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A Spirit-Based Theology of the Environment Lessons from African and Christian Traditions

Bonaventure Ikenna UGWU, C.S.Sp

1. Introduction

Debates and discussions about pollution, deforestation, global warming and other related environmental problems used to be considered in Africa as Western issues but today, there is hardly anybody in any part of the world, no matter how remote the area is, that is not aware of and worried about the situation of the natural environment.¹⁰⁶ Things are changing rapidly as far as the natural environment is concerned and these changes are affecting human beings adversely. In some places rains no longer fall when they usually do and in other places life is threatened by inundations. The earth is groaning in pains as a result of the indiscriminate exploitation and assault which it is undergoing primarily from the hands of the human members of the community of creation. This exploitation is taking place on daily basis and the effects are very much at home with us. It is believed that if the present situation is left unattended to, the entire world is in danger of annihilation.

Recently, precisely in April 2010, there was a wide spread warning about an impending acid rain which was circulated around the whole of Nigeria. People kept away from business outside their homes on the days supposedly marked out for the rain for fear that they could be cut unaware by the acid rain. It was said that the rain could cause cancer of the skin if it falls on a person. This made news even in remotest villages.

Obviously, the concern for the precarious situation of the natural environment has reached the remotest places in Africa and that

¹⁰⁶ As far back as 1984, the Federal Government of Nigeria had instituted what was known as "environmental day". It was seen mostly in terms of cleaning people's surroundings. Today, some state governments in Nigeria such as Imo State identifies the environment as part of its priority, hence, its slogan, "Green and clean". That is to say that the concern for the environment is with us in this part of the world.

has become also their problem. Africans are not just joining the discussion but also getting engaged in the collaborative search for what has to be done or avoided in order to guarantee a future for the natural environment. Governmental and non-governmental organizations everywhere, scientists, city planners, Christian theologians as well as men and women of other religions are working together to proffer a solution to the problem facing the universe. Africans have joined this collaborative ministry for environmental health.

This paper intends to examine the notion of Spirit-in-creation as found in African traditional religion and in Christianity in order to highlight the hope that they hold for the future of the natural environment. The reason for choosing to explore these two traditions, African and Christian, for a model of theology for the environment is not far from the observations made by McFague that "responsible theology ought to be done in context..." and that "the distinctive mark of constructive theology is that it does not rely principally on classical sources but attempts its articulation of the concepts of God, world and human beings with the help of a variety of sources..."¹⁰⁷ - fetched from the context of Africa as one informed by a double heritage which in this case are the African traditional religious cultures and the Christian message. It is hoped that a spirit-based theology and spirituality would go a long way towards providing both a remedy to the present ecological problems as well as hope for the future of the non-human sphere of creation. We would begin by first underlining some of the possible causes of the present ecological problems and some of the options so far proposed by theologians as solutions. The African and Christian understanding of the connection between spirit and the environment will be examined. The advantages offered by these traditions in the formation of a spirit-based theology of the environment will be highlighted. Finally, a conclusion will be drawn.

¹⁰⁷ Sallie McFague, "Imaging a Theology of Nature: The World as God's Body", in Charles Birch, William Eakin and Jay B. McDaniel eds. *Liberating Life: Contemporary Approaches to Ecological Theology*, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, p205.

2. Some Root Causes of the Problem

The quest for an effective theology of the environment often begins with an attempt towards the identification of the causes of the present ecological crises. Generally, accusing fingers are pointed at different directions such as Christian theologians, scientists, philosophers, and multi-national corporations. The historian, Lynn White Jr., in her famous article "The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis" first published in 1967, attributed the problem of the environment to how the people of Western world interpreted the Christian doctrine of creation which is found in the book of Genesis.¹⁰⁸ The claim is that this doctrine of creation gives human beings the right of domination over the natural world and this right is seen as part of God's plan for creation. The story is that after God had created human beings in his image, he blessed them and gave them the following injunction: "be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and every living thing that moves upon the earth" (*Genesis* 1, 28).

