Religion & Environment: Exploring Linkages

*Dr Kiran Bhairannavar

Assistant Professor, Department of Geography, Delhi School of Economics, University of Delhi, Delhi- 110007

ABSTRACT

The paper aims to explore the linkages between religion and environment. Religion has long been an influential realm for human life. The paper explores the religion and environment linkages taking three components, namely, religion and environmental ethics, religious practices and global cultural economy. It concludes that religion and environment are closely linked through ethics, and these ethics are largely based on the environment of the places of origin of religions. Secondly, religions when put into practice, leave dangerous effects on the environment. And lastly, Religion, when becomes a part of global cultural economy, re-connects ethical values towards environment in everyday practice.

Keywords: Environment, Religion, Ethics, Global Cultural Economy

1. Introduction

Human life, religion and environment make a complex interwoven mesh. All knowledge is human centric- the perspectives, the production and the consumption of it. Religion has been an influential prism for looking at life and the environment humans live in. This mediation of religion between humans and the environment produces varied interpretations. The manifestation of environment on religion and vice versa, can be found at philosophical and practical levels. For majority, religion is a path to reach God/ one’s inner self. It is a philosophical guide to lead fulfilling lives by following laid out principles and teachings. When religion is put into practice, it tends to leave its signature on the landscape/ environment. Furthermore, far from being a philosophical guide and a practice, it is also an artefact that commands its own economy and polity- from local to global scales, where it interacts with environment through the economy-religion-culture-spirituality nexus thus becoming an influential realm. This paper aims to exploring the linkages between religion and environment. It does so by focusing on three issues: environmental ethics in religion and local environments of the places of their origin; religious practices and environment; and religion and environment within the global cultural economy. By doing so, the paper brings out the varied ways in which religion conceptualizes environment and leaves its signature on the landscape. In what follows, I focus on the three issues. This paper explores these linkages by using scholarly works, opinions and documented practices.

2. Religion, Ethics and Environment

Religion and environment are intertwined through ethics. Ethics, defined as moral principles that govern a person’s behaviour, are central components of religion. They reflect the immediate environments where the religions were born and as such, their principles lay reverence to environment. While Judaism, Christianity and Islam reflect the environment of the West Asian
landscape and human life within it, Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism reflect the landscape of South Asia, mainly the Indo-Gangetic plains within their historical-geographical-social frameworks. This section highlights the religion-environmental linkage through the lens of ethics.

Consider the following from the work of Daniel B. Fink on Judaism:

“God tells the first humans to master the Earth and take dominion over the living things (Genesis 1) It introduces the concept of stewardship…. God set us in the Garden and told us to work it and watch over it…” reflecting on Genesis 2:4-15 “we are guardians of the divine trust… the Earth is Lord’s” “God establishes an essential constraint on our destructive tendencies, the Sabbath… the day on which all forms of work are forbidden. The Sabbath is tangible reminder that the creation is worth more than any monetary consideration.” (Fink, 1998)

Denny Fredric’s work on Islam mentions:

“The Quran however is clear that God is the ultimate holder of dominion over the creation and that all things return to him and thus are accountable each in their own ways” “With him are the keys (to the treasures) of the unseen that no one knows but he. He knows what ever there is on earth and in the Sea. Not a leaf falls with his knowledge: there is not a grain in Earth’s Shado, not a thing, freshly green withered, but it is (inscribed) in a clear record.” “There is a strong sense of goodness and purity of the earth. Clean dust may be used for abulations before prayers if clean water is not available.” “When doomsday comes, if someone has a palm shoot in his hand, he should plant it”. “Do you not observe that God sends rain from the sky, so that in the morning the Earth becomes green?” (Denny, 1998: 10)

