

# **Under the Spell of the Heart's Musings: Towards a Responsible Ecological Stewardship**

**KEYNOTE ADDRESS TO THE CONFERENCE OF THE CUMENICAL WATER NETWORK (EWN) ON WATER RELATED ADVOCACY**

**By**

**Paul Leshota**

**Department of Theology and Religious Studies**

**National University of Lesotho**

**P.O. Roma 180**

**[plleshota@nul.ls](mailto:plleshota@nul.ls)**

## **Introduction**

I feel deeply honored to speak here today on this important and historic occasion that marks yet another milestone in the life and history of the partnership between the Ecumenical Water Network of the World Council of Churches and the African Churches. I want to thank the local organizing committee for inviting me to share with this august assembly a few reflections on the subject of water related advocacy. To grace this important occasion, I thought I could share with you my reflections on the current situation of a global water crisis in the light of the familiar Biblical Story of the Birth of Moses. In concert with the perspective adopted by the Ecumenical Water Network, I concur that the issue of water crisis cannot be resolved in isolation from sanitation and protection of the environment. Informed by the statements and commitments of the various assemblies; projects and initiatives of the World Council of Churches and its partners; positions of some business oriented bodies and some examples from our continent; I wish to underline the complex, fragmented, diverging and sometimes even conflicting nature of the dynamics at play in any discussion about ecological issues in general and water in particular. I will also propose that economy and ecology, humankind survival and the natural world's survival are not exclusive. In fact they are, as De Cruichy (2007) suggests, inextricably linked and feed on each other. The reciprocal effect between them, therefore, is

demanded not only by humankind's survival but by the natural world's survival as well. Lastly, I will argue that the Church, especially the African Church, ought to reclaim its power and voice; embrace the struggle for holistic ecology as part of its mission through prophesying, advocating for and with, and restoring the voice to the people so that they may use their God given right to articulate their concerns.

## **The Story in its Context**

The story of the Birth of Moses is the story about God and his creation. It is a story about men, women and fine children. It is the story about the environment: the river Nile, its waters (clean enough for bathing and who said not for drinking as well) as well as its papyrus reeds. Coincidentally, the setting of the story is in Africa and its environment. This is a story about attitudes and sentiments. It is a story of a king whose fear of invasion or insurrection breeds jealousy and infanticide. This is the story about power, slavery, oppression and pain on one side, and resistance, liberation and joy on the other. It is a story about God who is deeply involved in human affairs and whose continued presence amongst his people cannot be mistaken. The story gives us a taste of what it means to give birth and raise a child in a hostile environment. It is a life of hidden agendas and conspiracies. It is a life of conniving, disobedience and betrayal.

This story of the Birth of Moses read in its context, in many ways, echoes the many stories around water and ecological crisis in the world, particularly in Africa. The story confronts us with the beauty of unadulterated environment. It is an immaculate, peaceful and friendly environment, where men and women marry; an environment where women conceive and give birth. The mention of the Nile river, with its reeds, thick enough for a child to be hidden and with its waters still clean for the princess to bathe, adds splendor to the well painted

scenery. Its banks are not yet littered with garbage. They are clean enough for the attendants to stroll along, while waiting for the princess to bathe. The papyrus basket obviously made from papyrus reed, as well as bitumen and pitch, which happen to be products of nature, become the house of the child against human threat. It is this environment that conspired with the woman of Levi to become a momentous but ephemeral refuge for the little and still harmless Moses, when hiding him had become impossible.

And yet this very same environment, in very subtle ways, acts as a spotlight, exposing and revealing, as it were, the musings of the human heart. It was the human heart which deliberated that it would not do any harm for Israel to live in peace in Egypt. It was the musings of Pharaoh's heart which welcomed the Israelites in these words: "The country of Egypt is open to you: settle your father and brothers in the best regions" (Exodus 47:6). It was the human heart which resolved that Israel was now becoming a nuisance and deserving of hard labor under very inhumane and harsh conditions. The poor woman who had conceived, had to give birth to a child under very trying and hostile circumstances. She hid him in the reeds at the river's edge and was forced by circumstances to give her own flesh and blood to Pharaoh's daughter as a son because Pharaoh had weirdly decided that it was too dangerous to allow male children to live. The very same heart still decided that the river Nile, despite its immaculate beauty, becomes a mass grave to hundreds or even thousands of children who could not raise a hand against the Pharaoh. The ecological damage that would be caused as a result of this bizarre decision cannot be overestimated.