Among other things, this passage is interpreted to mean that human beings are both the centre and crown of creation. Having such an exaggerated anthropocentric view of creation, human beings related to nature mostly in terms of power and control and in response to their selfish interests and needs. This erroneous attitude to nature created a division between the human and non human members of the world and ultimately ended in exploitation.¹⁰⁹ In addition to this, Christians laid much emphasis on the fact that creation is not divine and as a result that nature became divested of sacredness. All these contributed significantly to the overwhelmingly exploitative attitude of human beings towards nature.

¹⁰⁸ Cf. Lynn White, Jr., "The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crises" in *Ecology and Religion* in David Spring and Eileen Spring ed., New York: Harper and Row, 1974, pp24-28.

¹⁰⁹ Cf. Anne M. Clifford, "Feminist Perspectives on Science: Implications for an Ecological Theology of Creation", in Mary Heather MacKinnon and Moni McIntyre, eds. *Readings in Ecology and Feminist Theology*, Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1995, p347.

These accusations leveled against the Judeo-Christian tradition have been refuted particularly by those who are of the view that the Christian ethics of human responsibility to nature contributed more to building up the universe than being responsible for the its destruction.¹¹⁰ This essay presupposes this view that several elements of Christian faith and doctrine would support the up building of the universe. The fact, however, remains that Christianity contributed so much in shaping both the thoughts and actions of the Western civilization which gave rise to science and technology and industrialization which are principal actors in the exploitation of nature.

Philosophers and scientists could be said to have imparted more negatively on the environment than any harm caused by the misrepresentation of the Christian doctrine on creation. For instance, Francis Bacon (1561-1626), who is a philosopher but also considered being the father of modern science, conceived nature to be “unruly disorder calling out to be tamed, dominated, ordered and put to work”.¹¹¹ The main goal of his philosophical endeavour was to “replace speculative metaphysical thought about nature of reality with a mode of inquiry that would allow people to verify the truths of science by reading nature's books”.¹¹² In all these, his ultimate goal was to arrive at the competence to dominate and control nature. With such understanding of the natural environment as this, people went about destroying it without any qualms of conscience because as far as they were concerned, their conduct was proper. On his part, Rene Descartes (the French philosopher) introduced a sharp dichotomy between the mind and the body and went further to assert that the former is of higher value than the latter. By implication, the body which represents nature beg to be seen as degradable in relation to the psychic realm. In effect, by the end of the 17th century, John

¹¹⁰ John Austin Baker, “Biblical Views of Nature” in Charles Birch, William Eakin and Jay B. McDaniel eds. *Liberating Life: Contemporary Approaches to Ecological Theology*, pp9-26.

¹¹¹ Cf. Bona Ikenna Ugwu, *The Holy Spirit as Present and Active in Cosmic Turmoil and Human Suffering: A Dialogue between Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and Jürgen Moltmann*, Rome: 2004, p265 where this work is cited.

¹¹² Anne M. Clifford, “Feminist Perspectives on Science...” p339.

Locke came up with a categorical statement that "God gave the world to man for him to exploit for his own benefit".¹¹³ With the idea that the exploitation of the universe is a God-given project to humanity, there was little or no boundaries to the extent people could go to destroy the world.

Building on the conclusions reached by philosophers like Bacon, Descartes and John Locke, scientists launched the mechanistic mindset which understands the universe as a type of machine working according to the law of nature. Charles Darwin (1809-1882), for example, developed a theory of the evolution of species which states that God or the spiritual factor has no place in the explanation of the process of the evolution of the universe. This is because according to him, the process of evolution is controlled by natural selection through survival of the fittest. In all, science became a veritable instrument for the exploitation of the environment.

What this short presentation above shows is that the present situation of the natural order is traceable to a number of factors which combined to produce it. Philosophers and scientists and in some way, Christian theology offered an explanation of the world where nature is de-sacralised, devoid of spirit and is simply there to be exploited to satisfy human needs and interests. To this, one should add sheer ignorance of people and then ideologies differences.¹¹⁴ This largely explains the assault which human beings launched on the environment that landed us into the present predicament of a world threatened by possible extinction. Let us have a brief consideration of the solutions offered so far by Christian thinkers to redress the situation.

