

RELIGIOUS AND SECULARIST VIEWS OF THE NATURE AND THE ENVIRONMENT

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Özet

Bilindiği gibi 20. yüzyılın özellikle son on yılı küreselleşme kavramıyla birlikte anılır. Ekonomik küreselleşme sürecinin bir sonucu olarak bazı problemler de ortaya çıkmıştır. Bu süreçte dünyanın karşılaştığı en önemli sorunlardan biri şiddet ve terör, bir diğeri çevre problemleridir. Doğal çevrenin tahribi ve onun doğaya etkisi çevrecilerin ve akademisyenlerin temel ilgi alanlarından birini oluşturur. Bu makalenin amacı doğa hakkındaki yoğun tartışmaları ve görüşleri, özellikle doğaya karşı dinî ve seküler bakış açılarını sosyolojik perspektiften özetlemektir. Önce büyük dinlerin ve inanç sistemlerinin doğal dünyaya bakışları verilecek, daha sonra da doğaya ve çevreye karşı seküler bakış açısı özetlenecektir.

Anahtar Kavramlar: Çevre, doğal dünya, sekülerizm, din

Abstract

As it is known, the 20th century, especially the last decade of that century is characterized by the globalization. As a result of the economic globalization process some problems have emerged. One of the most important problems facing the world is violence and terror, another is environmental problems. The destruction of natural environment and its ecological impact on nature is one of the main concerns of ecologists and scholars. The aim of this paper is to summarize the intense debate about the nature, especially the religious and secularist views of the nature in sociological perspective. Firstly, I have given the views of some religions, great faiths about the natural world and then, I will summarize the secularist view of the nature and environment.

Keywords: Environment, natural world, secularism, religion

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Introduction

I have been asked to talk about what I consider the most important problems facing the world; one of them is peace, another is environmental problems. The problem of the environment is one of today's most serious problems. It is a problem that threatens not only ourselves, but the whole world, and future generations and their right to live in a healthy environment. But, with global environmental problems taking center stage, we are often unconscious of the seriousness of our environmental problems. The aim of this paper is to summarize the intense debate about the nature, especially the religious and secularist views of the nature in sociological perspective.

In fact, we have faced with the widespread destruction of the environment. As we know, the current worldwide ecological crisis has emerged during the past four decades. In this period, the public in general as well as political leaders are concerned about this problem, and experts from a wide range of disciplines are studying its causes. People everywhere are coming to understand that they cannot continue to use the goods of the earth as we have in the past. So, a new ecological awareness is beginning to emerge. Some of people propose economic and technological precautions for that crisis. But the problem is not simply economic and technological; it is moral and spiritual (see Bayraktar 1992:143-4).

In pre-modern age, it was considered that the world was charged with the grandeur of God. In religious view, all creatures were given their purpose by their creator, and agent or actor is God. But, in the modernization process, human beings witnessed the disenchantment of the world; the significance of 'religion' as a socio-cultural category demised. As religion/god receded from co-extensiveness with nature, secular values of environment developed. So in modern period, it has a mechanism. In this paper I will try to summarize the intense debate about the nature, especially the religious and secularist views of the nature in sociological perspective.

1. Religious views

In pre-modern age religion was a dominant factor on every area of life. For example, every significant event in the life cycle of the individual and the community was celebrated with various rituals and given a religious gloss. Birth, marriage, and death, and the passage of the agricultural seasons, because they were managed by the religious leaders, all reaffirmed the essentially religious world view of the people. In other words, a huge amount of credibility was given to the religious world view in everyday life and social interaction. For example, as Bruce, who is one of powerful authorities on secularization debates, said;

“People commented on the weather by saying ‘God be praised’ and on parting wished each other ‘God Speed’ or ‘Goodbye’ (which we often forget is an abbreviation for ‘God be with you’).” (Bruce 1999:20).

In religious view, it was considered that the world was charged with the grandeur of God, and all creatures were given their purpose by their creator. But in religious view also humans have more special position than all creatures and nature. For example, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, the three great faiths are noted for separating humans from the surrounding ecosystems. According to these faiths, it is considered humans separate and special, created in the image of God. In one interpretation, humans are here partially to provide wise stewardship of nature; at the other extreme nature is placed here for the pleasure of humans, to be used and discarded as needed. In other words, great religions are tolerant for the idea that God’s command that humans have dominion over all created things has too often been used as an excuse to plunder the earth.

Now, to understand some details in religious views, we should examine religions, because their origins are in the texts of religions.

1.1. Great Faiths

1.1.1. Judaism

The religions of Egypt and Mesopotamia were profoundly cosmological. The human world was embedded in a cosmic order that embraced the entire universe, without any sharp distinction between the human and the non-human, the empirical and the supra-empirical. Such continuity between people and the Gods was sharply broken by Judaism. As Berger puts it:

“The Old Testament posits a God who stands outside the cosmos, which is his creation but which he confronts and does not permeate.” (Berger 1969:115).

