

The African Ecological Spirituality in the Light of Henrik Gregersen's Christology of Deep Incarnation

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Abstract

The world is witnessing the growing destruction of the world's ecosystems prompting nations of the world and religious leaders to embark on the search for extensive scientific, cultural, and religious frameworks for analysing and mitigating this cosmological disaster. At the centre of this crisis is modern man's failure to manage the environment in the manner that our pre-colonial forefathers used to do thereby posing a threat to the subsistence of human life. Using a framework of inculturation, this article reviews Gregersen's theology of deep incarnation that focuses on understanding Jesus' incarnation as implying a complete union of the divine with biological existence. Through the incarnation, Jesus became matter and hence matter was divinized. The article argues that traditional African cosmological spirituality manifests elements of deep incarnation. Hence, the environment through the incarnation of Jesus has received the dignity often thought to be the preserve of human beings.

Key Terms: Deep incarnation, African Ecological Spirituality, Inculturation, Deep Resurrection, environmental protection.

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Introduction

The past two centuries have witnessed the growing destruction of ecosystems prompting nations of the world and religious leaders to embark on the search for extensive scientific, cultural, and religious frameworks for analysing and mitigating this cosmological pandemic. At the centre of this crisis is modern man's failure to manage the environment in the manner that our pre-colonial forefathers used to do thereby posing a threat to the subsistence of human life. St Paul speaking to the Romans lamented that 'creation is groaning' (Romans 8:22) signifying intense suffering as a consequence of human beings' transgressions. For Paul, this suffering can only find its meaning in the coming of Christ, the Word made flesh. The salvation of the cosmos through the incarnation of Christ is what Henrik Gregersen (2015) calls deep incarnation. This study aims to determine the relationship between the African ecological spirituality and Gregersen's Christology of deep incarnation. Using the framework of inculturation, it argues that traditional African cosmological spirituality manifests elements of deep incarnation.

Brief Insight into the Continent of Africa

There is growing consciousness of the need to revisit the cultural elements that were lost due to missionary ignorance of the traditions existent among the African people. A lot of literature exists among Afrocentric writers in defence of the return to traditional African spirituality as the panacea to the several problems bedevilling the continent (Mwawusi 2009). To the wider world, the name Africa is associated with hunger, coups, diseases, poverty, and refugees among other things. The negative Western media gives the impression that Africa has nothing to contribute to the world. This is despite the fact that the future of Christianity is currently located in Africa where there is a noticeable rise in Christian movements especially among the Pentecostal and African independent churches. Christianity and Islam, the predominant organized religions within the African continent are preoccupied with personal salvation to the detriment of ecological preservation (Tucker, 2005).

The increase in Christian membership has not translated into a positive developmental trajectory for the continent. Africa is beset with conflicts, violence, turmoil, poverty, and ethnic hatred among other things prompting the debate on whether Christianity has secular benefits for the continent. To some writers, Christianity is a civilization, a

Western civilization, just like Islam, Orthodox, and Shintoism (Hintington, 2011). The missionary preoccupation with winning souls for heaven has undermined the need to promote sustainable utilization of natural resources (Dube, 2022). Contrary to the letter and spirit of the Book of Genesis story of creation, the missionaries gave a blind eye to the colonial pillaging of Africa's natural resources (Viera, 2007). Traditional Africa placed a high regard for the environment as the source of life and livelihood. However, the African eco-spirituality with its rich traditions of sacred reverence for the environment has not received the attention it deserves.

At the international level, Africa has been at the receiving end of the negative impacts of climate change. While climate change affects everyone, Africa and other third-world countries who have contributed the least to it are the least well placed to respond due to lack of resources while those who contributed more to the problem are the most insulated from it due to their vast resource endowments (International Bar Association, 2014). While several legal instruments have been proffered to ameliorate the impacts of climate justice, there is a gap and a loud call for the African Traditional religions to take an active role in saving the ecosystem (Donald, 2004) Africa has a rich tradition of respect for the environment which has not been explored to its maximum. The goal of this article is to validate that African ecological tradition fits well with the Christian doctrine of incarnation.

