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**Discerning Climate Change as Climate Injustice and  
Colonization of the Commons:  
*A Christian response***

By George Zachariah\*

An alternative theological engagement with climate change begins with the discernment of the problem. Discernment involves the courage to critically evaluate the dominant diagnosis of the problem, and to re-problematize the problem from the perspectives of the victims of climate change. This discernment leads us to the critical task of introspection where we engage in a genuine soul search to understand why our faith communities are not motivated sufficiently to engage in eco-justice ministries. A constructive attempt to develop theological and biblical insights in the context of climate injustice begins from here.

Exposing the “ideological benefits” the dominant reap from the mainstream discourses on climate change Jione Havea observes that “In fifty years time, if the projection is correct, many small island nation states will disappear under the rising sea level. Even before that happens, and this is the tear in my talanoa, their voices and interests are already drowning under the politics of climate change and the whitewash of dominant societies.” To put it differently, the greatest challenge before the climate refugees is to protect their voices, perspectives, and agency from being drowned in the patronizing global diagnosis of the problem and prescriptions of solutions.

The root cause for the ecological crisis that we face today is the prevailing economic system perpetuated by the empire and consented by the majority of the middle class across the world. The Peoples Agreement adopted by the World People’s Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth held in April 2010 in Bolivia has exposed the politics of the dominant discourses on climate change and proposed alternative perspectives to understand and address climate change: “The corporations and governments of the so-called “developed” countries, in complicity with a segment of the scientific community, have led us to discuss climate change as a problem limited to the rise in temperature without questioning the cause, which is the capitalist system.... The capitalist system has imposed on us a logic of competition, progress and limitless growth. This regime of production and consumption seeks profit without limits, separating human beings from nature and imposing a logic of domination upon nature, transforming everything into commodities: water, earth, the human genome, ancestral cultures, biodiversity, justice, ethics, the rights of peoples, and life itself.” Christian responses in the context of climate change challenges us to identify and expose the principalities and powers that devour the movement of life. Along with neo-liberal capitalism, social structures and practices of exclusion and marginalization based on race, caste, gender and the like also contribute to the destruction of life and livelihood. The consequences and effects of ecological crisis are disproportionately borne by subaltern communities such as dalits, women, children, and the indigenous communities.

An alternative prognosis of the problem from the vantage point of the climate refugees enables us to discern the problem as climate injustice and colonization of the commons. When subaltern voices are silenced and their traditional knowledge and practices are ignored in the discourses and initiatives to address climate change, we experience epistemological violence and cognitive injustice. This is the pathos of the climate refugees—the experience of structural and cognitive violence. The pathos of the climate refugees is the seedbed of a new hope which empowers them to discern the injustice in the dominant discourses and to envision alternative approaches and practices. Christian response in the context of climate change, therefore, is an invitation to be immersed in the subaltern social movements in their resilience and resistance against the forces of death and destruction. Church happens in our organic presence in these struggles.

In our theological explanations, we tend to argue that somehow God is involved in climate change, probably to wake us up to engage in creation care. But the problem with this theological explanation is the very fact that we attribute climate change to “acts of God.” So an alternative theological formulation begins with new visions of God. Our dominant notion of God as a mighty monarch, controlling the earth from a distant place is not in accordance with the biblical witness of God. The Bible celebrates the intimate relationship between God and the natural world, and categorically affirms that “the whole earth is full of his glory.” (Isaiah 6: 3) This glory refers to God’s vibrant presence which the people of Israel experienced in their life story. The Hebrew Bible talks about the experience of the same glory filling the tabernacle, and the temple. That means, for the Hebrew people, earth is God’s sanctuary where God is vibrantly present in a special way.

The biblical vision of new creation is foundational in our Christian engagement with the crisis of climate change. The whole creation is groaning for redemption from the bondage to decay (Rom 8:21). In Christ, God identifies with all suffering bodies, including the wounded earth. We see this broader understanding of the salvific potential of Christ in the epistle to Colossians where the horizon of redemption/reconciliation is widened to include the whole community of creation. Christ’s intimate relationship with the whole of creation from time immemorial is celebrated here. So Romans 8 and Colossians categorically affirm a theology of redemption that goes beyond the saving of souls to the healing and the glorious redemption of the community of creation.

The New Jerusalem is antithetical to the political economy of greed and accumulation. In this alternative vision the metaphor of water is being reclaimed as the agent of healing and redemption. The water, which was stripped of its essence in the city of Babylon, is transformed into a free gift available for all. The river of the water of life which nourishes and nurtures the city of Jerusalem is surrounded by the trees whose leaves bring healing to the nations. As a Lutheran World Federation document aptly suggests, such a vision will certainly lead us to a journey of repentance and conversions: From Human independence to human dependence with the rest of creation. From technological control to respect for, and care, and balanced use of natural resources, using appropriate technologies. From the understanding of sin as broken relationship between humans and God to an understanding of sin as sinful ways breaking relationships with God and the community of creation. From an obsession with progress and development as measured in economic terms to a commitment to create sustainable communities. From the worship of global market system to a spirituality inspired by the vision of God’s economy for the sake of the well being of all, including the earth. From a focus only on technological or market-driven “fixes” to the healing of creation.

In the context of climate change the story of Jonah in the Bible is paradigmatic for us. The great imperial city of Nineveh was asked to repent and mend its ways. God had given the city forty days to do that. God did not want Nineveh to be destroyed. Rather God wanted Nineveh to turn and to repent. God wanted to save Nineveh. One can identify two insights in the story of Jonah which are relevant in our context of climate change. First of all God is not a God who intends to punish us for our inequities. Rather God is a God who loves God’s creation. God does not want the creation to be destroyed. Secondly, God believes in the possibility of human beings to turn and repent. The very fact that the great imperial capital city could turn back to God and mend their ways in forty days is the assurance for us to make climate change history through our act of repentance. Nineveh is a paradigm for all of us. The unbelievable good news that we find in the story of Nineveh should inspire us to journey from a politics of cynicism and despair to a politics of hope: the audacity of hope as President Obama would put it. But it demands from us a costly commitment to undergo a social metanoia.

If God is present on the cross of Christ, the same God is wounded and crucified at the altar of neo-liberal capitalism along with millions of human beings and a multitude of God’s creation. We discern God as a climate refugee in the slums of Dhaka struggling for survival. We meet God in Maldives, Kiribati, Tuvalu and other low lying small islands, lamenting with island communities over the impending disaster. However, the passion of God is not a passive acceptance of the brutal regimes of the powers and principalities of our times. Rather the passion of God in the company of the victims is the proclamation of the advent of an alternative earth, redeemed of death and destruction. It is in our presence in the ecological struggles that we witness the God of life. An alternative theological re-imagination emerging from the pathos of the climate refugees has the potential to transform us into alternative communities of resistance and celebration, manifesting the foretaste of a redeemed earth. We witness the in-breaking of alternative communities that resist the onslaught of death in our midst. They are determined not only to

resist death, but also to create alternative worldviews, technologies, industries, markets, economies, and social and ecological relations that respect, nurture, protect, and celebrate life in abundance.

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