The above excerpts from the respective religious texts used by both scholars clearly reflect the arid West Asian landscape in which Judaism and Islam were born. The inhabitants of West Asia were shepherds, travelers and traders; wandered from place to place. Their resources were scarce and valuable, so commonly held. Therefore, the owners were not individuals or communities but God, the Almighty. They needed to conserve these scarce resources for their sustenance so the fear of God and the holiness of the Earth was necessary to avert their over use. Both Judaism and Islam hold that ‘Man’ is a mere steward and it is God who is the ultimate owner. God holds dominion and people are accountable for their actions. The concept of ‘Sabbath’ in Judaism prohibits thirty-nine types of activities that change the natural order and holds creation much worthier than monetary gains. Islam gives the status of purity to Earth that so much that its dust can be used for abulations before prayers, clearly depicting the lack of water in their environment. That the rains are welcomed with open arms, only supports this fact. When doomsday comes and if someone has a Palm shoot in his hand, Mohammad the Prophet advises to plant it. The Palm shoot and not a neem, reflects the vegetation of West Asia putting emphasis on the value of the palm such that even when death is ahead and if one has a chance, he should plant it and die. “With Him are the keys to the unseen that no one knows but He…” speaks about their moving lifestyle in the desert and the foray into the unknown. Jewish interpretations were never a monolith (the core text being the same) as Jews themselves were scattered across the world. Scattered locations meant diverse environments. So were their interpretations of the Holy text. Christianity too holds almost a similar position but changed as times changed, as the political economy changed and so did its interpretations. When we take into account the stand these three desert-born religions take on ‘Population’ which is central for any society/community, all have similar views: They opposed birth control (contraception, abortion) and homosexuality as sin and anti-life. They encouraged fertility for on it depended the survival of communities given the harsh environments, high death rates and scarce resources. It is important to mention, they considered Jihad, Crusades and Jewish holy wars as ‘Just Wars’ in self-defense of the community and resources they controlled.

A little away from West Asia, to its south east (the Indian subcontinent), the environment was different. Here were born three major ancient religions of the World- Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism, the former much earlier than the latter two. Hinduism valued power of the natural world- fire, earth, wind, sun, moon, rain…; revered the tree, worshipped and praised the rivers, worshipped the cow and other animals giving them divine status. Such an environmental ethic is mere characteristic of abundance of resources and energy, unlike their scarcity in the West Asian region. This abundance of rain, wind, sun, water, land, forests, fire, which were beyond human control, and sometimes beyond human understanding (earth-quakes, rains, floods, forest-fires, droughts, famines) that they were worshiped and adored, and many a times needed to be pacified. The cow was a resource for pastoral Aryan economy. The river sustained life- food, irrigation and water. Similarly, animals went on to gain near divine status- the lion, tiger, mouse, boar, buffalo, as vehicles of Gods. So did tropical trees. One fails to find their mention in religions of West Asia as they were not a characteristic of the region. As times changed even Gods changed. The Early Vedic period Gods (Indra, Agni, Vayu, Varuna) were drastically different from later Vedic period (Vishnu, Prajapati, Krishna) basically because economy and society changed and so did ethics.

Religious beliefs and rituals when put into practice leave dangerous effects on the environment. For example, in India, River Ganga’s place in Hindu religion does not coincide with its material reality. River Ganga is believed to be purifying and washing away sins. Even death and last rites on banks of River Ganga have ritual significance in the Hindu philosophy. Besides the ritual symbolic significance and highest reverence to the river, it is found that Ganga chokes with half burnt dead bodies, ritual residues, industrial wastes and day to day garbage and solid waste (Alley, 1994; Mallet, 2017). The holy cow is regarded sacred but is left on roads to fend for herself even as she dies a slow death everyday by consuming toxic wastes (Fox, 1999; wewantrefill.com, 2018). Significantly, Delhi’s Temples and Mosques are known to be holy and religious in their intent but end up being polluting when they use loud speakers for their daily prayers causing noise pollution (Singh & Davar, 2004; Naik, 2012). Religious places and events produce huge garbage after daily rituals and consumables which are thrown very much in the vicinity that sometimes gets picked up only once a week produces bad smell, flies and hazardous environment (Doron, 2018). Many tanks, ponds, wells are choked to death at the end of every Ganapati festival due to immersion of idols and the leftovers (Gaur & Chapnekar, 2015). Similarly, annual festivals end up polluting the environment beyond limits (Kulshreshta et al., 2004). In recent years, it has been increasingly noted how Mosques contribute to sound pollution through Azan and have come under public and judicial scrutiny (Economic Times, 2017). Moreover, while philosophically religions preach tolerance, compassion, kindness and humility, in practice they are used as platforms for violence, riots and genocides destroying the social environments within multi-cultural societies (Kakkar, 1996; Embree, 2018). Thus, religious practices and people’s daily rituals at pilgrimage centers considerably deviate from their philosophies and ethical principles when put into practice, leaving strong marks on landscape which can be dangerous/ hazardous to natural and social environments.
4. Global Cultural Economy of Religion and Environment