This article agrees with Antony Raphael Etuk's observation that, "Africans now relate with nature and their environment from the capitalistic, manipulative and exploitative point of view in their attempt to accumulate wealth in terms of money" (Schlosberg, 2004). Consequently, the sacred character of the ecosystem that used to symbolise the African World View is lost leading to the current ecological crisis. The article concurs with Pope Francis' observation that "The ecological crisis is essentially a spiritual crisis" (Donald, 2004 p. 13). Through the lens of inculturation, the article tries to rediscover and experience 'the holy' in the ecosystem as a manifestation of the theology of incarnation.

Theoretical Framework

This article adopts the method of inculturation. Laurent Mangesa defines inculturation as, "the process of rooting Christianity into a culture; celebrating liturgies in an African way; integrating cultural elements into Christian worship; evangelizing Africa in an

African way; immersing the Christian faith in the local culture” (Mangesa 2004, p. 62). Inculturation aims to ensure that the Good News of Christ is understood according to people’s cultures and thought patterns. It acknowledges that the Gospel of Christ is dynamic and capable of being inserted into every culture thereby creating an interaction with that particular culture of the people. This was the mandate given by the Catholic Church during the Vatican Council in *Lumen Gentium* that the Church is directed to infuse the Gospel of Christ into the culture of the people (Bosco, 2005). In this mandate, the Church is tasked with the responsibility to preserve and purify those cultural elements that are deemed good according to the customs of the people. This article uses the framework of inculturation to demonstrate how the African ecological spirituality fits well with the Christian doctrine of the deep incarnation as espoused by Henrik Gregersen.

The need for ecological spirituality is more urgent today than ever. Both human beings and the environment are under serious threats due to the continuous exploitation of the ecosystem. Africa is at risk from desertification that is fast expanding into its interior (Magesa, 2015). Global warming is increasing as a result of the depletion of the ozone layer posing a serious health challenge to the ecosystem. This calls for collective efforts from all stakeholders within and outside the continent of Africa. Among the various possible strategy for mitigating this crisis is the need to revisit the African ecological spirituality whose potential for a new humanism has not been fully exploited (Pope Francis, 2015). Bringing world religions into dialogue with African ecological spirituality is one avenue that the study attempts to proffer.

Henrik Gregersen’s Christology of Deep Incarnation

Gregersen’s idea of deep incarnation is grounded in the Gospel of John’s theology that the ‘Word became Flesh.’ The Mystery of Christ is understood as a message for all creation. By becoming matter, God chose to enter the biological web of life (Gregersen, 2015). Instead of remaining a mysterious God who resides in heaven, divorced from the realities of this world, He chose through Christ to enter into a living presence, immersed in the burden of the material world. In the Gospel of St John, we hear that, “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory of the Father’s only Son, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). John alerts the reader to the existence of the Word in the Genesis creation narrative before the

world was made. The creative Word that brought the earth into existence has itself become the earth, the clay, the flesh. By deep incarnation, Gregersen implied that the divine Word has become material. He says,

Jesus breathes the same air as all the living creatures on Earth, eats food grown from the same ground and drinks water from the same raindrops. The natural biological processes of human flesh are true of the man Jesus. Jesus smells, tastes and feels in the same way that all humans do. In Jesus, God joins the web of life, and becomes part of Earth's biology (Gregersen, 2015 p. 142).

The Gospel of John does not refer to Word as becoming human or man in Jesus, rather, he uses the term flesh (Greek *sarx*) to denote a broader mortal reality encompassing fragility, vulnerability, perishability, and transitory (Johnson 2014). St John's words contrast the Hellenists' dualistic understanding of a Holy heaven situated up there with the secular earth down here which is sinful. By Word becoming flesh, John underscores the reality that the Word has entered the sphere of the material world. Deep incarnation, means that God through Christ is incarnated in everything that exists on the planet Earth (Multman 2015). According to Gregersen, John places the person Jesus in the cosmic perspective as the creative and formative principle of the universe. It is this creative and formative principle that became flesh (*sarx*) in the historical person of Jesus of Nazareth. He further defines the term 'beginning' as implying not just a temporal-spatial period but an ontological beginning. Within this perspective, it is then correct to say, in the beginning, biological life came through the expressive and transformative logos.