The story confronts us with different dimensions of the concept of eco-justice which embraces symbiotically the human community and the biotic community. This symbiotic relationship is characterized by interdependence, diversity, cooperation and peace. It also reminds us of the three dimensions of peace

according to the Buddhist perspective. These are: inner peace; peace in community of humankind; and ecological peace or peace with the Earth. These three dimensions – founded on the law of dependent origination – exist within the context of interrelationships, such that each person is sustained by the interdependent web of life. In what the Buddhists would have labeled impulse of hatred expressing itself in emotions such as resentment, rage and envy, Pharaoh, from his inner life, spewed forth destructive and violent outbursts that engulfed a community that had lived harmoniously for years. Pharaoh's decisions originating from his lack of inner peace had far-reaching implications for the community of humankind as well as the environment. He could only afford to think about himself and Egypt and their needs which did not take into consideration the needs of others. We know all too well that his decision did not only bring about harm to others but to himself and his people as well. How were they to survive with the now polluted waters of the Nile river which was the very basis of their survival?

### **Reading the Story in the light of our Concrete Socio-Political-Economic and Ecological Context**

It seems tragically clear that we are confronted with what Martin Luther King referred to as an “awe-inspiring threshold of the future; the astonishing peaks of scientific success.” The ‘Enlightenment Paradigm’ with its glorification of reason and the ability of the mind to discover and experiment, marked a turning point in the relations between science and faith, humans and God and also between humans and the rest of the natural world. It also affected in very profound ways the extent to which the church, science and economics could interface. Indeed, the scientific technological prowess, bursting, as it were, with the promise of freedom, enhanced human dignity and unfettered aspiration, reigns supreme.

The enlightenment paradigm allowed for the separation of humans from their environment and the examination of the latter by the former from the vantage point of scientific objectivity. The gap between the human world with its ability to analyse and research, and the non-human world was beginning to widen. As Bosch (1991:264) observes, nature ceased to be 'creation' and was no longer people's teacher, but the object of their analysis. The human soul enjoyed and still enjoys the excitement at the possibility of navigating the earth and discovering new territories which were never discovered before. Understandably the Church's perspective could not remain intact. It adopted and was predominantly influenced by the anthropocentric understanding of the universe. From this viewpoint, the value of the whole universe depended entirely upon its contribution toward the well being of the human person, for, in this view, the world is designed for the benefit of the human species (van den Brom 1998:435). The world was by nature ordered toward occupation, manipulation and exploitation by humans. Humans were convinced and are still convinced of their ability and the will to remake the world in their own image. Perhaps in keeping with the Biblical injunction, "Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and conquer it" (Gen.1:28) humans were more convinced than ever of their call and vocation to shape the physical world to suit their own purposes.

However, gains had from this enlightenment, industrial revolution and its offshoot of modern global economy cannot be overemphasized. De Gruchy ably draws our attention to this phenomenon:

We are its heirs whether we like it or not, and it has enriched our lives in many ways. From the internal combustion engines that offer us mobility, to the cell phones that keep us in contact with home; from the computer upon which I have written this essay to the insulin that my daughter injects daily via digital pump; from the

fridge which keeps our food fresh, to the micro-wave oven that warms it up for us – our lives are inconceivable without the assumptions, mechanisms and achievements of the modern economy. We cannot be simplistic and naïve about it (2007).

Perhaps all these are seen as the concretization of the Biblical injunction from the Book of Genesis, “With sweat on your brow shall you eat your bread.” (Gen. 3:19). This text enjoins us to consider the material conditions of life and the attendant gains that go with such a commitment. I am certain that all of us assembled here have embraced the idea of progress that manifests itself in technological development. We all glorify God at such a condescension of mind that has expressed itself in the airplanes and other means of transport that have dwarfed distance, placed time in chains and have brought us all here in a matter of hours. We recall the many flight attendants and airport servicemen and women, the employees in the transport sector we have seen swarming the many airports and transport stations around the globe. Industrial and commercial agriculture creates thousands of job opportunities in production, retailing and transportation of their produce. This scientific and technological abundance that characterizes our modern world provides a dazzling picture of humankind’s scientific and technological progress. The implication of all these technological developments for job creation and poverty reduction is something we cannot deny.

Yet, alongside these obvious advantages in science and technology there is a massive exploitation of earth resources and environmental degradation. Polluted air suffuses the entire atmosphere. Polluting gases are destroying the ozone layer. The carbon emissions resulting from the production, transportation and retailing processes, have far-reaching implications for our environment. Many poor rural households do not have access to electricity, fuel and gas, and so cut

down trees for fuel. This exacerbates deforestation which in turn leads to soil erosion which affects water quantity and quality. Unpredictable rainfalls, droughts, floods, desertification and drying up of water resources, which have become common occurrences in our days, are but few examples of nature's groaning. New names such as El Nino and its sister La Nina, Tsunami and Katrina, which match up the new ecological phenomena, are steadily making their way into modern ecological lexicons, while reminding us of a wounded ecology now revolting against us.