Religions hardly are left to their own when the dominant system of economy is that of (new service based) capitalism that reproduces on consumption of signs, symbols and cultural artefacts apart from material goods and services. The World in general and India in particular in the post-1990s witnessed the global emergence of religion, religion-based techniques and religious figures as icons of the global cultural economy- Yoga, meditation, Buddhism, spirituality, self-declared Godmen (and women) and Gurus like Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, Mata Amritanandmayi, Asaram Bapu, Sadguru Jaggi Vasudev, Baba Ramdev, the Dalai Lama, Sadguru etc. (As such Sri Satya Sai Baba, the Dalai Lama, Osho Rajneesh, Maharshi Yogi, Swami Prabhupada had an international presence much before but their positions become global after the Information Communication Technologies revolution of 1990s.) These signs, symbols and icons circulate globally as signs of spirituality, affluence and lifestyle for consumption. Holy men and women travel across the planet preaching faith, compassion and spirituality-based lifestyle, engaging in humanitarian causes, giving lectures on global platforms varying from World Social Forum to World Economic Forum and engage in Global Peace Initiatives. They head organizations like the Art of Living (AoL), Patanjali, Mata Amritanandmayi Math (M.A Math), International Sri Satya Sai Organisation, Isha Foundation etc. They have an ability to mobilize huge funds and people. Many have large following, influence and social media presence. They get heavily covered by media regularly especially on channels like Aastha, Sanskar, BBC, National Geographic etc. They play an active role within the global cultural economy which is a coordinated effort of corporate media, global capital, spirituality, religion, the culture industry and technology. As a part of a larger agenda, they play a proactive role in initiating environmental programs and movements for public good such as community development, conflict resolution, capacity building, disaster management and environmental sustainability. They invest in water management programs, watershed development schemes, organic farming, women empowerment etc. When a disaster hits a place, they help in reconstruction; for example, the AoL has a Mission Green Earth, The Magic Tree, rain water harvesting, river rejuvenation, chemical free farming and mass (environmental) awareness drives as its programs (artofliving.org, n.d). The M.A Math’s organization, ‘GreenFriends’ works for preservation and protection of environment, has been involved in earthquake, tsunami and flood relief and various poverty alleviation programs including establishing hospitals and educational institutions (amritapuri.org, n.d). Similarly, the Sri Satya Sai International Organisation is involved in Water programs among many others (sathyasai.org, n.d). Thus, these religious figures move and serve people across the world addressing issues from individual self to conflict resolution and sustainable development thereby expanding livelihood choices, capacity building and helping conservation of resources, and at the same time professing ethical values of the religions that they represent thereby transforming into symbols and icons of a particular culture and philosophy. As such religion, ethics and environment circulate as cultural symbols within the larger global cultural economy which are transforming the way religion, ethics, environment and life is understood. Such professing on global platforms aims to connect ethics to practice, thus making the society aware of human and environmental values and inculcating a sense of responsibility towards the earth and its resources.

5. Conclusion

The paper aimed to bring out the linkages between environment and religion. It does so by focusing on issues of ethics and place of origin, religious practices, and cultural economy. It is shown that religious philosophy and teachings are deeply connected to environment in which they originated. Religions profess ethical treatment and sense towards the environment. However, when religions are put to practice leave damaging effects on landscapes and contribute to environmental degradation. Thirdly, the paper has shown how religion becomes a part of the global cultural economy. As a consequence, ethical practices towards environment are brought back through awareness, practice and environmental regeneration programs. While religion seems to be a dominant realm of life associated with human values and spiritual fulfiment, environment forms the strong basis of its practice affecting it both negatively and positively.

References