Gregersen's concept of deep incarnation seeks to demonstrate that God in Christ is incarnate in all that is (Gregersen, 2015). The name Jesus-Emmanuel 'God with us' should not be taken to refer to the biological human beings only, but Emmanuel as *God with all living things*. This presupposes that God is present even in natural evils like earthquakes, floods, volcanos, and in human suffering. While on face value, this might sound contradictory to the concept of an omnibenevolent God, rather, it demonstrates the universality of Christ's saving grace in the midst of evil. God in Christ is present in natural evil not as the principle originating that evil, but, as the ontological salvific energy mitigating life. This was demonstrated in the Book of Job where he

maintained that, "I know that my redeemer lives, and that at the last, he will stand upon the earth" (Job 19: 25 RSV).

Gregersen's theology of deep incarnation has strong links with the Franciscan cosmic doctrine of Christ. St Francis the founder of the Franciscan Order marvelled at the splendour of creation in the context of the 'gifts' of God. Followers of St Francis adopting their founder's spirituality, advanced a cosmic doctrine of Christ from the perspective of creation. In trying to grapple with the Trinitarian question of why God became human, Franciscan theology emphasized the relationship between incarnation and creation. It posits that both creation and incarnation are not a necessity in the ontology of God, but part of divine nature understood as God's principle of action (Delio, 2003). Simply put, according to the Franciscan theology, creation presupposes incarnation and the two cannot be separated as they reflect the principle of God's action.

If we accept the proposition that creation presupposes incarnation, the question then is; what would the incarnation look like had Adam not sinned? This is the question that Don Scotus, a Franciscan theologian tried to answer where he argued that, "the predestination of anyone to glory is prior by nature to the prevision of the sin or damnation of anyone..." (Walter, 1988). This means the incarnation was imminent irrespective of sin since it leads to God's ultimate and final end. In this regard, Jesus or the incarnation is not a consequence of Adam's sin but a product of God's free will. In other words, incarnation is not God's answer to the human beings' desire for salvation. For Scotus, God from eternity willed to unite Himself with the cosmos through the unification of the divine and human natures in Christ.

It surmises to say that the theology of deep incarnation is the idea that the whole of creation is to a greater extent incarnational. Consequently, the matter is spiritualized. If incarnation is the process of God's self-communication, deep incarnation then is the His self-revelation to the whole of creation that is groaning awaiting the final restoration where God will be all-in-all. In this regard, human beings are intrinsically connected to nature to such an extent that one cannot talk of human identity outside cosmic development. The salvation of human beings through Christ cannot be achieved outside the wider context of the community of creation.

Deep incarnation is an invitation to move away from the traditional conception of salvation as dictated by moral behaviour. It encompasses other aspects of life like the composition of Jesus' earthly body which was made up of water, oxygen, and nutrients from plants, fruits, and vegetables all of which constitute the environment. If the incarnate body of Christ comprising of such cosmic elements entered heaven (Deep Resurrection), and as St Gregory Nazianzen claimed, *what was not assumed was not saved* (Joshua, 2023), then everything in the environment was assumed in the incarnate body of Christ and shall find salvation in him.

The African Ecological Spirituality

According to Kanu, African eco-spirituality is, "a manifestation of the consciousness and experience of the sacred in the ecology which may serve as a sustained source for African communities' and individuals' practical struggle for the healing of the earth's ecology" (Kanu, 2021, p. 46). It is the connection between ecology and African spirituality. At the heart of the African eco-spirituality is a conscious conviction in the sacredness of the environment and the need for taking personal responsibility towards the ecosystem (Sunganthi, 2021). The term spirituality echoes a life that is entrenched in the interrelation of oneself, others and the cosmos (Manobo, 2021). Eco-spirituality then focuses on the individual's spirituality in relation to the ecosystem. This is further reflected from the perspective of the African traditional worldview.

While spirituality can exist independently of any religion, African spirituality cannot divorce itself from the traditional African World View that forms the foundation of the African Traditional Religion. It has long been affirmed that African Traditional Religion is holistic with no room for dichotomy between the sacred and the secular (Magesa, 2015). This is why John Mbiti (1971, p.2), says, the African carries his religion with him, "to the fields where he is sowing seeds or harvesting new crop, he takes it with him to a beer parlour or to attend a funeral ceremony; and if he is educated, he takes religion with him to the examination room at school or in the university; if he is a politician, he takes it to the house of parliament." Hence, African eco-spirituality is a science of religious ecological spirituality and cannot be discussed under the classifications of, 'religion-without-spirituality and spirituality-without-religion' (Mbiti, 1971). All life for the Africans is religious signifying a symbiotic relationship between human life and all other animate beings.

