Law, Religion and the Environment in Africa

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1 ECOTHEOLOGY IN AFRICA: AN OVERVIEW AND PRELIMINARY ASSESSMENT

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INTRODUCTION

The relationship between religion and the environment has generated considerable scholarly attention. Researchers from diverse disciplines have sought to understand and to explain the interface between the two fields. In terms of the emergence of the discipline, the contribution by Lynn White, one of the pioneering figures in the field, in his article, "The Ecological Roots of Our Crisis",² remains foundational. In summary, White maintained that the contemporary ecological crisis emerged from Christianity's dominating approach towards the created order. Christian attitudes to the environment were basically exploitative, he argued. Since then, different contributors to the debate have either sought to confirm, debunk, recast or expand White's underlying thesis. The realisation that we are living in a world characterised by a radical plurality of religions has led to the broadening of the focus, beyond Christianity and the Bible.

That there is a global environmental crisis is widely accepted, except by a few powerful individuals and institutions who do not recognise the implications of this reality. Such individuals and institutions are mainly located in the global North and are aware that the global environmental crisis demands that they change their lifestyles, as well as making financial contributions to address this pressing challenge. Some activists have been frustrated by the intransigence of the powerful denialists, concluding that they are impervious to scientific facts. I am persuaded that those who deny the reality of an environmental crisis are adopting a strategy that enables them to hide in plain sight. Although the reality of climate change has become clear to citizens of the global South, some powerful individuals in the global North are able to avoid their responsibility, because the impact is not yet as obvious in their context. Climate policy analysts Anja Kollmuss and Julian Agyeman have summarised some of the key factors that influence the failure to act in the wake of environmental challenges.³ These include, first, the non-immediacy of many ecological problems, second, the slow and gradual ecological destruction and, third, the realities of complex systems, since environmental problems are highly complex and not easy to simplify. Such factors lead to lack of urgency in addressing environmental issues.

1 World Council of Churches, Theology Consultant on HIV; Professor, History of Religions, University of Zimbabwe.

2 White L (Jr). 1967. "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis", *Science*, New Series 155(3667):1203-1207 [<https://doi.org/10.1126/science.155.3767.1203>].

3 Kollmuss A and Agyeman J. 2002. "Mind the Gap: Why do people act environmentally and what are the barriers to pro-environmental behavior?", *Environmental Education Research* 8(3):253 [<https://doi.org/10.1080/13504620220145401>].

Africa has been severely affected by the environmental crisis. In particular, the impact of climate change has deepened the vulnerability of many citizens. Kapyra Kaoma, an African environmental theologian, argues that environmental consciousness is slowly becoming an economic and political issue. He asserts, "This consciousness is also prompted by the increasing extreme weather events – heat waves, floods and landslides. These events are worsened by human activities – soil erosion, burning of fossil fuels, pollution, the felling of trees and the over-exploitation of the land."⁴ Here, it is vital to note that the continent and its people are already reeling from their marginalisation from the global economic (dis)order. While citizens of the continent have done the least harm to the environment, we find ourselves having to carry the greatest burden of the consequences. The following has been noted in relation to Southern Africa:

The sub-continent is already under pressure from climate stresses; with further climate change, climate in the region is predicted to become more variable and extreme weather events such as droughts and floods are predicted to become more frequent and severe. Southern Africa is particularly vulnerable to climatic changes and variability because of the fact that the majority of the population makes their living from the land as cultivators and pastoralists.⁵

Due to the very real threats that African people are facing, African theologians and scholars of religion have sought to address the issue of the environmental crisis. One of the biggest motivating factors for this engagement is that African theology seeks to be contextually sensitive and relevant.⁶ It endeavours to answer the questions that Africans are asking, as opposed to being abstract and abstruse. The discussion below selects representative ideas from Anglophone scholars in Southern, East and West Africa to illustrate the developments within ecotheology in Africa, broadly defined. Further, it is important to acknowledge that some of the scholars who have contributed to the discourse on religion and the environment in Africa have also proceeded to include or shift to the emerging focus on religion and climate change in Africa.

ECOTHEOLOGY IN AFRICA: MAPPING THE CONTOURS

It must be conceded that although African theologians in diverse contexts have drawn some attention to the need to address the environmental crisis, it is not yet possible to refer to a well-defined body of writings that could be labelled as

4 Kaoma K. 2017. "Towards an African theological ethic of earth care: Encountering the Tonga lwiindi of Simaamba of Zambia in the face of the ecological crisis", *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 73(3):3834 [https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v73i3.3834].

5 Darkoh MBK. 2009. "An overview of environmental issues in Southern Africa", *African Journal of Ecology* 47(1):93-94 [https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2028.2008.01054.x].