There is also a growing interest in the management of water through commercialization and privatization, which as the claim goes, achieves higher economic growth, poverty reduction and greater food security. The fascination with this market approach to water management has been hailed with a whole bunch of alleged advantages. As Hoering in *Water for Food – Water for Profit* observes, such an establishment, as seen by its proponents, would advance the necessary increase in efficiency and agro-production; water would flow where it holds the highest value and thus the highest economic use; it would balance the mostly weaker position of agriculture in the allocation battles with the cities by turning water into a source of revenue and it would promote investment and employment (2005:46).

The World Bank, the IMF and other multilateral financial institutions, are the strong-willed advocates of this stance. They have proposed and imposed their economic plans on weak and desperate governments without sufficient consultation or discussions that involve people for whom these plans are intended (Wilson et al 1996:102). They have done and continue to do so at the expense of sustainable environmental integrity. Few examples may be cited to underline the ambiguous involvement of the World Bank and the IMF in some of these projects. Their involvement in the aborted attempts to privatize the

municipal water systems of Cochamba in Bolivia and those of Ghana; their role in the controversial multi-billion dollar project of the Lesotho Highlands Water Project are but few examples of relationships that conjure up memories of the unfettered musings of the human heart. All these are relationships characterized by inequality and domination which breed violence, exploitation, exclusion and a widening gap between the rich and the poor (De Gruchy 2007).

The Lesotho Highlands Water Project, because of its proximity, is a case in point of these lopsided and destructive relationships. It is one of the largest water projects in Africa. Clouded in controversy since its inception and backed by the World Bank and other financial institutions, the Lesotho Highlands Water Project was expected to benefit the entire nation in employment opportunities, better roads, tourism growth, water supply and environmental protection.

Ironically, the project has been a source of untold suffering for the majority of the would-be beneficiaries. The association of the rapid progression of HIV infection with the construction workforce has been established and documented. The disruption it caused to people's lives is captured well by Lenka Thamae *In the Wrong Side of Development* in these words, "No price could compensate for a life that has been so emotionally disturbed". The poor implementation of resettlement program resulted in bitter relations with host communities as the influx of re-settlers often led to increased demand on local amenities, utilities and communal resources. More often than not this led to conflict between host communities and re-settlers (Mashinini & Setsabi 2005). The Development fund which was meant for poverty alleviation was bogged down in bureaucracy and party-political patronage. Promises of an improved life, as a result of the project, are yet to translate into tangible socio-economic benefits for the majority of poor people. The implementation of this project acted as a spotlight, exposing and revealing, as it were, the disparity in power relations between the poor and the

rich; the vulnerability of the people who, though directly affected by the project, were denied meaningful participation in the planning and implementation of this project.

This is not the story of Lesotho alone. It is the story of Africa. The story common with the many countries around the globe which though rich in minerals, clean water and water resources, immaculate environments, reminiscent of the picture of the environment in the story of Moses, have been condemned to crunching poverty by the musings of the human heart. This whole scenario evokes the words of a nuclear physicist von Weizsacker, "There can be no peace among human beings if there is no peace with nature.

This commercialization and privatization of water promoted and sponsored by the World Bank, the IMF and their partners, pushes towards treating water as a commodity and 'economic good'. This perspective stands in glaring contrast to the position adopted by the World Council of Churches and its partners. Drawing from culture, ethics and the Bible, the World Council of Churches prefer to see water as God's gift, a precondition for life, a symbol of life, a public good and a right which cannot be left to the whims of water marketers alone, indeed not of any sector alone.

In this regard De Gruchy proposes a balanced view between the demands of ecology, the natural world's survival on one side and economy and humankind's survival on the other (2007). In his purview both ecology and economy are rooted in the same Greek *oikos* which means household or home. The two words ecology and economy derive from this Greek root. Ecology loosely translates discourse about the home or household. Economy translates rules of the home or household. From this association it can be inferred that both ecology and economy - seen in global perspective - belong to the same household of

humankind which we all inhabit and that is the earth. It can also be inferred that both ecology and economy are concerned about the earth, according to which rules they live and relate to the earth.

De Cruichy's perspective, therefore bids us to seek to change perspective. From what has been seen as a dichotomous relationship between science and faith, nature and culture, economy and ecology, a much more robust paradigm should be allowed to organize our way of thinking if we are to resolve the long overdrawn tug-o-war between what Mshana (2005) calls the water marketers on one hand and the public service defenders on the other. This would allow us access to both an improved means and an improved end. In this maze of conflicting and contrasting interests and ideals we have to wade our way in search for an answer that guarantees welfare of the entire ecological community which includes humans and the whole world of nature.