3. Searching for Solutions

In this section we intend to present a very concise review of the

¹¹³ Ugwu, *The Holy Spirit*, pp265-266.

¹¹⁴ Cf. Rowland Moss, "God, Man and Nature: Contrasting Views in Christendom" in *The Teilhard Review*, Vol. 13 no. 2 (Summer 1978), 89-103 where the author discusses how ideological antecedents (differing views of nature and human relationship to it) contributed to the present problem.

ideas of some Christian scholars on what they consider to be crucial elements that should form the basis of a theology that would respond adequately to the needs of the environment today. This review will provide us a background for the option which this work wants to propose. The underlying assumption is that Christian theology has something to offer in the search for solution for environmental crises. The fact that Christianity is accused of contributing to the bad condition of the cosmos implies recognition that the Christian religion has an important role to play in shaping people's minds and attitudes in relation to the environment. Hence, Christian thinkers and theologians have made and are making meaningful contributions by articulating and proposing approaches and models for a healthy environment.

James M. Gustafson in his *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective* expresses the view that the way God relates to the world has to form the basis for human relationship with the environment. He favours a God-centred approach to the problem more than the anthropocentric approach which is predominant in the present age. By acknowledging the sovereignty of God, a limit will be placed on human beings who see themselves as the Lord of creation. S. Toulmin favours the view that in order to bring to an end the present exploitation of the environment, the idea of the cosmos as a home should be highlighted. People do not usually want to have their homes destroyed rather they do everything possible to protect and preserve it.¹¹⁵ Similar to this notion of the cosmos as a home is the idea by people like H. Skolimowski which sees the universe as a sanctuary. A sanctuary is a sacred space within the temple which is held in great respect and adorned with beautiful ornaments for worship. On her part, Harvey Sindima proposes a life-centred understanding of the universe as the best option for the conservation of the universe as against the anthropocentric and mechanistic worldviews of the Bible and scientists respectively.¹¹⁶ John Habgood proposes a sacramental

¹¹⁵ Cf. Toulmin, *The Return to Cosmology: Post-modern Science and the Theology of Nature*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982.

¹¹⁶ Cf. Harvey Sindima, "Community of Life: ecological Theology in African Perspective" in

approach to the ecological issues. The Christian doctrine of the sacraments is founded on the belief that material things such as water, bread, wine, oil and human beings can acquire new meanings that transform them into means of encounter with the divine. Habgood is of the view that the exploitation of the cosmos implies a denial, frustration, distortion, defacing and ignoring of the divine potential of the world. If the world is understood in its sacramental nature, exploitation of the environment will be replaced by respect and care for it.¹¹⁷

Sallie McFague expresses the view that concern for the cosmos largely depends on the overriding idea of God that people has. Thus, she proposes the image of God which sees the world as God's body.¹¹⁸ She rejects the monarchical imaging of God as King or Lord because "it supports conceiving of God as a being existing somewhere apart from the world and ruling it externally either directly through divine intervention or indirectly through controlling the wills of his subjects".¹¹⁹ In other words, it does not encourage ecological sensibilities. Going further she calls for a type of theology that combines a theocentric, life-centred and cosmocentric sensibilities towards creation. Such a theology would be able to place human beings rightly into the natural world, not making them passive and yet not constituting them as both centre and measure of the universe. In the bid to play down on what is perceived as the human centred understanding of the universe, attempts are being made to assign a non consequential position to human beings in the world.

McFague's warning that human beings should not be made passive in the world carries a lot of weight. It is true that before the arrival of human beings on the scene, evolution was carried along

Charles Birch, William Eakin and Jay B. McDaniel eds. *Liberating Life: Contemporary Approaches to Ecological Theology*, pp137-200.

¹¹⁷ Cf. John Habgood, "The Sacramental Approach to Environmental Issues", in Charles Birch, William Eakin and Jay B. McDaniel eds. *Liberating Life*, pp46-54.

¹¹⁸ Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological Nuclear Age*, London: SCM Press, 1987, pp69-87.