The God of Ancient Israel was a radically transcendent God. There was a thoroughly demythologized universe between humankind and God (Bruce 1999:13).

But ask the beasts, and they will teach you; the birds of the sky, and they will tell you; or speak to the earth and it will teach you; the fish of the sea, they will inform you. Who among all these does not know that the hand of the Eternal has done this? (Job 12:7-9).

1.1.2. Christianity

In his essay, “Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis” that has received widespread attention over the years from scientists as well as humanists, Lynn White correctly identifies the dominant strain or core structure of Western theism, and claims that “Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has

seen”, that it “not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God’s will that man exploit nature”. The most important source cited to support this is Genesis 1:28, which calls on man to

“Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, and subdue it. Have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the sky, and over every living thing that moves on the earth”. (Genesis 1:28).

In this essay, Lynn White links Christianity to environmental degradation. He does qualify his argument, stating that “Christianity is a complex faith, and its consequences differ in differing contexts.” He criticizes the Western European version of Christianity. According to White, the Western world’s attitudes towards nature were shaped by the Judeo-Christian tradition (he also included Marxism within this overall tradition). This tradition involved the concept of a world created solely for the benefit of man. Along with this, Western Christianity separated humans from nature. In older religious traditions, humans were seen as part of nature, rather than the ruler of nature. And in animistic religions, there was believed to be a spirit in every tree, mountain or spring, and all had to be respected.

White’s influential article asserted that Christianity was to blame for the emerging ecological crisis through using the concept of the “image of God” as a pretext for justifying human exploitation of the world’s resources. But, in *Reenchantment of Nature: The Denial of Religion and the Ecological Crisis*, Alister E. McGrath rejected Lynn White’s views on nature. According to McGrath, “*these were bold and simple words, written at a formative stage in the emergence of the modern environmental movement... A scapegoat had to be found for the ecological crisis, and this article conveniently provided one. Where there is a problem, there is a perpetrator... Christianity is the enemy of the environment.*” (McGrath 2003:xv-xvi).

1.1.3. Islam

The Koran and the Hadith, Islam’s primary and secondary authorities, gives specific rules about various environmental practices. Koran claims “that nature is not there just by accident, as a result of the process of evolution or chaotic configurations without meaning or purpose”, and that everything in the universe is created by Allah and that the universe is the work and art of Allah (Özdemir 2006:161). It is possible to say that the Koran is replete with references to the precious resources of air, water, and land, and proscribes wastefulness. The Koran also calls for thinking about the nature and its sustainability:

“Behold! In the creation of the heavens and the earth; in the alternation of the night and the day; in the sailing of the ships through the ocean for the profit of mankind; in the water which God sends down from the sky, thereby reviving the earth after its death; in the beasts of all kinds that He scatters through the earth; in

the change of the winds, and the clouds subjugated between the sky and earth [here] indeed are signs for a people who thinks.” (Koran 2:164).

Some verses of the Koran reveal an invitation to examine and investigate the heavens and the earth, and everything that can be seen in the environment (Özdemir 2006:161). Islam considers the creation of the universe as an open book, a guide inviting observation which increases the faith of the observer. In some verses of the Koran all creatures including plants and animals, sun and stars named ‘ayet’ (sign of Allah) and they are witnesses of Allah. Therefore this fact points out that there is a powerful emphasize to nature in the Koran.

Like the Holy Bible, humankind has a special place in God’s scheme in Koran, the holy book of Islam. According to the Koran the creation of the cosmos is a greater reality than the creation of humankind (Koran 40:57), but human beings have been privileged to occupy a position even higher than the angels as vicegerents of God on the earth. In Islamic perspective, humans are God’s vicegerents on the earth; it has been given us in trust (emanet) (Koran 33:72). The conception of Khalifa –or the role of stewardship-has important in Islam. Humankind is guardians of earth. Khalifa is the sacred duty God has ascribed to the human race. Because the human is the most favoured of God’s creation, everything in existence was created by Allah for the use of humans. The idea of human vicegerency on earth has drawn much criticism in environmental ethics. But, with respect to humankind’s stewardship of the earth, the privilege entails a profound responsibility. There are many verses in the Koran that describe human duties and responsibilities, such as the following which aptly summarizes humanity’s role: “*It is He who has appointed you viceroys in the earth.*” (Koran 6:165). The concept of stewardship doesn’t mean that creation is the possession of humanity.

