful and immoral activities. In other words, what people believe and how they live their daily lives are quite different. Religion and morality do not influence each other. Even when people pray for rain, as they usually do, they do not feel an urge for conversion from the sins that are largely contributing to climate change. This essay suggests that what is needed to end dualism and make people’s life in spirit genuine and their prayer relevant to daily events of life is dialogue between the Catholic Church and ATR. The next section will examine African prayer, highlighting its foundations, characteristics, and relevance to the Catholic approach to environmental crisis.

<sup>17</sup> Hughes, *God in All Things*, 3.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

## African Traditional Religion and Its Relevance to Environmental Crisis

African spirituality arises from the conviction that God exists. The African God not only exists but is the origin and sustainer of all things, both animate and inanimate. The African God is transcendent, but also immanent: personally involved in creation. God is simultaneously transcendent and immanent.<sup>19</sup> The African God is ultimately the champion of the good, of life, justice, and harmony. God's goodness not only encourages commitment on the part of human beings to imitate God, but also demands it. Goodness here refers to relating harmoniously with other people and taking care of the weak, including caring for the environment. It is incumbent on human society to maintain harmony between persons and the rest of creation. Human failure to be good as God is good leads to a breaking of the relationship between human beings and God, as well as between human beings and the rest of God's creation. Breaking our relationship with God leads not only to human suffering but also to the suffering of the rest of creation – such as land and animal infertility or death. In other words, the cause of evil and suffering is human failure. Evil is not ontological.

Since, as Africans believe, evil is not ontological, the purposes of prayer are to heal and restore the broken relationship with God and to harmonize relationships among people and the entire creation. Since Africans believe that God is immanent and manifests Godself through human beings, nature, and dreams, they turn to God in times of drought, famine, epidemics, wars, and other human or environmental instabilities. For Africans, there is no dichotomy between heaven and earth, sacred and profane. Nature is never only natural; it is always filled with a religious value. The world is impregnated with messages of sacredness. Although sometimes these messages are in code, prayer helps people to understand them.

Prayer in the African context can take the form of words or sacrifices. It can be done privately or communally and for various needs. Prayer is not taught; it comes spontaneously as one starts praying. There are no specific times or places for prayer. Although there are female and male mediums, priests, and elders who sometimes officiate at prayers, in reality prayer is not their prerogative. The following prayer from Ankole, Western Uganda, demonstrates how Africans pray and the motives behind such prayers:

Merciful and Almighty God  
 You who created Mariam, pastoralists, shepherds, and cows  
 We implore you come and bless our cows and women  
 Bless the cows with plenty of milk and make our women elegant

<sup>19</sup> John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy and Religion* (Nairobi: Heinemann, 1985), 32ff.

Bless our women's breasts and make them fertile  
 Bless their natural beauty; their dark skin and whiten their teeth  
 Bless my sons: Benon and Kenneth  
 As Benon is now a teenager, bless him that he may play and date girls  
 For Kenneth, banish his weakness and foolishness so that he can impregnate a girl  
  
 For my personal needs, loving God, I don't have much to ask of you  
 Nevertheless, you know the one I love most  
 Turn her mind and thoughts toward me;  
 Make her dream about me this very night  
 So that in the morning as I open my door, I find her waiting for me.  
  
 I now leave you for the poor  
 I know that they will tear you into pieces and burden you with their requests.  
 They are desperately in need of money, food, water, milk, and love.  
 Amen.

The above prayer demonstrates how African prayer not only focuses on God, but is also contextual. There is no escapism from what is mundane. Religious concepts and cosmological images are inseparably connected and form a system of the world. For Africans, prayer is not attending Sunday services, or kneeling in the morning, noon, and evening. Rather, it is the spirit that is evident in all forms of life. It is also the communication with the divine that makes human beings know that they have a mission to fight against all forms of evil, including environmental crisis. The praying person addresses God in a fraternal manner. The above prayer also indicates that women, earth/nature, and fecundity are interlinked. A woman is mystically held to be one with the earth. The holiness of woman depends on the holiness of the earth. Fecundity and birth have a cosmic structure. Marriage and childbearing are seen as incumbent on all people, and the birth of animals is a blessing from God, as well. The appearance of human, animal, and plant life is the central mystery of the world. Life comes from somewhere that is not of this world. Without prayer, the beginning and destiny of life remains unclear. Therefore, prayer helps to decipher the meaning of life in all its various forms. Since prayer is central for the Catholic Church, as this essay has demonstrated, through dialogue the church can learn how to make its prayer relevant to address the challenges that affect the environment and humanity in general.

## Conclusion

The scope of our challenge and the scale of our current environmental degradation cannot be stated strongly enough. Increasing industrialization, destruction of ecosystems, rapid use of resources, and population explosion are causing global climate change and species extinction. This problem must be tackled from the perspectives not only of

scientists, public policy, and global ethics, but also of faith-based communities. The state of our environment is a great challenge to the Catholic Church, which proclaims and prays for the reign of God. The church has certainly not been silent before this challenge: as seen, for example, in principles from Catholic social and environmental teaching, as well as in teachings of local church communities.

However, the nature and scope of environmental degradation spur the church to an active level of response to meet the challenge. This essay has shown that the eradication of environmental problems calls for Catholics to convert to a morality of worldwide responsibility. The error of dualism between the sacred and profane, spiritual and material, religious and spiritual must end so that the salvation being offered to people does not stop at the church door. The spirit and power of prayer must motivate believers to bring together what is going on inside and outside of the church. In this way, the outside will be genuinely religious and spiritual, and the inside real – and not ideology and illusion.<sup>20</sup> If prayer is to be relevant to the human condition – in times, for example, such as drought – it must bring Catholics into relationship with people of other religious traditions. Its efficacy must drive the Catholic Church toward a unity of purpose with ATR. Inter-religious dialogue is not a luxury, but a necessity. The nature of dialogue should be such that both religions share concerns, needs, hopes, celebrations, joys, and sorrows.<sup>21</sup> They must be convinced that isolation is no longer desirable or even possible in our contemporary globalized world. Dialogue is an important tool for overcoming the environmental crisis that affects us all.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, each player must be humble and engage in dialogue with the other on an equal basis, since no one has a monopoly over God's Spirit.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>20</sup> William Dych, "The Dualism in the Faith of the Church," in *The Faith that Does Justice*, ed. John C. Haughey (New York: Paulist Press, 1977), 59.

<sup>21</sup> Patrick Ryan, "A Christian Perspective on Inter-religious Dialogue," in Getui et al., eds, *Spirituality for Another Possible World*, 131. According to Ryan, there are three levels of dialogue: (1) the dialogue itself, involving sharing concerns, needs, hopes, celebrations, joys, and sorrows; (2) the dialogue of action, involving sharing humanitarian development, standing shoulder to shoulder to work for the common good; and (3) the dialogue of sharing theological exchange, concerning sharing academic investigations.

<sup>22</sup> W. Tyndale, "Some Reflections on a Dialogue Between the World's Religions and the World Bank with Reference to Catholic Social Thought," in *Globalization and Catholic Social Thought: Present Crisis, Future Hope*, ed. John Coleman and William Ryan (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2005), 158.

<sup>23</sup> Steven B. Bevans and Rogers P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2006), 358–59.