¹¹⁹ McFague, *Models of God*, p. 64.

without any conscious contribution from the part of created things, but “with the advent of mankind, reflection, choice and freedom came into play and consequently, passive transformation of creation gave way to conscious and active involvement of creatures for a change”.¹²⁰ In other words, the progress of the world depends largely on human industry and energy, on what they do and undergo. In fact, if human beings fail to strive with all their might, the growth of the universe will be retarded and its ultimate actualization may be delayed. The value of human effort particularly when it is placed in the context of the kingdom of God cannot be underestimated. All human efforts applied to the development and ordering of the earth towards the fullness of life at all spheres of creation must be encouraged. Debunking the anthropocentric world view of creation does not mean denying humanity its place in the cosmos. Therefore, any attempt to diminish the importance of human beings in the world or to assign them a passive role therein runs the risk of crippling the movement of creation.

In what follows, an attempt will be made to offer a Pneumatological approach to the ecological question. A Spirit-based theology will provide the much needed theology of the environment that will at the same time be respectful of human beings and nature, and be totally dependent on God. The particular understanding of the Spirit which will help to realize this goal can be found in African traditional religious culture and in Christianity especially in the works of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. Let us now briefly examine the insights from these traditions.

4. The African Understanding of Spirit Favourable for the Environment

The religion of Africans which they practiced before the coming of Christianity or Islam is predominantly spirit-centred. The African understanding of the world places a lot of emphasis on

¹²⁰ Ugwu, *The Holy Spirit*, p101

life, on relationship and on harmony. There is constant quest for the maintenance of these core existential values. God the Creator appears to be far removed from the world but he is present and involved in creation through the spirits. According to the African belief system, "spirits are ubiquitous" because "there is no area of the earth, no object or creature which has not a spirit of its own or which cannot be inhabited by a spirit".¹²¹ This is why to some people the African world can simply be described as "forest of spirits" since the length and breath of life among Africans are wielded together by a thread that could simply be called spirit(s). Bushes and forests, mountains and hills, trees and plants, rivers and streams, animals and peoples are dwelling places of spirits. The spirits do not only inhabit them but use them to manifest their presence and actions in the world. Human beings relate with spirits through these intermediaries. If there is any single factor that has contributed to the preservation of the environment among the Igbo of Nigeria it is the fact of people's awareness of the relationship between spirits and nature. Bushes can be cleared, trees may be felled, and streams might be tampered with but not those dedicated to or known to be inhabited by spirits.

The African universe is religious¹²² and earth itself is believed to be a spiritualized subject that is intimately related with human beings in the world. Among the Igbo, for example, the earth-spirit is a very popular deity which sometimes appears to have priority over the spirits that inhabit the sky or the heavens. The fertility of men and women and of crops and animals are attributed to the earth-spirit. People look up to the earth-deity to provide them food and sustenance on daily basis and when their days in this world are ended, they expect to be laid to rest inside her. Given the role of the earth-spirit as source of fertility, as provider of sustenance, and as the one to whom all must return at the end of their terrestrial sojourn, she is considered to be a mother. As

¹²¹ E. Bolaji Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition*, London: SCM Press, 1973, p174. Cf. also Bona Ikenna Ugwu, *Holy Spirit: Fire from Above*, Enugu: San Press, 2008, pp32-35.

¹²² This view is highlighted by J.S. Mbiti in his *An Introduction to African Religion*, London: Heinemann educational Books, 1975, p32.

mother she is caring and compassionate to all provided that they abide by her norms and rules.

Respect is, therefore, accorded to the earth either because it is spirit, because it is mother or because it is inhabited by spirits. There are rules and customs in different communities for caring for the earth. The community streams cannot be used every day; there is at least one day in a week (the traditional week among the Igbo is made up four days: *Eke*, *Nkwo*, *Orie* and *Afo*) when people are forbidden from going to do anything in them. Such a day is reserved for the spirits which inhabit the stream. Anybody who contravenes this rule will be visited with punishment by the gods. There are days when people cannot go work at the farms because they are sacred days to the spirits in charge of the farmlands. Apparently, these customary instituted rules are simply religious but they are ultimately measures that ensured that the environment is not over-used.

