**Environmental Racism: Earth, Wind & fire (and Water) -Theme for 24th March 2021**

I deeply appreciate the UN as an esteemed Organisation focussing on Environmental Racism and People of African Descent. The concept note, pertaining to the ‘**28th Session of the Working Group of experts on people of African descent on Environmental Justice, the Climate Crisis and People of African Descent, 24-26 March 2021’** reflects its importance and urgency adequately. However, I feel, there is a gap in one area where it says, “Environmental racism is a measurable contemporary manifestation of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia, Afrophobia and related intolerance”. I firmly believe that we need to add Islamophobia here. It will be worth bringing people of all faiths and no faith in God together from an interfaith perspective. This will enable people to respond to the need of human beings’ role in protecting the earth from interfaith perspectives. Although it may look very daunting, it needs to be explored with an aim of deepening peace between people and their responsible relationship with the earth. I suggest that each religion and faith bring out what is the calling from their faith to Environmental Justice. An Interfaith perspective upholding the faith of each community to care for both environment as well as the people of African Descent will be helpful.

Intolerance based on religion and faith needs to be addressed and therefore, there is a genuine need to include Islamophobia also along with Afrophobia in order to bring Environmental Justice to People of African Descent. We have witnessed the drastic consequences of many wars – we have destroyed our earth, wiped out communities and polluted those regions as well as the rest of the world. We are in a context where we can no more talk about separate faith communities. Within families, members are from different faiths. Understanding another person’s faith will enable families and communities to live in harmony among ourselves as well as with our environment. This is essential for promoting environmental justice and we should be able to talk with members of other faith communities about their commitment to environmental justice. One of the themes for a starting point for such a venture could be the fundamental elements – space/ether, wind, fire, water and the earth. How does each faith address this?

For example, in Hinduism it is considered as follows:[[1]](#footnote-1)

*Nature is made up of 5 major elements known as Panchabutas. These five elements are supposed to be the parent elements and all the other elements are inherited from these parent elements.*

*The panchabutas are as listed below:*

***Elements******Attributes***

1. [*Space (Akasha)*](http://gyanpro.com/blog/how-big-is-universe/)*–                       Sound*
2. *Wind (Vayu)              –                       Sound + touch*
3. [*Fire (Agni)*](http://gyanpro.com/blog/why-do-we-perform-agnihotra/)*–                       Sound + touch + form*
4. [*Water (Apas)*](http://gyanpro.com/blog/doesnt-water-burn/)*–                       Sound + touch + form + taste*
5. *Earth (Prithvi)          –                       Sound + touch + form + taste + smell*

It is to be noted that the title of the above article refers to these elements as ‘5 elements of life with reference to Vedic Illuminati’[[2]](#footnote-2). It is principle that unifies life in the ecosystem.

In Islam, a Sufi perspective is as follows:

*Follows In this world, Allah created many different kinds of beautiful and valuable things, but there would have been no creation at all if the five elements had not come together in unity. Earth, fire, water, air, and ether are natural enemies to one another, but God joined them together through the recitation of the kalimah: “There is no god except the one God, and Muhammad is His Messenger.”[[3]](#footnote-3)*