For vicegerent (khalifa) means ‘deputy’. And this in turn means that man is the sole being whom God holds responsible for the earth, to whom He has entrusted its preservation. Such a deputy would not betray the trust of the One who created the world with a particular order, balance, and harmony. If he was to spoil the order and harmony and destroy them, he would be known as an unreliable and perfidious deputy. It is clear that the Islamic world view could not endorse any view of man’s vicegerency of the earth which destroys and spoils the ecological balances and the order and systems of nature. The ecological balance and its sustainability have important in Islam (Bayraktar 1992:39-44; also see Hicr 19; Rahman 7-9; Kamer 49).

In the frame of ecological balance, Prophet Mohammad says that any Muslim who plants or cultivates vegetation and eats from it, or another person, animal or bird, eats from it will receive a reward for it from Allah. He also said that anyone who plants a tree under which people seek shade or shelter from the sun will have his reward with Allah (Musnad, V:415). Therefore the cutting down of trees without strong and legitimate reasons is encroaching on the bounties of Allah, and on the beauty of the environment which Allah has created.

If one studies the histories of the Muslim peoples, one sees that they lived in harmony with nature and its creatures. The most reliable witnesses to this were Western travelers who visited the Muslim lands. For example, the French lawyer Guer, who traveled in the Ottoman Empire in the 17th century, mentioned a hospital in Damascus where sick cats and dogs were treated. Again, the famous French writer Montaigne touched on this subject when he said: "The Muslim Turks found hospitals and pious foundations for animals even." Because The Muslim Turks found pious foundations for various purposes, such as solidarity and help each other, they are pioneers in the history of pious foundations. The Muslim Turks found these foundations for building mosques, helping for poor, ill, widowed, orphan either motherless and fatherless, accommodation of students, preparing trousseau for orphan girls, watering and protection the trees, filling up animals to go hungry in winter (Kirman 2004:244).

1.2. Other Faiths

In this title, the various Eastern faiths like Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism and Shintoism will be examined.

It is possible to consider these faiths to provide a strong model of human harmony with nature. But there are some strong ideas of pantheist philosophy in the doctrines of these faiths. All things are the works of the Great Spirit. He is within all things: the trees, the grasses, the rivers, the mountains, and the animals, and the winged people. In this context we keep in mind these faiths are not religions, but philosophical systems. Because they are philosophical systems, their doctrines can easily be reinterpreted in an ecological fashion or in other ones. For example although the picture of the Buddha seated under the tree of enlightenment has not traditionally been interpreted as a paradigm for ecological thinking, today's Buddhist environmental activists, sometimes characterized as ecoBuddhists or Green Buddhists.

The concepts of *karma*, *samsara* and *nirvana* are important doctrines in Buddhist tradition. By karmic continuum, Traditional Buddhism may privilege humans over animals, animals over hungry ghosts, male gender over the female, monk over laity. But contemporary Buddhist environmentalists claim that although karmic continuum constitutes a moral hierarchy, differences among life-forms and individuals are relative, not absolute. Buddhist environmentalists see their worldview as a rejection of hierarchical dominance of one human over another or humans over nature, and as the basis of an ethic of empathetic compassion that respects biodiversity (Swearer 1998). Among contemporary Buddhists, there has been the most insistent on the central role of mindful awareness in the development of a peaceful and sustainable world.

2. Secularist views

The ecological crisis is defined as a crisis of modernity by some social scientists, and as a manifestation of the broader problems of modernity (e.g. Carter 2001:359). We know the story of the formation of the modern world, the dominant intellectual framework and its beginnings in the 17th century, known “Enlightenment Age” with the publication of Descartes’ Cartesian philosophy propounded a dualism that separated mind and matter and then its development in the 18th century with Newtonian physics. This mechanistic view of the world encouraged the development of science and technological invention on purely mechanistic lines, and also industrial plundering (see Berry 1996). As new technologies were developed, our powers of dominion over our world increased exponentially. During the Enlightenment Age, secular humanism that emerged was a result of an uncritical scientific positivism (McGrath 2003:100). In the modernization process, human beings witnessed the disenchantment of the world; the significance of ‘religion’ as a socio-cultural category demised. As religion/god receded from co-extensiveness with nature, secular values of environment developed.

In modernization period, it raised a growing trend to accept the authority of experimental or scientific observations rather than religious sources of authority. In this view, nature was to be examined and explained on its own terms. Human have become tend to commitment to a “let’s dominate and transform nature” mentality. The roots of the same idea could be found in some of the pre-Socratics, the earliest Greek philosophers. They argued endlessly about how it was possible to know the true nature of the world. According to them the universe was rationally constructed and it could therefore be understood through the right use of human reason and critical reflection (see McGrath 2003:182).