The exploitation of the natural resources was far from the norm. In effect, the question of reckless bastardization of nature through indiscriminate felling of trees and cutting down of bushes is a recent thing in Africa. This came with the money-market economy where almost every crop could be sold for money and people had to go all out to flow along with the new system in order to earn a living. The agitation of some communities in the Niger Delta areas of Nigeria against the multi-national oil exploring companies is partly because they feel that their lands are being desecrated. The issue is not simply that the environment is being destroyed but that the abodes of their deities are desecrated without remorse. Some communities have had to stop the construction of roads or bridges because their sacred bushes or trees or rivers are being tampered with. Their reaction is at times motivated by the fear that disturbing the dwelling of the spirits would bring disaster on the entire people.

Sometimes, people think that the African understanding of the earth as a spiritualized entity or the objects therein as inhabitants

of spirits militate against development but that is mistaken. Africans cultivate lands, use the products of trees for building houses and fetched water from streams for domestic use. Their respect for nature did not stifle the flow of life or forbid whatever the tradition considers a proper use of the environment. Certainly, in some instances, the spirits have to be appeased before certain trees are felled or paths are made through some bushes. However, in all, Africans understand that the natural world is not simply there for their domination and exploitation; nature commands respect, veneration and even sometimes adoration insofar as spirits (which the earth is) ranks higher than human beings in the hierarchy of beings.

Similar understanding of spirit in creation can be seen in Christianity and the examination of the ideas of a Christian thinker would underscore that.

5. Spirit as the Heart of Matter: Teilhard de Chardin

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955) is one of those religious thinkers and mystics in modern time who laboured tirelessly to forge a union between the scientific theory of evolution and the Christian doctrine of creation. Strictly speaking, his primary concern was not the environment as an environmentalist because he died in 1955 "a generation before there was a significant awareness that the earth was indeed an 'environment' that was endangered by pollution and the indiscriminate use of resources"¹²³ Nevertheless, his thoughts on the cosmos and his notion of the mode of God's presence in creation has so much relevance for the contemporary concerns about the destruction of the environment.

The universe, for Teilhard, is a "divine milieu" where God and creation are in intimate relationship working towards the realization of one definitive goal, namely, the unification of all things in Christ who is the Omega of history. Evolution is the law governing everything in the universe and by virtue of this

¹²³ Brennan R. Hill, "Teilhard's Vision and the Environment" in *Horizon*, Vol. 28, No.1 (Spring 2001), p50.

evolutionary process, the universe is moving towards a point of ultimate consummation in unity. Matter plays an essentially positive role in the process of convergence which the universe undergoes; atoms attract one another to form molecules and human beings attract others to establish families, communities and nations. Interactions and cooperation among people and groups would not have been possible without the existence of matter. Thus, in a sense, nature appears to possess the universal power which brings together and unites everything.

Teilhard goes further to remark that in spite of the appearance of the universe as an aggregate of disparate, disunited and antagonistic elements, it is inter-connected with everything within it held together by a spiritual force. Behind the apparent multiplicity that characterizes the world there is a hidden transcendent unity because of which the world is more than simply the sum of its constituent elements. From the point of view of a natural thinker or scientist, matter presents itself as the single essence, the origin and finality of the universe. It shows itself as "the one and only universal substance ...that carries within her the seeds of all life and the sustenance of all joy".¹²⁴ This outlook, according to Teilhard, which suggests that matter is the most essential thing in life is mistaken because matter is characterized by an inherent tendency to decay and disintegration and so by itself it lacks consistency.

Within the universe, there is a spiritual dynamism that causes everything to come together towards a focal point. The energies of the universe are directed by a "higher energy" which also stirs up creatures and impels them toward unification. This energy is the principle of existence, of truth, of stability, of unity, of cosmic consistency and it is the one in whom all things hold together. It is divine and spiritual; it is the breath of God and the Spirit of Christ. It so intimately penetrates matter that it appears as one with it.

¹²⁴ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, "Cosmic Life" 1916 in his *Writings in Time of War*, (tr. R. Hague), London: William Collins, 1968, p30.