6 It is important, however, to acknowledge that every theology is contextual. Therefore, the tag, "contextual" must not be misconstrued as suggesting, "local, limited, not universal", as no such universal theology exists.

“African ecotheology”. Although helpful material has been generated and new insights have been proffered, the offerings have been made intermittently and with limited interaction amongst the scholars who are contributing to this area. As a result, it is difficult to assert that there is a composite field that has a distinct identity. One could contrast this with developments in a much younger strand of African theology, namely, HIV theologies. Although the field of HIV theologies emerged later than the concern with the environment, it has since grown to have a recognisable shape.

Despite not having sharply defined boundaries and themes that are addressed in a sustained way, African ecotheology is a field whose key features can be mapped. As with most academic fields, it is possible to identify founding fathers and mothers, central and recurrent motifs and ideas, elaborators and dissenters. Further, it is also possible to recognise specific groups that have emerged from within the larger field. For example, as shall be elaborated below, African women theologians have approached the field from a particular angle and have demonstrated the value of employing gender perspectives to the study of religion and the environment. Below, I highlight some of the notable developments within this field. Given that Africa is home to a plurality of religions, the discussion necessarily adopts a multifaith approach to ecotheology. Clearly, the earlier assessment by Marthinus Daneel, a leading scholar on AICs, as well as ecotheology, that “Black African theologians have done little towards producing a comprehensive Africanised theology of the environment”⁷ now needs to be revised, as the literature has expanded considerably.

AFRICAN TRADITIONAL/INDIGENOUS RELIGIONS AND THE ENVIRONMENT

It is an ideological imperative that a study of religion and theology and the environment in Africa takes African Traditional/Indigenous Religions (AT/IRs)⁸ as its starting point. This is because these religions constitute the foundation upon which other religions have built or been built. They represent the indigenous approach to the environment. It is not surprising that the doyen of the study of AT/IRs, John S. Mbiti, an African theologian, articulated the position that these religions are ecologically friendly and that they contribute significantly towards the protection of the environment. According to Mbiti, African religions view nature as being “filled with religious significance”.⁹

The first generation of African theologians, predominantly male and writing in the 1960s and 1970s, generally adopted a defensive and romantic idea of ATR/IRs. This is understandable, as they were responding to the critique by many missionary and colonial writers who demonised AT/IRs. Where the indigenous beliefs and practices

7 Daneel ML. 2001. *African Earthkeepers: Wholistic Interfaith Mission*. Pretoria: Unisa, 175.

8 There is debate regarding the most appropriate designation for the pre-Christian and pre-Muslim religions of Africa.

9 Mbiti JS. 1977. *African Religions and Philosophy*. Oxford: Heinemann, 56.

of Africans had been written off in favour of Christianity, in particular, they sought to write them back and accord them pride of place. Thus, for example, where the religiosity of Africans had been questioned, Mbiti and pioneering African scholars stridently defended the existence of ATRs. In fact, they swung the pendulum to the other extreme and suggested that “everything in [traditional] Africa was/is religious”. In the specific case of attitudes to nature, the earlier African theologians insisted that AT/IRs are strategic resources in the quest to preserve and protect the environment. They rated AT/IRs quite positively and bemoaned the tendency towards desacralisation.

The theme of the positive contribution of AT/IRs to the conservation of the environment has been taken up by different African scholars across the generations. Although writing in a later period and acknowledging the danger of romanticising the African past, Edward Antonio describes nature as a “tutor”.¹⁰ He expresses the conviction that the indigenous approach to nature has a lot to teach the world today. This idea has been endorsed by many African scholars. An analysis of the contributions shows that most African scholars begin by drawing attention to the environmental crisis. They proceed to outline the “traditional/indigenous” African attitude to nature and creation. Here, the role of totemism, namely, the association of specific communities with specific animals, receives emphasis,¹¹ as do beliefs, taboos, myths, proverbs and songs as forms of articulating beliefs about animals and the land.¹² Some scholars trace the impact of colonialism on African attitudes to nature.¹³ Many then proceed to express the confidence that the religions that were formerly dismissed as superstitious, backward, primitive, amongst other descriptors, are well placed to make an effective contribution towards resolving the environmental crisis. Why AT/IRs continue to be neglected in the response to the environmental crisis is a recurrent question. For example, “ATR has inherent environmental resource conservation and management principles, why is this religion not promoted by conservation experts for the conservation and management of these resources?”¹⁴ Other scholars underscore the role of AT/IRs in protecting the environment and contributing to sustainable

10 Antonio E. 1999. “Letting the People Decide: Towards an Ethic of Ecological Survival in Africa”, in Hallman DG (ed). *Ecotheology: Voices from South and North*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 227-234.