According to Mbiti, in traditional Africa, land with all that it holds did not belong to living human beings but to God and the ancestors. Human beings were only stewards of the ecosystem. Only through fierce battles did the indigenous people invade and took possession of another tribe's ancestral land. Each tribal geographical area belonged to the ancestors who held control over the land's fertility and rainfall (Chavunduka, 2001). This is why the struggle for liberation in most African countries and Zimbabwe in particular was seen not as a mere quest for self-governance but a spiritual struggle for repossessing the ancestral heritage.

During the struggle for liberation, the freedom fighters collaborated with nature in the fight for freedom. Often they used to receive clues from the birds, trees, animals, and vegetation about the presence of an enemy. For example, when a snake crosses your path, it was a message for the individual to change direction. This means, for the Africans, every animate and inanimate being had a spiritual force and could communicate life or death. Big trees, mountains, rivers, and big snakes had spiritual significance and were abodes of special spirits. Trees and vegetation had healing powers not because of the perceived scientific properties in them, but because they possessed spiritual healing powers for the sustenance of the people's health and wellness. Destruction of the ecosystem meant destroying the very source of life in the community.

Traditional African communities believed that the fertility of the land was ensured through traditional rituals than the use of chemical fertilizers that have to a greater extent rendered the land barren. Speaking in the context of the indigenous people of Botswana, food security was highly knotted to the rich agricultural rites. These rites were designed to ensure enough supply of rain and enhance the fertility of the land (Amanze, 1998, p. 27). Seasons like seed preparation, eating of new crops and harvesting were preceded by rites invoking God through the ancestors. These rites which formed part of the African World View demonstrate a symbiotic spiritual connection between humans and the cosmos. In this way, Africans believed that human beings were mere stewards of land entrusted to them by their ancestors. The environment was understood spiritually and not a mere physical endowment that could be abused by humans. As an ancestral inheritance, land and all that grew on it like fruits had no commercial value. The land was sacred because it housed the graves of

the departed and any product from the land was considered a gift from the ancestors for the sustenance of human life.

In traditional Zimbabwean culture, the destruction of the environment invited sanctions from the ancestors. Cutting down trees was punished through droughts, death or mental illness. In sacred forests, fruits were eaten on site and not hoarded for commercial purposes and such attempts were sometimes punishable by getting lost (*Chidzimira*). When an individual profane a sacred place, the chiefs and headmen as custodians of the ancestral stewardship would punish the offender (Unebune and Chinjioke, 2021). Several taboos attached sanctions to actions that violate the environment. While punishment for destroying the environment could be administered by the local traditional leaders, often, the ancestors were responsible and penalties like death, barrenness, madness, sickness or loss of wealth were common. Traditional leaders as representatives of the ancestors could act on behalf of the spirits in administering punishment to offenders.

African eco-spirituality is the understanding that there is a connection between this earth and the African World View. It is premised on the belief that natural phenomena is sustained by the spirits. For the Africans, the earth is humanity's mother who sustains human life through the provision of food, plants for medicines, and the oxygen that people breathe. In traditional Shona culture, a mother occupies a special sacred place in the family. It is taboo to fight, scorn, or swear against your mother. Such malpractices against a mother often attracted punishments like madness (*kutanda botso*). In like manner, the environment and all that constitutes it is sacred because it is the habitat of Supernatural Beings. Consequently, every African had a role to play in conserving the natural environment. This was well noted by Guno et al., where they say, "the killing of sacred animals, felling of sacred trees and destruction of sacred spaces in the forest only meets with spiritual disapproval, which manifests itself in the form of great droughts or disease outbreaks" (Gumo et al., 2012, p. 527).