Therefore, Spirit is not opposed to matter; the two are not totally different or fenced off from each other by an impenetrable barrier. In effect, the world that Teilhard presents is not constituted by two but one thing which could simply be described as "spirit clothed in matter or matter with spirit as its heart and soul".¹²⁵

The whole process of the evolution of the world can, therefore, be described in terms of the spiritualization of matter by the Spirit. The Spirit acts from within matter and as this happens, the former does not get dissolved but rather consummated as it gets unified. Hence, "no idea can better convey to our minds the redemptive function of the Word than that of a unification of all flesh in one and the same Spirit".¹²⁶ Suffering and pain will cease in the world when everything has been spiritualized or unified. Teilhard acknowledges the fact that the groaning of creation cannot be completely attributed to human causes. Besides the effects of human exploitative relationship, the nature of matter disposes it to suffering. Every incompletely organized plurality such as matter is bound to experience pain and sorrow, and hence suffering is part and parcel of creation. A world that is still in a process of becoming cannot be without suffering, cosmic disaster and death. Cosmic growth cannot be achieved without encountering some disorders that necessarily imply suffering.¹²⁷ On every side there are threats capable of sweeping away in a minute a civilization built up in many years. Fire, pestilence, storm, earthquakes, flood, volcanic eruptions and other dark forces are products of the nature of creation as not-yet-harmonized realities. Nonetheless, at the end of the processes of evolution it is expected that matter would not be dissolved rather it will be unified, liberated and spiritualized with its negative dimensions gone.

Teilhard identifies this spiritual energy that is ultimately behind the progress of the universe towards consummation as love. In

¹²⁵ Ugwu, *The Holy Spirit*, p83.

¹²⁶ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, "The Struggle against the Multitude", 1917, in his *Writing in Time in War*, p106.

¹²⁷ T. Berry is also of the view that turmoil, violence and conflict are part of the processes of emergence and advancement in life. Cf. his *The Dreams of the Earth*, San Francisco: sierra Club Books, 1988, pp216-218.

fact, "it is through divine love and the human cooperation with it that things are transfigured, consummated and transcended".¹²⁸ When understood as the "internal aspect of the affinity which links and draws together the elements of the world",¹²⁹ love is not unique to human beings. However, its presence in the universe is differentiated according to the level of consciousness in question. Love is found in the most primitive form of life where it is scarcely perceptible and found in human beings particularly in families where the same love manifests itself in the form of drives for reproduction which attract bodies to form unions. Thus, "the most telling and most profound way of describing the evolution of the universe would undoubtedly be to trace the evolution of the love".¹³⁰ Such is how love is central to the story of the universe. The solidarity of divine love energy, namely the Holy Spirit, with nature reaches the point that the Spirit shares in the suffering of creation. The ultimate goal of the Spirit in creation is to perfect the latter by transforming it and replacing everything therein with love. To realize this objective, the Spirit immerses herself in creation and assumes the form of the very thing that she wants to transform. The logic of this immersion of the Spirit in the natural environment explains the fact of this mystical suffering of the third divine person in the cosmos. By living in and operating or rather by being immersed in a world that is characteristically marked by disorder and pain, the Spirit participates in the pains and sufferings which the world experiences on daily basis.¹³¹ This suffering of the indwelling Spirit in creation is, however, redemptive.¹³²

Therefore, in Teilhard one finds the notion of the Spirit of God that is not opposed to matter, that is present and acting from within

¹²⁸ Hill, "Teilhard's Vision and the Environment", p58.

¹²⁹ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, "The Rise of the Other", (1942) in his *Activation of Energy*, (tr. R. Hague), London: William Collins, 1970, p70.

¹³⁰ Teilhard de Chardin, "The Spirit of the Earth", p33.

¹³¹ Cf. Ugwu, *The Holy Spirit*, p135-139 for a more detailed discussion on the suffering of the Spirit in creation.

¹³² Mark Wallace supports this position because for him the wounds that the Spirit sustains in creation is the hope of the earth. See his "The Wounded Spirit as the Basis for Hope in an Age of Radical Ecology" in D. Ijssel and R.R. Ruether eds. *Christianity and Ecology*, p51-72.

matter not towards the dissolution but spiritualization of matter. The groaning of creation with all its pains, sorrow and suffering is not completely the fault of human beings; the nature of things insofar as they lack consistency is suffering prone.