11 See, for example, Awuah-Nyamekye S. 2014. *Managing the Environmental Crisis in Ghana: The Role of African Traditional Religion and Culture with special reference to the Berekum Traditional Area*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Press.

12 Asante EA, Ababio S and Boadu KB. 2017. “The Use of Indigenous Cultural Practices by the Ashantis for the Conservation of Forests in Ghana”, *SAGE Open* January-March:1-7 [https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244016687611].

13 Ikuenobe PA. 2014. “Traditional African Environmental Ethics and Colonial Legacy”, *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 2(4):1-21 [https://doi.org/10.15640/ijpt.v2n4a1].

14 Eneji CVO, Ntamu U, Unwanade C et al. 2012. “Traditional African Religion in Natural Resources Conservation in Cross River State, Nigeria”, *Environment and Natural Resources Research* 2(4):45-53 [https://doi.org/10.5539/enrr.v2n4p45].

development.¹⁵ There is often a rallying call to recover the traditional worldview in order to overcome contemporary environmental challenges. For example, theologian Julius Gathogo recommends that

... oral tradition could be repackaged and passed on in the form of motion pictures, music, video cassettes, dance, drama and radio presentations that are appealing to young people. In the formal school curriculums, the need to integrate indigenous environmental conservation methods is paramount. In school activities, physical activities that seek to preserve nature should be emphasised at all levels of education.¹⁶

The focus on AT/IRs is also expressed through using the lens of *ubuntu*. The concept of *ubuntu*, expressed through the saying, "I am because you are, because you are, therefore I am", has been deployed to highlight African indigenous approaches to the environment. An overview of reflections on *ubuntu* and the environment highlights a common thread: African ideas of being extend beyond humans to the environment. Sometimes, the concept of *ubuntu* is appropriated in discourses on Christian ecological ethics.¹⁷ Overall, the argument is that *ubuntu* is a holistic philosophy. Humans, animals and flora and fauna are all part of the community.¹⁸ Philosopher and ethicist Mogobe Ramose, one of the key players in popularising *ubuntu*, writes:

The principle of wholeness applies also to the relation between human beings and physical or objective nature. To care for one another, therefore, implies caring for physical nature as well. Without such care, interdependence between human beings and physical nature would be undermined. Moreover, human beings are indeed an intrinsic part of physical nature although possibly a privileged part. Accordingly, caring for one another is the fulfilment of the natural duty to care for physical nature too.¹⁹

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- 15 Obasola K. 2013. "African Religion and Environmental Dynamics: Implications for Human and Sustainable Development", *Journal of Studies in Social Sciences* 4(2):199-212.
- 16 Gathogo J. 2013. "Environmental management and African indigenous resources: echoes from Mutira Mission, Kenya (1912-2012)", *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 39(2):33-56.
- 17 Kaoma KJ. 2013. *God's Family, God's Earth: Christian Ecological Ethics of Ubuntu*. Zomba: Kachere Series.
- 18 See, for example, Mawere M. 2012. "'Buried and Forgotten but not Dead': Reflections On 'Ubuntu' in Environmental Conservation in Southeastern Zimbabwe", *Afro Asian Journal of Social Sciences* 3(2):1-20, and Museka G and Madondo MM. 2012. "The Quest for a Relevant Environmental Pedagogy in the African Context: Insights from Unhu/Ubuntu Philosophy", *Journal of Ecology and the Natural Environment* 4(10):258-265 [https://academicjournals.org/journal/JENE/edition/July_2012].
- 19 Ramose MB. 2009. "Ecology through Ubuntu", in Murove MF (ed). *African Ethics: An Anthology of Comparative and Applied Ethics*. Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.

Alongside *ubuntu*, the concept of indigenous knowledge systems has also been used to reference AT/IRs' commitment to environmental preservation. Some postcolonial African scholars seek to challenge the hegemony of Western ways of knowing. They contend that the marginalisation of indigenous knowledge systems was part of the colonial agenda. Munyaradzi Mawere, an African philosopher and a consistent proponent of indigenous knowledge in Africa, defines indigenous knowledge as "a set of ideas, beliefs, and practices (some of which have indigenous religious underpinnings) of a specific locale that has been used by its people to interact with their environment and other people over a long period of time".²⁰ It is possible to narrow down the scope from African indigenous knowledge in general to traditional ecological knowledge,²¹ although indigenous knowledge remains the more popular concept.

