


Pursuing fullness of life through harmony with nature: Towards an African response to environmental destruction and climate change in Southern Africa

**Author:**Buhle Mpfu¹ **Affiliation:**

¹Department of Practical Theology and Mission Studies, Faculty of Religion and Theology, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

Corresponding author:

Buhle Mpfu,
buhlem202@yahoo.co.uk

Dates:

Received: 26 Feb. 2021

Accepted: 19 Apr. 2021

Published: 31 May 2021

How to cite this article:

Mpfu, B., 2021, 'Pursuing fullness of life through harmony with nature: Towards an African response to environmental destruction and climate change in Southern Africa', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 77(4), a6574. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v77i4.6574>

Copyright:

© 2021. The Authors.
Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

Read online:

Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

Like the rest of the developed world, African nations are now subject to consumerist tendencies of the global economic architecture and activities, which excessively exploit natural resources for profits and are at the centre of what this article describes as 'disharmony between nature and humanity'. The exploitative nature of consumerist tendencies requires healing and restoration as it leads towards unpredictable and destructive weather patterns in which the relationships between human activity and the environment have created patterns and feedback mechanisms that govern the presence, distribution and abundance of species assemblages. Disharmony is employed to describe the exploitative nature of consumerist tendencies that lead to unpredictable weather patterns. The consequences include climate change and natural disasters such as floods, drought and environmental pollution, which have been severely experienced in Southern Africa recently. This article provides a qualitative literature review on recent religious and ecumenical responses to climate change crisis and draws on the notions of 'cultural landscapes' and 'ecothology' to highlight an exploitative relationship, which is characterised by disharmony in the relationship between humanity and nature. This illustration demonstrates how the concept of unity between 'self and the entire *Kosmos*' in African worldview presents a potentially constructive African theology of ecology. Amongst other recommendations, the article proposed that in order for humanity to restore harmony and attain fullness of life – *oikodome* – with nature the notions of healing, reconciliation, liberation and restoration should be extended to human relations or interactions with nature and all of God's creation.

Contribution: This article represents a contextual and systematic reflection on climate challenges facing the African context within a paradigm in which the intersection of philosophy, religious studies, social sciences, humanities and natural sciences generates an interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary contested discourse.

Keywords: care of creation; fullness of life; healing; restoration; nature; eco-theology; cultural landscapes.

Introduction

This article discusses recent ecumenical trends in responses to environment destruction, climate change and care for environment as part of exploring the mission of the churches in southern Africa. The article first provides a qualitative literature review on recent religious and ecumenical responses to climate change crisis and draws on the notions of 'cultural landscapes' and 'ecothology' to highlight the exploitative relationship between nature and humanity with a view to demonstrate the need for healing, restoration and reconciliation. As Sheryl Haw (2021) has rightly observed:

... Integral mission is not just evangelism and good works, it is the pursuit of justice, the persistence towards peace and reconciliation, the care of creation, the liberation, healing, restoration of all things in heaven and earth in Christ (Colossians 1:20). It is obedience to Jesus and following his way of love ... (p. 1)

To describe mission as 'the pursuit of justice' and to incorporate 'the care of creation' as an extension of evangelism has implications on how human interactions with nature should be understood. This is profoundly revealing, given that Christian evangelism has often tended to focus on spiritual redemption for humanity and neglected the physical aspects of human interactions with nature. By highlighting that evangelism is also about '... the persistence towards

Note: Special Collection: Theology, Economy and Environment: Social, Cultural and Biotic Influences on Religious Communities, sub-edited by Jerry Pillay (University of Pretoria).

peace and reconciliation, the care of creation, the liberation, healing, restoration of all things in heaven and earth in Christ', Haw (2021) brings our attention to the fundamental aspects of truly pursuing justice – for justice is not just a matter of peace and reconciliation amongst human beings – but it is also the liberation and restoration of the relationship between humanity and the created order of the universe. These observations underscore the significance of broadening the scope of mission and evangelism to include the broader pursuit of fullness of life for all of God's creation and therefore, examining human relations with nature becomes central to our responses to climate change.

In one of the World Council of Churches (WCC 2017) publications dedicated for reflections on *Praying for rain? African perspectives on religion and climate change* editorial preamble observed:

There is ample evidence that various regions of the African continent will be adversely and disproportionately affected by climate change. Many scholars have contributed to ongoing reflection on climate change in Africa, but relatively few voices have addressed the interface between religion and climate change from the African context. (eds. Brown, Chitando & Conradie 2017:311)

This was a clarion invitation for faith communal action to respond to the devastating impact of climate change and natural disasters. Although not focussing solely on the interface between faith action and climate change, we have seen a number of laudable attempts to globally tackle climate change from different perspectives such as 'Environmental Sustainability and Eco-Justice' (Anim 2019); *End-Times Theology, the Shadow of the Future and Public Resistance to Addressing Global Climate Change* (Barker & Bearce 2013); whilst some have explored the intersecting complexities of climate change and Christian religious practices with regard to environmental destruction, ecological and economic (in)justices and sustainability (Conradie, Mtetwa & Warmback 2002; De Gruchy 2015; Oikos Study Group 2006); and other scholars have approached religion as a resource of ecological praxis and ethos (ed. Altner 1989; Liedke 1979; Moltmann 1985) or debates on relationship between religion and ecology (Conradie 2011; Ives 2016; SACC 2009).