### **What Role Can the Church Play?**

In its Faith and Order Paper 198, The World Council of Churches defines the Church as God's creature brought about through the Word and the Spirit. It is God's gift, and as such cannot exist for itself. Of its very nature it is missionary, called and sent to serve, as an instrument of the Word and the Spirit and as a witness to the Kingdom of God. In the exercise of this mission, the Church cannot be true to itself unless its preaching in word and deed, saves and transforms the world (2005: #37). Following upon Jesus' example, the Church ought to embrace the call to share the suffering of all by advocacy and care for the poor, the needy and the marginalized and to critically analyze and expose unjust structures and work for their transformation 2005: (#40).

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, when the World Council of Churches' commission on Faith and Order, released a report entitled *God in Nature and*

*History* in 1967, its intentions and commitment to re-read its call and mission in the light of new ecological exigencies could not be missed. Many fruitful insights had from this report, constituted an important groundwork for the subsequent Council's commitments and pronouncements and propelled into being the many projects and initiatives of the World Council and its partners. The fifth World Assembly in Nairobi, Kenya in 1975, building on the same foundation, provided an important opening for looking at ecological questions from an ecumenical perspective with added impetus. The subsequent World Assemblies in Canada, Australia and Brazil respectively, reiterated this commitment, as the call for the renewal of the whole creation gained momentum.

Within these few years of its existence, the Ecumenical Water Network has brought together experts and leaders from all over the world in dialogue, support and advocacy on water related issues. Its coming onto the stage, served as a catalyst for discovering a model of balanced interrelationship between humans and creation, especially the recognition of the important role played by water in the sustenance of the whole of life. The latter has to be read in the light of the crisis of water and climate change that are visiting upon us in ways that we never imagined. The Conference on water in Nairobi, Kenya in 2005, 'The Churches for Water in Africa' Conference in Entebbe, Uganda in 2007 and now in Maseru, Lesotho, in 2008, are highlights of the Network's commitment to the struggle for eco-justice which puts the integrity of the whole ecological system at the center. The message that comes out very clearly from these conferences is a realization that water is a deeply, biblical, theological, justice, moral and cultural issue. Because of its importance and indispensability for life in all its dimensions, water cannot be left to the whims of the water marketers alone.

This testifies to the fact that the Church has been present to the people and to the whole of God's creation in different ways, at different times. From the Biblical

times to the present post-modern era, the Church has had to re-interpret the gospel in the light of new exigencies, while adopting new theological paradigms in the process. Despite the cultural and historical limitations and conditionings within which the gospel is preached, we cannot as the Church, renege from proclaiming the gospel of grace, of compassion and of mercy. Our God is the God of compassion who is moved by the agony and suffering of his people contrary to the Aristotelian description of God as “An Unmoved Mover”, dwelling in an unassailable Olympian height (Tutu,1983:60). God did not watch disinterestedly when Pharaoh contemplated and started implementing those weird decisions that were catastrophic for both humans and the environment. He came down and was involved in their politics, economy and ecology thereby proclaiming that God was the God of politics, economy and ecology. As Tutu (1983:60-61 puts it:

He showed himself to be a God of liberation, the great Exodus God, who took side of the oppressed, the exploited ones, the down-trodden, the marginalized ones. He was not a fence-sitter. He took sides against the powerful on behalf of the widow, the orphan and the alien – classes of people who were often at the back of the queue, at the bottom of the pile (1983:60-61).

This stance echoes the disposition of Bonhoeffer, whose reflections on the presence of the Church in Germany of the time, led him to say, “false piety which ignores the world is as useless as the false worldliness which ignores God” (Veldman 1998:59). We are today, as the Church, called to preach the gospel, in a world characterized by episodes of harmony and prosperity, of progress and hope; but also of problems and tragedies – sometimes of almost unspeakable magnitude. We are heirs to a paradigm that glorified reason and the mind’s ability to discover and experiment. Indeed human beings are convinced more

than ever before of their ability and the will to remake the world in their own image. We live and minister in the world that celebrates scientific and industrial developments, manifest in the technologies and industrial progress and the concomitant economic paradigms. These achievements are, however, made at a cost to the good and integration of all the whole of creation. Not only do we experience the widening chasm between the rich nations and the poor nations, the rich individuals and the poor individuals within countries and nations, but also an environment that is wreathing in pain at the exploitation that has no consideration for the future generations.

As we gather together here in Lesotho for these five days of the conference on Water and Human rights, around the theme “Let Justice roll down like waters: faith based advocacy and water for all”, we cannot, as the African Churches, afford to go to slumber until justice has rolled down like waters for all God’s people in our countries, especially the poor rural and urban communities. The presentations and experiences as well as interactions with local communities in Lesotho should spur us on our journey towards the realization of justice for all God’s creation not as an eschatological ideal but in the here and now. The African Church should take up the challenge to equip its members with sharp minds, keen ears, warm hearts, quick feet and loud voices and to overcome what Chitando (2007) calls “ambulance theology” which he describes as always arriving at the scene after the accident has already taken place.

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