Researchers from different African countries have highlighted the extent to which indigenous knowledge systems have been vital for successful conservation of the environment. For example, studies on the Baganda²² in Uganda and the Tonga in Zambia,²³ as well as rituals for rain in Kenya,²⁴ have highlighted the extent to which indigenous communities have thrived through utilising indigenous knowledge systems. These studies have shown the importance of respecting and appropriating indigenous knowledge systems to address the environmental crisis. Many African scholars have been keen to question the special status that has been given to Western approaches at the expense of indigenous knowledge systems, when the latter have served communities throughout the ages. According to Joram Tarusarira, a scholar of religion, in order for development programmes, particularly those addressing climate change, to succeed, there is need to take indigenous knowledge systems seriously. Thus: "Unless the vision to address climate change is articulated by those for whom it is intended, it cannot inspire and sustain a people. Any climate change enterprise must begin by considering how people's full range of resources, including their spiritual or religious resources, can be used for their general well-being."²⁵

20 Mawere M. 2015. "Indigenous Knowledge and Public Education in Sub-Saharan Africa", *Afrika Spectrum* 2:59 [https://doi.org/10.1177/000203971505000203].

21 Obiora C and Emeka EE. 2015. "African Indigenous Knowledge System and Environmental Sustainability", *International Journal of Environmental Protection and Policy* 3(4):90 [https://doi.org/10.11648/j.ijep.20150304.12].

22 Lssozi A. 2012. "Values and participation: The role of culture in nature preservation and environmental education among the Baganda", *The Journal of Sustainability Education* 7(3):88-99.

23 Kanene KM. 2016. "Indigenous practices of environmental sustainability in the Tonga community of southern Zambia", *Jambá: Journal of Disaster Risk Studies* 8(1):331 [https://doi.org/10.4102/jamba.v8i1.331].

24 Gumo S. 2017. "Praying for Rain: Indigenous Systems of Rainmaking in Kenya", *The Ecumenical Review* 69(3):386-397 [https://doi.org/10.1111/erev.12301].

25 Tarusarira J. 2017. "African Religion, Climate Change and Knowledge Systems", *Ecumenical Review* 69(3):410 [https://doi.org/10.1111/erev.12302].

A CRITICAL VOICE ON AFRICAN TRADITIONAL/ INDIGENOUS RELIGIONS AND THE ENVIRONMENT

It is understandable that there is considerable unanimity over the strategic role of AT/IRs in promoting environmental conservation. These religions are an integral part of life in indigenous settings. African scholars have adopted a favourable and positive stance in evaluating AT/IRs in relation to the environment. One scholar, however, has posed some critical remarks. Nisbert Taringa, an African scholar of religion, in an article, "How Environmental is African Traditional Religion?" questions the high rating of AT/IRs in relation to preserving the environment.²⁶ Taringa is concerned that African scholars have adopted a romantic approach towards AT/IR in its engagement with the environment. For him, indigenous religions are not intrinsically ecologically friendly. Instead, ATRs tend to preserve the environment predominantly out of fear of consequences of the wrath of the ancestors, rather than any innate commitment to the environment itself. With particular reference to the Shona of Zimbabwe, Taringa writes, "This means that Shona attitudes to nature are ambivalent. Extreme attitudes coincide: ecologically responsible and ecologically harmful."²⁷

In this regard, Taringa's intervention is quite significant. He dares to go against the grain and asks hard questions regarding the motivation for AT/IRs' attitudes towards the environment. He queries the narrative that AT/IRs are intrinsically environmentally friendly. He challenges the notion that totemism safeguards animal species, since, he argues, a family observes taboos that relate only to a specific animal or a part of the animal. All other animals are fair game, he contends. Taringa questions the dominant argument that the Shona were keen environmentalists before the arrival of Christianity and Western ideas. He writes:

I believe that such perceptions may be idealistic and romantic and need to be re-examined. This is especially so if Shona religion is to re-emerge as a stronger environmental force in the global village. Contrary to these views, I wish to propose, phenomenologically, that traditional Shona beliefs and practices do not necessarily support religious environmentalism, and that the traditional Shona worldview does not sit comfortably within a worldview assumed in modern environmental discourses. The question how environmental is Shona traditional religion has not been critically pressed.²⁸

A longer narrative is required to engage Taringa in a more detailed way. What is clear, however, is that he breaks ranks with an overwhelming majority of African scholars and critiques the dominant position (namely AT/IRs are intrinsically environmentally friendly) in a profound way. Significantly, however, Taringa has not returned to this theme of the ambivalence of AT/IRs in relation to the

26 Taringa N. 2006. "How Environmental is African Traditional Religion?", *Exchange* 35(2):191-214 [<https://doi.org/10.1163/157254306776525672>].

