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Religious Studies and Theology

Mama Wangari Muta Maathai was a strong-willed, go-getter, and courageous woman born in 1940, Nyeri District in Kenya. She was from the Kikuyu tribe who populated the central highlands of Kenya. Wangari went to St. Cecilia boarding school at age eleven. It was a catholic school and it gave her a Christian foundation. She also joined the faith of Legion of Mary, an organization that sought to serve God only by serving other human beings. Later Wangari went to Loreto High School after graduating as the best in her class. The school was also a Catholic girl's high school in Limuru, Kenya. With her discipline and hard work, Wangari earned a scholarship to study science and biology in Mt. Scholastica College, Kansas USA. Subsequently, graduating in 1964, she went to the University of Pittsburg to have her masters in biology. While in the university she came across environmental activists who were fighting against air pollution (McKenna 48).

Upon Wangari Maathai's completion of her masters in 1966, she became a research assistant for a professor of Zoology in the University of Nairobi. Later, a German Professor, Reinhold Hofman in the same university, hired her to be a research assistant. The nomination was the first for a woman in the country. Wangari moved to Germany to pursue a Doctorate in veterinary anatomy after so many persuasions by the German professor to do so. Wangari

Maathai in 1971 had a Ph.D., the first woman to attain such academics in East Africa. She taught courses in the University of Nairobi and also other lessons to empower the society, especial women. Her main aim was to protect the environment and people's health. Wangari was an environmental activist long before the notion became famous. Just like many other activists, she was a pioneer. Since she was born in forest lands of Nyeri, her childhood memories were of the fertile fields with sweet potatoes, maize, fertile soils, and singing birds (McKenna 49). She started by cautioning the community against commercial logging, clear-cutting, and the planting of non-indigenous trees as cash crops.

Wangari Maathai was an active woman chairing the National Council for Women in Kenya. From 1981 till her death, she continually introduced community tree planting by developing grassroots and broad-based organizations. Wangari's main focus was tree planting by women groups to conserve the environment and consequently improve the quality of life. Her advocacy was a holistic vision that linked the economic opportunities to the sustainability of the environment. Her aim was to replant all the forests in Nairobi with indigenous species to improve the soil, be a habitat for animals, and cut soil erosion. Additionally the forests were important as they would serve as windbreaks and shades (Anderson). For women, the forests were a source of livelihood as they would provide people with firewood supplies. On the whole, Nairobi farmlands would be productive.

The woman in this decade that people mostly associate with trees is Wangari Maathai. The Nobel Peace Committee presented Wangari with the Nobel Peace Prize for her planting trees, environmentalism, and organizing women to ensure that coming generations had a future. The Norwegian Nobel committee had to shift their focus from local conflicts that result from religious and ethnic aspects. In awarding Wangari, the committee recognized the ecological

circumstances (McKenna 48). Wangari's social activism and ethics are informative and necessary reflect on her Christian faith. A good example is the way Jesus had a concern for the whole world and sought to meet the needs of people. Similarly, Wangari Maathai was a voice of conscience in Kenya. Using social history, she focused on materialistic conditions of life. The traditional linking of economic and social history promoted her perspectives as they were overlapping the political history of Kenya. Wangari's reforestation efforts have built exemplary careers on the basis of African thought that nurtures more deferential approach to the environment. Wangari is among leaders who embrace the idea of humanizing Africa as their own. Her work was to reforest Africa with the help of women who were Green Belt Movement members (Fahlbusch 64).

Wangari Maathai is a significant person in Kenya's environmental matters. Her concerns were on the destruction of the environment. Wangari always said that when God was creating the earth, He was pleased with everything that he saw. Her question was if today God would have a look at the land, would he say that everything is good? Confidently Wangari made frequent claims that destroying the environment is putting to an end the creation of God. Environmental matters according to Wangari Maathai were the concerns for Christians as well as to others who share a similar heritage of creation. In advocating an environment friendly society, Wangari had faith in God and Christianity (Marks 114, 115). She had a practice of doing justice to the environment by encouraging tree planting.

The Green Belt movement began when Wangari was assisting women in planting trees. In 1977, her ideas grew to the Green Belt Movement. By 1986, the idea spread and became Pan-African Green Belt Network. Countries such as Zimbabwe, Tanzania, Lesotho, Uganda, and Ethiopia were part of the movement. Approximately, 40 million trees were planted on schools,

church compounds, and farms in Africa. In turn, the forests were a source of income for almost one million women in Africa. With the spread of the movement in Africa, Wangari was publicly connecting the issues of poverty, environmental destruction, globalization, national debts, buying of African lands, development and economic scarcity. The reason for her advocacy is because Africans had many problems of land relocations. Politicians made illegal appropriations of land from poor people. Moreover, business corporations were stealing land from the real owners (McKenna 50).