6. The Environmental Implications of these Insights from the Two Traditions

The African traditional belief about spirits in creation and the idea of the presence and action of the Spirit in the evolving universe by Teilhard de Chardin can be of great help in addressing the current environmental crises which is threatening the world. These two perspectives highlight the immanence of God in creation and the connectedness of all things in the world. This rejects the idea of a “withdrawn” God who abandons creatures to their own fate. Equally, these two traditions reject the bifurcation of reality into nature and spirit; in some ways, dualism informs the exploitative attitude of human beings towards nature.

God, human beings and matter have specific but interrelated roles to play in their explanation of the universe. The story of matter always includes the spirit who is at the heart of all things and because the spirit in within it creation will attain its goal. This hope in the future of the world counters the temptation of pessimism into which the concern for the environment often falls. Ecological crises are sometimes exaggerated to the point where it appears that there is no future for the universe. Such pessimism cripples human beings who cannot apply themselves to work for the sustenance of creation if they have no hope in the future.

Furthermore, these two traditions overturn the tendency to define matter/nature negatively or as opposed to spirit which has contributed immensely to the present ecological crises. The ancient teaching of Manichaeism has it that nature or the material world in general, is inferior to the spiritual world

and, in fact, evil.¹³³ Moreover, Teilhard's position succinctly responds to the temptation to accuse human beings of being responsible for all the forms of cosmic turmoil experienced today. The Teilhardian vision of reality states that, in fact, the groaning of creation is as a result of the nature of the universe itself as an entity composed by a multitude of disharmonious elements.¹³⁴

Christian tradition down the ages tends to lay more emphasis on the presence of the Holy Spirit as a soul in individual Christians or in the Church. True as the presence of the Spirit may be therein, this idea represents a restricted sense of the indwelling of the Spirit. The visions of the cosmic Spirit in the two traditions extend the notion of the indwelling of the Spirit from its restricted sense where it applies solely to ecclesial community to a wider community of creation which is the universe as home for both human and non human beings. The Spirit is in creation as a heart is in the body. Moreover, the Spirit of God who is the Church and operative in the lives of Christians is the Spirit of creation.

Teilhard offers us a position which supports that human beings have to work hard to care for the earth because their destiny stands or fall together with the rest of the community of creation. Everybody needs to be committed to building up unity in the world. The notion of a world to be built up by merely science and technology is totally unacceptable. Science, religion and other human efforts have to be combined in hammering out a way forward in the project of having a healthy environment.

The imaging of the earth as mother which the Igbo traditional religious system offers is of immense importance to the attainment of a healthy environment. The relationship between children and their mothers is often characterized by respect, love

¹³³ Scholars like Christopher Derrick attribute the misuse of the natural world to the tenets of Manichaeism which have survived right from the ancient time down to the present age. Cf. his book *The Delicate Creation*, London: Stacey, 1972.

¹³⁴ Teilhard's position accords with Scripture which says that "creation was subjected to futility not of its own will but by the will of him who subjected it in hope ... (Rom 8:20).

and solidarity. Erstwhile, the exploitation of nature implies the lack of these virtues. In addition to the image of the earth as mother, the introduction of love into the discussion of environmental crises brings a personal face to the debate. Love-based relationships are lasting, not exploitative, respectful, sacrificing and not selfish. This insight challenges the African understanding of nature as spirit or deity that is worshipped or feared. There is no identity between the Creator Spirit and creation. Respect for nature should not be out of fear but love. The love motif calls for conversion too because the Christian understanding of the divine commandment of love has largely been limited to human beings in their relationship with one another and with God. Now there is an invitation to humanity to widen this understanding in order to include the universe of nature.