Speaking from an Orthodox Christian Perspective, our worship includes the use of the five fundamental elements – space, wind, fire, water, and earth. Prayers include praying for the nature and its salvation. Yet, Christians need to ask, ‘what does the Lord require of us with respect to promoting environmental justice and environmental ethics?’ A theological perspective on the creation stories will help Christians.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The purpose of environmental ethics is to provide moral grounds for social policies aimed at protecting the earth's environment and remedying environmental degradation. The environmental Justice movement has broadened the prospective environment from just conserving and preserving of natural resources by defining environment as ‘Where we live, work, play, learn and pray’[[5]](#footnote-5) Here, space becomes very important. A safe space for every human being and extended to all life needs to be promoted. Here, I would suggest that we include the missing element ‘space’ as given in the title, ‘Environmental Racism: Earth, wind and fire (water)’. This will help to address the plight of masses of People of African Descent who are literally pushed into challenging and crowded areas to live. Tricia Rose talks about how African-Americans are branded with red lines and denied of financial support or loans as she unfolds how structural racism works.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Our world/earth is facing climate Change with severe destruction and dislocations to life with major threats expected in the near future if we don’t respond here and now. Care for our environment is a basic essence of Environmental Ethics. Earlier we had many Environmental issues, now it is one struggle – For LIFE itself and we are part of the nature. Interconnected web – Ecosystem and humanity is a part of it. The consequence of biodiversity loss is that it changes everything forever. Environmental degradation can wipe out our species too. We have had a glimpse of that since last year due to COVID, where communities in the margins had to face unjust consequences due to where they lived, worked, played or prayed. We also saw how human caused pollution could be considerably brought down especially in cities by reducing travel. It did reduce the co2 emission into our atmosphere. COVID times also witnessed the death of George Floyd in the United States which made communities from around the world to raise their voice against racism once again. Black Lives Matter Movement is raising its voice louder today. Communities are in solidarity with this movement as people are denied their basic human rights based on the colour of their skin.

George Floyd’s cry for his life saying, ‘I can’t breathe’ still rings in our ears often. Is this cry

Only a cry to live on or does it have layers of social, economic, ecological, racial identities and environmental injustices? Prophet Amos pleads and says, ‘But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!” (Amos 5:24). What does it mean for us today when we hear, ‘I can’t breathe’? It is in a context like this where a majority of the population – African Descent in every part of the world is pushed to corners that we are called to construct truly liberating theologies through the religious texts and all traditions of faiths and beliefs too. We are called to dismantle the present social structures that stand on the pillars of social and spiritual injustices due to our limitation in understanding, interpreting and constructing theologies, way of life taking practical steps to promote Environmental Justice, combat climate crisis and address environmental racism on the people of African descent.

I am reminded of a poem in Tamil written by Kavimani Desiga Vinayaga Pillai born in 1876:

தூய காற்றும் நன்னீரும் Clean air and clean water

சுண்டப் பசித்தபின் உணவும் Appetite first, meals thereafter

நோயை ஓட்டி விடும் அப்பா! Will drive diseases away

நூறு வயதும் தரும் அப்பா! Make you live a hundred years

The above poem gives a very succinct point – a formula for a healthy and long life. It is not just for the have-nots but also for the have-lots. Clean air and pure water are prerogative rights of every human being born in this world. This is the result of keeping our environments safe to grow healthy food and it includes safe space - places where we live, work, play and pray. Safety and security are at the forefront of promoting life and life in all its fullness. When we pollute air and water, we destroy life in general. When the above poem talks about having meals after a good appetite, it is the message for the have lots who tend to eat more even without the need for it. Overeating, wasting and hoarding food add to bringing down the quality of life. So, production needs to be checked first and monitored with just distribution and consumption to ensure clean air and pure water for everyone everywhere. This is my dream, and this is my vision.

Dr Elizabeth Joy

A member of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church

A Director/Trustee at Churches Together in England

A member of the Council of Reference at British SCM

One of the two nominated candidates for the role of GS-WCC awaiting election

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1. "Panchabhutas - 5 Elements of Life with Reference to Vedic Text and Illuminati", Gyanpro https://gyanpro.com/blog/panchabhutas-5-elements-of-life-with-reference-to-vedic-text-and-illuminati/ (accessed 15th March 2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. M R Bawa Muhalyaddeen, "Unity: The Secret of Creation", Bawa Muhalyaddeen https://bmf.org/iswp/secret-creation.html (accessed 15th March 2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Elizabeth Joy, "Let Justice Roll on Like a River: Theological Implications for Environmental Ethics," in *Quilling Our Visions: Weaving Our Dreams*, ed. Vinod Victor et all(Delhi, India: ISPCK, 2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. "Environmental Justice & Environmental Racism", Greenaction.org http://greenaction.org/what-is-environmental-justice/ (accessed 17th March 2021). for further reading on the principles of Environment Justice, use the same link [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Tricia Rose, "How Structural Racism Works" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KT1vsOJctMk (accessed 15th March 2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)