The Incarnational Eco-Spirituality of Pope Francis

In the history of Christian theology, Pope Francis was the first to lay out a systematic Social Teaching of the Catholic Church on ecological spirituality in his encyclical *Laudato si* (Pope Francis, 2015). This extremely valuable piece of literature has strong implications for the African eco-spirituality of what he terms our 'common home'. For

Pope Francis, humanity is at the edge of becoming a victim of its actions against the environment. Destruction of the environment in the name of economic progress devoid of moral and social progress is a recipe for disaster. The Pope insists that development should of necessity have a moral character as the current misuse of creation suggests that human beings consider themselves to be 'ends' and no longer recognize the existence of a higher Being. He acknowledges the complexity of the ecological crisis and that solutions to the crisis should be sought within the collective interpretation of this reality through the various cultures and religions of the world.

Pope Francis locates the source of the current ecological problems in the biblical sin of Adam that he describes as, "our presuming to take the place of God and refusing to acknowledge our creaturely limitations" (p. 56). By distorting and changing the mandate from *dominion* to *domination* over the earth', human beings entered into a conflictual relationship with nature. However, for Pope Francis, "the ultimate destiny of the universe is in the fullness of God, which has already been attained by the incarnation of Jesus", and the glory of the risen Christ, whom he calls the "the measure of the maturity of all things" (p. 83).

The incarnation of the Son of God is testimony to the fact that nature is part of God's salvific plan. According to Pope Francis, the incarnate Son of God toiled the earth with his hands while at the same time maintaining a relationship with, "matter created by God" for the greater part of his life-giving human labour its significance (p. 98). By being incarnated in the womb of the Blessed Virgin Mary, God became matter itself, thereby giving the earth a special significance. St Paul in his letter to the Philippians speaks of Jesus' teaching on the kenosis when he said, Jesus, "Who being in very nature God did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage" (Philippians 2:6). The Gospel of John testifies that the Divine Word (*logos*) became flesh (John 1:14), meaning that the one person of the Trinity entered into the created cosmos, throwing in his lot with it. On the same note, the Pope further asserts that, "since the beginning of the world, but particularly through the incarnation, the mystery of Christ is at work in a hidden manner in the natural world as a whole, without thereby impinging on its autonomy" (Pope Francis, 2015, p. 29).

African Eco-Spirituality in the Light of Deep Incarnation

Having taken a survey of literature that undergirds the understanding of African Ecological spirituality and the theological foundations of the incarnation, this article proceeds to articulate African Eco-spirituality in the light of Gregersen's theology of deep incarnation. The article will argue in favour of the proposition that African eco-spirituality is theologically incarnational, Christologically incarnational, and Pneumatologically incarnational. In an attempt to proffer a theological treatise on African eco-spirituality, this article takes note of Pope Francis' observation that there is no unique solution to the ecological crisis that humanity faces due to the anthropogenic nature of the predicament (Platovnjak, 2019). In this regard, the use of cultural elements in finding solution to the problem is highly encouraged.

African eco-spirituality recognizes that the source of every created reality including mother earth resides in the creator God (*Musikavanhu*). The starting point for ecological contemplation is the belief that God the creator is the originator of all that exists. Nothing operates outside the power and influence of the creator God. It is God who directs the circumstances of both animate and inanimate beings (Magesa, 2004). If by theology, we understand it to mean the study (*logos*) of God (*Theo*), then the African Cosmo-vision is both religious and theological. This takes us far aback to Mbiti's observation that for the African, everything is religious (Mbiti, 1971). The Online Cambridge Dictionary of English defines religion as, "the belief in and worship of God or gods and any such system of belief and worship" (Online Cambridge Dictionary). If the conventional assumption by all major religions of the existence of a Universal God or supreme Divine Authority (Naik, 2020) is anything to go by, then African ecological spirituality fits well into the divine self-revelation of the one God, the creator of all that is.

The God who revealed Himself in History through the people of Israel and His full revelation in the person of Jesus Christ is the same God who through the ages has revealed Himself to the African people through their ancestors. The understanding of African ecological spirituality is historical and revelatory as they are moral precepts passed down from the creator (*Musikavanhu*) through the ancestors and down to the people. Through revelation, God communicates His very being and this

communication is relational. It is a communication of love and life that was extended to the whole universe. In the Biblical story of creation, human beings were given the role of dominion (translated here as stewardship) and not domination (Genesis 1:28). Hence, St Francis of Assisi in his canticle would sing of 'brother sun' and 'brother moon' (Speelman, 2018).