It is important to note that secularization has been defined in several ways (see Kirman 2005:51-4). The one of meanings of secularization is, in Max Weber’s term, “disenchantment or desacralisation of the world”. The world loses its sacred character as man and nature become the object of rational-causal explanation and manipulation in which the supernatural plays no part. Another definition “identifies secularization as de-institutionalization. This refers to a decline in the social power of once-dominant religious institutions whereby other social institutions, especially political and educational institutions, have escaped from prior religious domination.” (Stark 1999:250-1). In referring to Durkheim’s definition which was a distinction between the sacred and the profane, secularization may mean simply movement from a ‘sacred’ to a ‘secular’ society. In the sense of an abandonment of any commitment to traditional values and practices, the acceptance of change and the founding of all decisions and actions on a rational and utilitarian basis, “this usage is far wider than any which refer only to an altered position of religion in society.” (Hamilton 2001:187).

While there was a religious view of nature in pre-modern age, secular one emerged in modern age. In pre-modern age, it was considered that the world was charged with the grandeur of God. All creatures were given their purpose by their creator. In modernization process, because humanity has become the measure of all things, human attitudes to nature are be defined on utilitarian and exploiter grounds. Modern secular culture has chosen to break with its religious roots, declared that human liberation and fulfillment come about through the domination of the natural world, and interpreted the religious texts in manipulative way. In this view, nature has nothing to do with the divine. It was not divine, and was not given any special status or privileges in the face of human inquiry and advance. An older view of nature, which held that it possessed a position of privilege and dignity and held humans accountable for how they used it, was swept aside. Secularization eliminated both any special divine status of nature and any human responsibility toward it (McGrath 2003:110).

Modern man has an “anthropocentric” conception that human is at the center of all things, and is the origin of all values. But in the beginning of 21st century this conception has come to change, because “eco-centric” has arisen. (Özdemir 1998:68).

Conclusion

Ecological crisis or environmental problems is the most important challenge facing mankind. In the globalization age, it takes on a special urgency and importance. I believe it can and should be improved.

Firstly, it is necessary that all people save themselves from the insanity of consumption, especially in technological area. In 20th century the capitalistic product relationship has made the environmental destruction. Many of environmental problems can be traced to products people consume. For example, with only 5% of the world’s people, North America consumes 25% of the world’s resources. The natural world surrounds us. As we know, the natural world is not so malleable. On the contrary, it will demand that we adapt to it, and if we don’t, we die. It is a harsh, powerful, and unforgiving world. So, we must use science and technology in a full and constructive way.

Secondly, we need norms or an earth ethics which arrange relationship between human and nature. But the history of Environmental Law is new. However, both secular and religious expressions may play a constructive role in ongoing deliberations on religion and ecology. The issues at the heart of our ecological crisis, which we must grapple with it, do not fall within the domain of a single discipline. So, both religious and secular perspectives certainly can and should play a role in the common cause of restoring ecological balance. Religion and secularism have fundamentally different views of humans, the nature and the

world, but environmentalism is much different from religion and secularism. It is included from parts of them.

Religions and belief systems have been considered as important conduits in shaping social attitudes toward nature and the environment. What role does religion play in shaping our attitude towards the natural world? It is possible, then, that religions could present a leading voice in environmental thinking. Jews, Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Confucians and the followers of other religions must collaborate with secular humanists or atheists to save the nature and all creatures of God, because they have also some motives about nature. According to a study which is performed in Britain, there is no significant difference among adherents of different religions concerning environmental attitudes. (Hayes and Marangudakis 2001). We have much to learn from religious and cultural traditions that locate the human within nature. We think there are origins of environmental ethics in religious texts. All religions contain concepts that can lead to the enhancement of core human-earth relations and earth ethics. All religious traditions can guide and stimulate us about the nature. And as we know, respect for nature is of course central in many other religious rituals. For example, the believers pray to God for the wholesomeness of the water and air, for the orderliness of the seasons, for the abundance of the fruits of the earth, and for the usefulness of the animals. It is also possible to say that all religions or religious texts have enormous potential for renewed appreciation of nature and environmental sustainability.

Finally, the basic theme of this paper is simple. It suggests that we try to reconnect to nature. We must learn to see the meaning, value, and beauty of nature. We dwell in this world. The natural order is our place of living. Let us appreciate the wonders of nature. We must keep the creation just as God keeps us. The world belongs to all of us. Everyone has a part to play, but for the demands of justice, charity, and solidarity and environmental sustainability. We are all obliged to conserve and protect these values. We must co-operate and work together for a better world, a better future, and a better environment. We must love and preserve our environment and all the living creatures within it. As Yunus Emre, the Turkish poet of 13th century, said: “*We love creatures for the sake of their Creator*”!

In this way, we want to believe that the 21st century will be the century of peace, happiness, tolerance, and brotherhood. Not only for human, but for all creatures either animate or inanimate.

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