27 Taringa, "How Environmental is African Traditional Religion?", 204.

28 Taringa, "How Environmental is African Traditional Religion?", 192.

environment in a detailed way.²⁹ Indeed, when he focused on this theme in a larger project, he sought to promote dialogue between Christian and African traditional attitudes to the environment. He concludes that an “authentic inter-religious environmental ethic must revise both Shona and Christian attitudes to nature as presently understood”.³⁰ It is striking to note that, thus far, Taringa’s critical stance on the ambivalence of AT/IRs towards the environment has not been challenged in a direct and engaging way by scholars from Africa or elsewhere.

AFRICAN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGIANS AND THE ENVIRONMENT

As would be expected, given Christianity’s dominance in African theology and religious studies and its generally longer engagement with the environment, there have been more in-depth reflections on the environment from Christian perspectives than from any other angle. As it is not possible to exhaust these perspectives within the context of this chapter, I shall draw upon a few examples to illustrate trends within this strand of ecotheology in Africa. I shall retain the general categorisation of African Christianity into mainline churches, African Independent/Indigenous/Initiated/Instituted Churches (AICs) and Pentecostal churches.³¹ I readily concede that these labels mask a lot of diversity. What unites the various contributors is their conviction that the Church in Africa must make a fundamental contribution towards addressing the environmental crisis.

Jesse Mugambi, a prominent theologian from Kenya, has demonstrated a keen and abiding interest in Christianity and the environment. As a resource person for the Ecumenical Water Network and the World Council of Churches Working Group on Climate Change, Mugambi has been consistent in drawing attention to Africa’s vulnerability to the ecological crisis. He co-edited the volume, *Christian Theology and Environmental Responsibility*.³² Mugambi has reflected on the implications of climate change for food security in Africa and calls upon African Christianity to be proactive.³³ As one of the leading voices in calling for an African theology of reconstruction, Mugambi argues that there must be a correlation between the African theology of reconstruction and ecological concerns. Thus, “The theology of reconstruction will have to take ecological concerns seriously, restoring and

²⁹ Taringa passed away on 11 January 2020.

³⁰ Taringa, NT. 2014. *Towards an African-Christian Environmental Ethic*. Bamberg: Bamberg University Press, 81.

³¹ Whereas mainline churches are associated with the early missionaries, AICs largely seek to harmonise Christianity and African culture, while Pentecostal churches are more recent expressions of Christianity that emphasise the role of the Holy Spirit, speaking in tongues, healing and deliverance.

³² Mugambi JNK and Vähäkangas M (eds). 2001. *Christian Theology and Environmental Responsibility*. Nairobi: Acton.

³³ Mugambi JNK. 2016. “Climate Change and Food Security: A Challenge for African Christianity”, in Phiri IA and Werner D (eds). *Anthology of African Christianity*. Oxford: Regnum Books.

rehabilitating the habitats which humankind has destroyed under the pretexts of 'civilisation', 'progress', 'development' and 'economic growth.'³⁴

Ernst Conradie, a Euro-African South African scholar, is one of the leading voices on theology and the environment and climate change in Africa and globally. Through articles, books and edited volumes, Conradie has underscored the urgency for churches to make a decisive intervention in the response to the ecological crisis. Conradie has been insistent that human beings must take responsibility for our actions. To ask God to intervene, without calling upon human beings to take corrective action, is to renege on responsibility.³⁵ Further, Conradie has drawn attention to the devastating impact of the environmental crisis on the most vulnerable groups. He writes:

In global terms it is widely recognised that countries in Africa are marginalised in the global economy and are subjected to new forms of colonial conquest in the scramble for Africa's resources. This has a significant impact on a micro-level. The victims of socio-economic injustices are typically also victims of environmental degradation. These include various groups of marginalised people on the economic periphery: indigenous peoples (who often become environmental refugees), women, children, the poor, mine workers, factory workers, farm workers and people of colour. The poor and marginalised are driven to live in physical conditions which are of a bad environmental quality (and which are therefore "open" for occupation). The poorest often live (and work!) on urban waste dumps.³⁶

While Mugambi and Conradie have been addressing theology and the environment for a much longer period than most African theologians, they are by no means the only ones involved in this venture. Space considerations prevent a detailed analysis of the contributions of other African theologians who have reflected on the environment. Gitau,³⁷ Kaoma³⁸ and Lagat³⁹ represent some of the scholars who have provided full length monographs on the theme. They are united in their call to the churches in Africa to galvanise their members and the larger society to offer effective leadership in addressing the environmental crisis. They wrestle with the biblical, theological, ethical and political justification for the Church's role in responding to the ecological crisis in Africa.

34 Mugambi JNK. 2012. "Theologies of Liberation and Reconstruction", in Conradie EM (ed). *Creation and Salvation: A Companion on Recent Theological Movements*, vol. 2. Zurich: LIT, 326.