According to Gregersen, the central teaching of the doctrine of incarnation is that God, the Word that created the world, become flesh in the person of Jesus Christ. By becoming human, the Word of God took on the natural biological processes of the human flesh (Gregersen, 2015). To quote the 16th century vegetarian Joachim Beuckelaer, Flemish, 'You are what you eat'. By taking the biological flesh in the form of the human body, the incarnate Word of God became the fruits of the forest, the herbal shrubs of the land, and the waters that he regularly took. In the same manner, African eco-spirituality proffers that fruits, herbs, mountains, forests, and rivers are all gifts from the creator for the purpose of sustaining the ecosystem. To ensure their preservation, taboos with corresponding penalties for offenders were instituted.

Gregersen's Christology of deep incarnation follows Gregory Nazianzen's *Letter to Cledonius* where he said, "For that which He has not assumed He has not healed, but that which is united to His Godhead is also saved" (Joshua, 2021, p. 563). The logic of this teaching was that if Christ did not take the human form, then his death is of no significance to our salvation. Gregersen takes the principle further to mean, Christ took everything that is human including the biological constitution of our bodies. He further argues that in the same way that he took our whole human nature at the incarnation, it follows that at the resurrection, everything biologically existence was assumed into heaven. If the human body was composed of elements found in nature, it follows that nature was assumed into heaven. Following the argument of Gregory, since nature was assumed into heaven, then it suffices to conclude that nature is saved as well. Gregerson calls this 'deep resurrection'.

There is a logical relationship between deep incarnation, deep resurrection and African ecological spirituality. Both, deep incarnation and deep resurrection submit that the incarnation of Jesus and his resurrection confers dignity not just to human beings alone but to everything and everyone. Consequently, there must be some interdependence between corporeality and materiality, between heaven and earth,

and between the human person and the environment (Nash, 1999). In African eco-spirituality, the dignity of creation lies in the provenance of the creator who ensures the security, fertility, and productivity of the land. Since human beings depend on the ecosystem for their survival, it follows that for the Africans, the ecosystem has the same dignity that human beings possess.

Deep incarnation attests to the reality that Paul taught the Ephesians when he talks of Christ as one who fulfils God's plan "to gather all things together in him, things in heaven and things on Earth" (Ephesians 1:10). While African eco-spirituality just like the discipline of African theology struggles to locate the reality of incarnation within the African World View, the role of Christ as the universal saviour who assumed human flesh to save the world remains valid for all religions. Christ is the universal saviour not because he was born out of the Jewish election, but because he came from the Father and is the perfect revelation of Him. His incarnation has universal significance for every race since he did not assume a Jewish nature, but a human nature. In this way, being Jewishness though significant is accidental and not constitutive. He is the saviour because he is the incarnate son of the Father and not because he is Jewish. By analogy, he is the saviour of the cosmos not because he was born human, but because he assumed biological existence.

African eco-spirituality is pneumatological. It manifests a sacred connection between human beings and the cosmos (Uwineze, 2021). Deep incarnation attests to the reality of the presence of God Spirit in the created world as a power that animates and renews the world, the Spirit of God is not heaven-bound but an earthly reality of His presence in the ecosystem. The incarnate Son of God upon his ascendance to heaven promised his disciples that he will send the Paraclete who will reveal to them everything about the Father (John 14:16-17). African eco-spirituality is premised on the belief that the earth is a manifestation of the Great Spirit (Ekechukwu, 2021) and that everything created has a spirit. There are spirits that animate the mountains, the seas, and the trees, including human beings. Abuse of the ecosystem is a travesty against African eco-spirituality.

Conclusion

Environmental protection is not just a question of ecological rights, it has religious connotations. The commercialization of natural endowments that has characterized the modern world has brought negative consequences to human beings and the environment at large. While change is desirable for development, it has become, “a source of anxiety when it causes harm to the world and to the quality of life of much of humanity” (Pope Francis, 2015, p. 6). The African ecological spirituality is a call to understand environmental destruction in the light of the doctrine of the incarnation. This article aimed to justify that there is a relationship between African eco-spirituality and the Christian doctrine of deep incarnation. Deep incarnation gives testimony to the African worldview on the sacredness of the ecosystem as saved by Christ. Consequently, human beings are called upon to view the environment in the same way they view the sacredness of human life.

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