It is important to note that these two traditions have raised the question of the environment to a level that transcends this world. Oftentimes, the reasons for people's concern for the preservation, protection and care for the earth are largely anthropocentric or cosmocentric. A Spirit-based consideration and call for ecological responsibility includes the interest of the earth and human beings but goes beyond them to anchor on God. No matter how a theory or theology of the environment articulates the correct understanding of creation and of the right attitude to it and of proper actions towards nature, it cannot bring about the complete eradication of the cosmic suffering. It is only God dwells in creation through the Spirit that can provide a solid ground and end for ecological concerns. Thus, the ultimate ground for the liberation of creation from decay and groaning has to be sought in the mystery of the Spirit of God.¹³⁵

A Spirit-based consideration for the environment as contained in these two traditions raise a very serious moral issue. Since the

¹³⁵ Cf. Ugwu, *The Holy Spirit*, p269.

spirit is so intimately related to the environment to the extent of suffering in solidarity with it, it means that exploiting the earth amounts to grieving the Spirit. Wallace supports this view, namely, "that the specter of ecocide raises the risk of deicide: to wreak environmental havoc on the earth is to run the risk that we will do irreparable harm to the Love and Mystery we call God".¹³⁶ If people are aware of this, it will affect their rate of wreaking the environment.

The kind of relationship which these two traditions establish between the Spirit and creation makes one reason along with scholars like John Chryssavgis who affirm that "in our age, green is perhaps most fittingly the color of the Holy Spirit...".¹³⁷ Following the witness of Scripture in *Acts of the Apostles* (*Acts* 2, 3) where it is said that the Spirit was manifested in the form of tongues as of fire, Christian tradition particularly in the area of liturgy is used to taking red to be the symbolic colour of the Holy Spirit. On Pentecost Sunday and other votive Masses of the Holy Spirit, the recommended colour for celebration is red. Today, with the growing awareness of the nature and activities of the Spirit in creation particularly as epitomized in the insights of the two traditions examined above, one would not hesitate to also consider green as a suitable colour of the third divine person. In this case, Red colour for the Spirit derives from what might be termed "Pneumatology from above" while Green is from "Pneumatology from below/nature". Either Red or Green could be used depending on the value that one wants to emphasis at the time.¹³⁸

One needs to remark that the African (Igbo) understanding of spirit in creation does not highlight sufficiently what the spirits do while they dwell in nature. It appears as if it is a case of passive indwelling. On another note, the concept of spirit in Africa does

¹³⁶ Wallace, "The Wounded Spirit", pp60-61.

¹³⁷ John Chryssavgis, "The World of the Icon and Creation: An Orthodox Perspective on Ecology and Pneumatology", in D. Hessel and R. R. Ruether eds. *Christianity and Ecology*, p91.

¹³⁸ The dove which is one of the principal symbols of the Holy Spirit is often depicted in white colour; in other words, white is also a colour for the Holy Spirit.

not readily mean the Holy Spirit and in Teilhard the use of spirit(s) sometimes calls for clarity. Finally, given that the reality of spirit is found in almost every religious system in the world, a spirit-based theology of the environment stands to have a universal appeal because it can be appropriated by men and women of different religions and nationalities. Such a theology of the environment with a universal appeal is what the world needs today.

7. Conclusion

This discussion has brought us to the point where we can conclude that African traditional religious belief in spirits particularly among the Igbo of Nigeria and the teachings of the Pierre Teilhard de Chardin on the Spirit, yield invaluable insights on the basis of which a theology of the environment with universal appeal can be constructed for effective response to the ever threatening situation of the ecological crises. Their insights provide corrective alternatives to the solutions or theories that separate the earth from the heavens or that either deny the spiritual or over exaggerate the value of spirits over matter. Together, they draw attention to the link between Pneumatology and ecology and thus contribute to the rediscovery of the "spirit ecological identity" or "ecological Pneumatology" which has been played down over time.¹³⁹

Therefore, in the light of the relationship between the Spirit of God and the natural environment one would say that any serious attempt to appreciate, promote, and preserve the earth should be done against the background of the presence and actions of the Holy Spirit in creation. Theologians need to explore the beliefs and traditions of different religious systems in the world in order to draw insights from them to be integrated with Christian doctrines to arrive at a spirit based theology of the environment. This work is a step in that direction and it holds a lot of promises

¹³⁹ Cf. Mark I. Wallace, "The Wounded Spirit as the Basis for Hope in an Age of Radical Ecology" in D. Hessel and R. R. Ruether eds. *Christianity and Ecology*, pp. 50-72.