35 See, for example, Conradie EM. 2011. "The Church and the Environment: Seven Steps Towards the Sanctification of the Whole Earth", *Scriptura* 107:156-170 [<https://doi.org/10.7833/107-0-133>], and Conradie E. 2016. "Approaches to Religion and the Environment in Africa", in Bongmba EK (ed). *The Routledge Companion to Christianity in Africa*. London: Routledge.

36 Conradie, "Approaches to Religion and the Environment in Africa", 445.

37 Gitau SK. 2000. *The Environmental Crisis: a challenge for African Christianity*. Nairobi: Acton.

38 Kaoma KJ. 2015. *The Creator's Symphony: African Christianity, the Plight of the Earth and the Poor*. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster.

39 Lagat DK. 2019. *Christian Faith and Environmental Stewardship: Theological Foundation for Earth Care*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock.

The contribution of AICs to the conservation of the environment has been popularised by the work of Marthinus Daneel. Daneel built on his long-standing interest in AICs in southern Zimbabwe to mobilise AICs (and traditionalists) to invest in earth care. In the first volume of *African Earthkeepers*, Daneel indicates that he seeks to “describe the religio-ecological rituals evolved in our earthkeeping endeavour and assess some of the main trends of an emerging ecotheology, both traditional and Christian, as they spontaneously and intuitively manifest themselves in ecological action”.⁴⁰ Daneel demonstrates his appreciation for the positive roles of both traditional and Christian resources in preserving the environment. In the second volume of *African Earthkeepers*, he concentrates on the activities of AICs in tree planting and the innovative rituals that have been formulated to support ecological activities in the movement.⁴¹ Daneel’s work has gone a long way in challenging the negative images of AICs in the media and has highlighted their important contribution towards addressing environmental degradation in Zimbabwe.

Pentecostalism has emerged as the fastest growing strand of African Christianity. While other dimensions of African Pentecostalism have received or are receiving scholarly attention, the same is not true of Pentecostalism and the environment. Clarifying the complexity in Pentecostalism, Kenyan religion scholar Loreen Maseno observes that, “Protestantism does not have a single ecotheology, and neither does Pentecostalism. This leaves room for several creative possibilities on the African continent.”⁴² Maseno provides an overview of reactions to the environment in three different Pentecostal churches in Nairobi, drawing attention to the diversity of approaches. However, she concedes that an African Pentecostal ecotheology is yet to emerge.

Writing from Ghana, Ben-Willie Golo, a theologian, draws attention to the point that there is some concern that the prominent role that the theology and gospel of prosperity enjoys in African Pentecostalism can instigate consumption patterns that run contrary to sustainability. However, there is also the recognition that African Pentecostals celebrate the environment, as can be seen in “forest prayer movements, and the purchase of mountains and sublime and remote parts far outside urban areas in order to have spiritual encounters”.⁴³ In another publication, Golo analyses the impact of Africa’s prosperity gospel on the environment.⁴⁴

40 Daneel ML. 1998. *African Earthkeepers*. Volume 1. Interfaith Mission in Earthcare. Pretoria: Unisa, 3.

41 Daneel ML. 1999. *African Earthkeepers*. Volume 2. Environmental Mission and Liberation in Christian Perspective. Pretoria: Unisa.

42 Maseno L. 2017. “Prayer for Rain: A Pentecostal Perspective from Kenya”, *The Ecumenical Review* 69(3):338 [https://doi.org/10.1111/erev.12297].

43 Golo B-WK. 2012. “Creation and Salvation in African Neo-Pentecostalist Theology”, in Conradie. *Creation and Salvation*, vol 2, 336.

44 Golo B-WK. 2013. “Africa’s Poverty and Its Neo-Pentecostal ‘Liberators’: An Ecotheological Assessment of Africa’s Prosperity Gospellers”, *Pneuma* 35(3):336-384 [https://doi.org/10.1163/15700747-12341366].

AFRICAN WOMEN THEOLOGIANS ON THE ENVIRONMENT

African women's theologies have become a key aspect of African theology. African women theologians have recognised the importance of speaking for themselves and refusing to be spoken of as if they were dead.⁴⁵ They have addressed a variety of issues that deny African girls and women the opportunity to have life in abundance. These include oppressive ideologies (and accompanying practices) from patriarchy, harmful cultural practices, unfair global economic systems and others. They have also tackled the issue of environmental degradation and climate change, and how these affect African women.⁴⁶