Due to political stance on some forests in Nairobi, Wangari Maathai had to learn the hard way that speaking the truth regarding trees and women issues was a dangerous affair. She was beaten, prosecuted, attacked and also threatened by the government during that time. Wangari Maathai's activist politics in promoting environment integrity, democracy, and protests had to use indigenous methods of women resistance to oppression. She stripped nakedly along with other women to show that women have to fight for their rights. The demonstrations led to her jail terms, physical assault and criticism by the government under the rule of Moi administration. Maathai was experiencing financial problems due to her divorce expenses and the Moi government which pushed her into further economic difficulties. She went on with her international activism on environmental integrity, human rights, women's rights, and economic, social, and political justice. Her perseverance led to her recognition and prominence by the world (Anderson).

In 2002, people elected her as a member of parliament for her resilience in encouraging women, reforesting bare land, and planting trees. It was evident that her work paid as women had plenty of food. The president, Mwai Kibaki then nominated her as a deputy minister for the environment. The day Wangari knew she won the Nobel Prize; she was on her way to her

ancestral home Nyeri. She was so overwhelmed that she knelt down, planted a tree weeping, not minding the red dirt in gratitude. She planted a Nandi flame tree, in remembrance in the shadows of Mount Kenya. The Norwegian Nobel committee had to shift their focus from local conflicts that result from religious and ethnic aspects (Emeagwali). In awarding Wangari, the Nobel committee recognized the environmental circumstances.

Emeagwali states that the speech by Norwegian Noble Committee chairman was on peace. He claims that the earth primarily depends on people's ability to secure the living environment. Maathai was firm in fighting to promote ecologically viable economic, cultural and social development of Kenya and Africa at large. Her holistic approach was embracing democracy, and human rights as her thoughts are of the global nature though she acts locally. Wangari through her work contributes to world peace. She had a deep sense of respect to traditions and spirituality. Her inspirations make a lasting and profound justice for her, women, the country Kenya, and the wider world.

When asked about her passion for the environment, she speaks of her faith. The underground is the source of her life, vision, and work. Nature is Maathai's spirit and soul. She claims that her curiosity drives towards ethical and spiritual questions as well as the convictions that drive the human action. In conversations, she describes her faith to be, as a result, of the ecological passion. The lively fusion of real world encounters of good and evil with Christianity in addition to ancestral Kikuyu traditions from the Kenyan highlands were among her motivations. Her schooling had a Catholic background, and till her death she continued practicing the Catholic faith (Marks 119).

Kikuyus traditionally worshiped under a fig tree, while honoring Mount Kenya. Ancestral Kikuyu believed that God resides in the second-highest mountain in Africa, Mount Kenya. Wangari Maathai later understood scientifically, that the mountain is the source of many rivers in Kenya. The fig tree was a sacred tree to Kikuyus; therefore, it was an abomination to cut it down. Wangari realized that the tree had the deepest roots which were necessary for bringing water to the surface from deep below. However, climate change in Africa is, as a result, of systematic cutting of trees by African industrialists and colonial Christians. People all over the world ought to learn from Wangari Maathai. Her point of view is that the ecology is an issue of peace and war and also life and death (McKenna 51, 52).

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Maathai worked on broadening the concept of peace around the world after receiving the Nobel Prize. The concept was mainly on poverty, trees people's survival, and the ecology. In her thirty-fifth anniversary celebrating Earth Day, Wangari claimed that nature is a fundamental component of people's ability to survive. It is a central pillar for expanding the opportunities of peace. Her comment on that day was in response to the Nobel Committee. She claims their message to the world was having a peaceful planet requires people to manage the environment sustainably and responsibly. Most importantly, humanity has to share the available natural resources equitably at national and international levels. She started the idea of "Plant for the

Planet, a billion trees campaign (Anderson). With Wangari's inspiration led to 12 African countries planting trees.

In Conclusion, Wangari Maathai has referred to a history that includes inequitable distribution of resources such as land, which is the main trigger for post-election violence in Kenya. Wangari was keen on the relationship between environmental degradation and poverty. Through her faith in Christianity, she had a way to cut on the essential core of environmental issues. Wangari's work is an inspiration that creates a framework to sustain United Nation's development deliberations. Maathai is among many African leaders that have worked tirelessly to heal their traumatized nations. With that in mind, African leaders can and are contributing to the global ethics, in quest for global healing. Truly, Wangari Maathai was an enlightening soul illuminating the society to desire and guard the nature that sustains humanity.

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