While generally sharing the same concerns as African male theologians who have reflected on the environment as presented above (including the place of AT/IRs, *ubuntu*, Christian theological ethics, etc.), African women theologians bring a specific gender lens to the discourse. Their major focus is on the impact of environmental degradation on the health and well-being of African women and girls. In particular, they draw attention to the prominent role of women in agriculture and how droughts and unpredictable weather patterns worsen the status of women in African societies. Further, in line with the thrust of ecofeminism, African women theologians writing on the environment consistently evoke the role of Mother Earth. They highlight how patriarchy and capitalism have driven the exploitation of the environment and have downplayed women's principal roles in preserving creation. For example, Fulata Moyo underscores the value of burying the umbilical cord as indicating the tie that one has to Mother Earth.⁴⁷

Isabel Mukonyora has argued that AICs such as the Masowe (white garment churches) provide valuable insights into the formulation of an African ecofeminist theology due to their emphasis on African motherhood and indigenous female images of Mwari (God).⁴⁸ In another essay, Mukonyora explored women and ecology in Shona religion.⁴⁹ This theme of AT/IRs as providing the foundation for formulating a competitive African ecofeminist theology has been taken up by a notable number of African women theologians. African women biblical studies

45 Oduyoye MA and Kanyoro MRA (ed). 1992. *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition, and the Church in Africa*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.

46 For further information on African women theologians, see Conradie EM and Fredericks CE (eds). 2004. *Mapping Systematic Theology in Africa: An Indexed Bibliography*. Stellenbosch: African Sun Media [<https://doi.org/10.18820/9781919980379>].

47 Moyo FL. 2012. "Women as Guardians of Mother Earth", in Conradie, *Creation and Salvation*, vol. 2.

48 Mukonyora I. 2017. "Motherhood and Christ in an African Ecofeminist Theology for Climate Justice", in Kim GJ and Koster HP (ed). *Planetary Solidarity: Global Women's Voices on Christian Doctrine and Climate Justice*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

49 Mukonyora I. 1999. "Women and Ecology in Shona Religion", *Word and World* 19(3):276-284.

scholars such as Musa Dube⁵⁰ and Madipoane Masenya⁵¹ have also contributed to the discourse. They demonstrate how particular readings of the Bible that take into account the lived experience of African women can be liberating.

African women theologians call for the dignity of women in Africa (and globally) to be affirmed, as they simultaneously call for the acknowledgement of the integrity of creation. With “passion and compassion”, they have called upon society in general and the church in particular to pay urgent attention to the destruction of the environment. They are aware of the impact of the destruction of the environment on African women. As part of their commitment towards the total liberation of African women, African women scholars have made an urgent and impassioned call for religious actors to be at the forefront in preserving the environment.

FURTHER REFLECTIONS ON RELIGION AND THE ENVIRONMENT IN AFRICA

As indicated earlier, ecotheology in Africa necessarily takes place in a context characterised by radical pluralism. Thus, in many African contexts, AT/IRs coexist with other religions. These include Islam, religions deriving from Asia and various new religious movements. The religious market in Africa is clearly oversubscribed. However, in addition to dominant Christian perspectives, it is worth paying attention to reflections on religion and the environment emerging from within Islam and Rastafari. Although adopting a global perspective, Ekpenyong Ekpenyong from Nigeria has reflected on the potential that Islam possesses to contribute towards addressing the environmental crisis.⁵² His compatriot, Rafiu Adebayo, while conceding that different religions, including Islam, have posed a danger to the environment, draws attention to the role of Islam in addressing the environmental crisis.⁵³ Muhammed Haron has highlighted the critical role that Islam can play and is playing in Africa’s response to climate change. He maintains that African Muslims have intangible assets that are vital to the struggle against climate change.⁵⁴

One religion that has been understudied and underrated in studies on religion in Africa is Rastafari. In many African contexts, it is marginalised and even demonised by some because of its opposition to Christianity. It is often associated with an

50 Dube MW. 2015. “‘And God Saw that it was Very Good’: An Earth-friendly Theatrical Reading of Genesis 1”, *Black Theology* 13(3):230-246 [https://doi.org/10.1179/1476994815Z.00000000060].

51 Masenya MJ. 2001. “An Ecobosadi Reading of Psalm 127:3-5”, in Habel NC (ed). *The Earth story in the Psalms and the Prophets*. Earth Bible Series. Volume 4. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 109-122.

52 Ekpenyong OE. 2013. “Islam and Global Ecological Crisis”, *International Journal of Asian Social Sciences* 3(7):1591-1596.

53 Adebayo RI. 2013. “Abuse of Religion and Environmental Pollution in Nigeria: An Islamic Perspective”, *Intellectual Discourse* 21(1): 109-121.

54 Haron M. 2017. “Drawing on African Muslims’ Intangible Assets: Doing Jihad against Climate Change”, *The Ecumenical Review* 69(3):348-361 [https://doi.org/10.1111/erev.12298].

anti-establishment approach due to its resistance to “Babylon” or the oppressive global system. Fortune Sibanda, a scholar of religion, has provided valuable reflections on Rastafari attitudes to the environment in Zimbabwe. He has explored how Rastafari beliefs and practices are valuable in promoting effective responses to the environmental emergency.⁵⁵ Sibanda’s work is valuable, as it highlights the capacity of a marginalised religion to respond to the challenges of environmental degradation.

AN EMERGING AFRICAN ECOTHEOLOGY: A PRELIMINARY ASSESSMENT

It is important to acknowledge that African scholars have begun making substantive contributions to the discourse on religion and the climate emergency. This might be due to the existential reality with which African scholars have to wrestle. The impact of the climate emergency is no longer theoretical or abstract for most African scholars: they are experiencing it in their own daily lives: pollution in all its forms in the cities, degradation in the rural areas and irregular weather patterns affecting their own agricultural activities. Consequently, it has become imperative for African scholars of religion to address the issue of the climate emergency in a direct way. To this end, their interventions described in the foregoing sections are noteworthy.

However, some critical remarks are necessary. First, there is limited interaction amongst African scholars writing on religion and the environment. This is not to say that African scholars are not aware of each other’s work, but to indicate that there is scope for much closer interaction, critique and refinement of earlier positions. Thus, there is need for scholars to acknowledge that considerable groundwork has already been laid and that there is need to establish points of concurrence, as well as points of departure in relation to the extant literature on religion and the environment in Africa. More importantly, there is urgent need for activism and practical engagement with the issues. It is not enough to write impressive treatises on religion and the environment when governments, multinational corporations and foreigners are contributing to environmental degradation.

Second, while quite informative, the material on AT/IRs and the environment now runs the risk of becoming uncritical and celebratory. This might sound insensitive, given the systematic exclusion and denial of African ways of knowing due to cultural and religious imperialism. It remains important for African scholars to restate the critical role of indigenous attitudes to nature and how this knowledge must be harnessed for effective responses to the climate emergency. However, many African scholars have tended to repeat the mantra that AT/IRs are ecologically sensitive, without acknowledging the massive changes that have occurred in society. The painful reality is that a number of factors, including colonialism, rapid social change, the population explosion and others have affected AT/IRs’ capacity to protect the environment.

⁵⁵ See, for example, Sibanda F. 2012. “The Impact of Rastafari Ecological Ethic in Zimbabwe: A Contemporary Discourse”, *The Journal of Pan African Studies* 5(3):59-76.

Third, the contribution of African women scholars of religion on the environment deserves closer attention. The struggle for space by African women scholars of religion is real. Patriarchal dominance remains a reality, with many departments of religious studies and cognate fields continuing to have male scholars in the majority. Therefore, when African women scholars reflect on religion and the environment, it is important for their male counterparts to take them seriously. There is need, therefore, for African women scholars of religion's reflections on the environment to be integrated within the field.

Fourth, the radical pluralism characterising the discipline is noteworthy. Africa is home to a multiplicity of religions, including the so-called minority religions. Thus, future researchers need to acknowledge the impact of these religions in the discourses on religion and the environment. The dominance of AT/IRs and Christianity, and to a less extent Islam, must be critiqued. Thus, there is need to appreciate that ecotheology in Africa will, by definition, exude a multi-religious outlook.

Fifth, it is critical for scholars writing in this field to engage with the abiding land question in Africa. In different contexts, politicians have sought to extract capital out of the contestation over land. These could be individuals such as former president Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe, or Julius Malema of South Africa where race is an important factor. In other contexts, ethnicity plays a role in access to land. Contributions to African ecotheology must, therefore, include the political dimension to the land question.

Sixth, African ecotheology needs to open and sustain conversations with African environmental ethics.⁵⁶ There are many shared interests and concerns between the two areas of study. For example, the concept of *ubuntu* features prominently, as well as the concern with utilising African values to preserve the environment. Further, the centrality of African holism in both systems needs further explication in the wake of increasing individualism in Africa.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has provided an overview of African theology's interaction with ecology. The chapter highlights the extent to which African scholars in theology and religious studies have reflected on the environment. Whereas previously only a few scholars were keen to contribute on this theme, it is emerging into a notable dimension of African theology and religious studies. However, it does not yet have a more compact outlook. The chapter has outlined the key voices of African ecotheology, as well as illustrated the key trends and major voices. As the continent continues to struggle with climate change, the discipline's importance will grow and further reflections will be proffered more consistently.

⁵⁶ See, for example, Chemhuru M (ed). 2019. *African Environmental Ethics: A Critical Reader*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer [<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-18807-8>].