The interface between religion and climate change has also dominated scholarly research focussing on norms, practices, traditions and activism of faith communities (eds. Binay & Korchide 2019; Hancock 2018) as reflected in contributions such as *Religion and Ecology in the Public Sphere* (Deane-Drummond & Bedford-Strohm 2013); *Worldviews Religion and Environment* (ed. Foltz 2003; ed. Gottlieb 2006; Jenkins, Tucker & Grim 2016); *Christian Perspectives for a culture of sustainability* (Heidel & Bertelmann 2018). Some have explored environmental sustainability from a theological perspective (Vogt 2009); *Ecological Imaginations in the World Religions* (eds. Tucker & Grim 2014; Watling 2009); *Land, Ecotheology and Traditions in Africa* (Ntrel, Aidoo & Aryeh

2019); *Worldly Wonder: Religions Enter their Ecological Phase* (Tucker 2003); *Towards and African ecogender theology* (Kaunda 2016); *what does religion have to say about ecology?* (Beyers 2016) and works that demonstrate how all things in life are connected to God such as An exploration of the idea of economy in Calvin's view of God and the world 'to show what implications the idea of oikodome has for churches in South Africa today, especially in the context of poverty and struggle' (Pillay 2015:1).

This article builds on the given notions to further explore the relationship between humanity and nature as means to attain the fullness of life – *oikodome* – through healing, liberation, reconciliation and restoration as the idea that could help communities to care for environment. In order to achieve this task, the article employed the notions of cultural landscapes and Ecotheology to highlight what is identified as disharmony, which characterises the relationship between humanity and nature.

Cultural landscapes and Ecotheology

As I have already alluded to, this article drew on the concepts of 'cultural landscapes' and 'Ecotheology' to discuss the need for a harmonious relationship between nature and humanity as a response to environmental destruction and climate change. According to the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO: no date) the term 'cultural landscape' embraces a diversity of manifestations of the interaction between humankind and its natural environment and is used in the fields of Geography, Ecology and Heritage Studies, to describe a symbiosis of human activity and environment. Ecotheology is understood as 'the integration of the new scientific perspective on the natural world with traditional theological concepts, producing a new theological paradigm' (Troster 2013:382). Scholars in the field of anthropology employ the 'concept of cultural landscapes' to reflect on the multifaceted links between people, place and identity. In defining the concept of cultural landscapes, Farina (2000:320) observed that in cultural ecology, this concept often refers to geographic area '... in which the relationships between human activity and the environment have created ... patterns and feedback mechanisms that govern the presence, distribution and abundance of species assemblages' (Farina 2000:320).

Scholars in the field of anthropology employ the 'concept of cultural landscapes' to reflect on the multifaceted links between people, place and identity. Therefore, integrating the new scientific perspectives on the natural world with traditional African and theological concepts can help us produce a new theological paradigm as Troster (2013:382) observed. As a 'constructive theology', 'Ecotheology' should facilitate the interrelationships between humanity and nature as means to explore African community based, life affirming and transformative responses to environmental destruction and enhance *oikodome*.

Troster (2013) understood Ecotheology as ‘the integration of the new scientific perspective on the natural world with traditional theological concepts, producing a new theological paradigm’ (p. 382). Whilst drawing on this definition, this article approaches Ecotheology from the perspective of ‘constructive theology’ (Grau & Wyman 2020), which focusses on the interrelationships between humanity and nature as means to explore African community based, life affirming and transformative responses to environmental destruction and climate change.

Wyman (2017) understood constructive theology to be:

[A] method of doing Christian theology that takes seriously theological and church traditions as well as modern critiques of that tradition being something universal, eternal, or essential; it employs traditional themes and loci of theology in order to formulate useful, inclusive, fallible guidance for living as Christians in the contemporary world, against descriptions of a systematic theological system that pretend to unveil any true essence of essential reality of Christianity; and takes as it[s] mode a goodfaith engagement with parallel academic disciplines, often religious studies; an activist/crisis confrontation; or, ideally, both. (p. 2)

Contextual reality

In our contemporary world of turmoil and destruction from both natural and human-induced disasters, there is an urgent need for a ‘useful, inclusive, fallible guidance for Christian living’ beyond the traditional theological and systematic engagement. New challenges such as climate change, require new approaches. In recent years, most parts in southern Africa have experienced severe droughts and floods with catastrophic consequences, which threaten the livelihoods of the poor. According to the Luo et al. (2015):

Climate change is a greater driver of change in population exposure to river floods than socioeconomic development, because both the frequency and intensity of river floods is expected to increase due to climate change in many areas. This phenomenon would expand flood-prone areas, and make floods more likely to occur in those areas more often. (p. 1)

In a report listing countries with the most people exposed to river flooding, Luo et al. (2015:1) identified 15 countries most at risk of flooding and observed that ‘[b]y 2030, 48 500 more people could face river flood risk and 87% of that difference would be driven by climate change’ (Luo et al. 2015:1). Although some affected countries did not appear in this report, the projections are a warning that in the near future, the world will experience more violent storms and unpredictable weather patterns, which will lead to droughts and other natural disasters.

For example, detailing the impact of climate change on the Colorado River, Kloop (2021) states that between the years 1913 and 2017, the flow of the river is estimated to have lost about 20% of its capacity. Colorado River is one of the important sources of water in the United States, as it stretches through the Rocky Mountains of Colorado through to the western Gulf of California. Its flow has been hugely impacted

by climate change (Kloop 2021:1). Given that the river extends for 2330 km, it is a source of water to about 40 million people that live in the cities of Denver, Las Vegas and Los Angeles, amongst others. These communities could face water shortages as the river flow keeps changing with sea levels rising much faster than previously thought. According to this study (Kloop 2021), 40% of the world’s population living in coastal regions is at high risk as their livelihoods are impacted with devastating consequences. Together with the veld fires, storms and other natural disasters that the world has experienced recently, these excessive weather patterns reaffirm the importance of tackling greenhouse gas emissions to avoid catastrophic climate damage such as floods or tidal surges and other disasters to humanity.

The African continent has not been spared the effects of this phenomenon as most communities are reeling under harsh climatic conditions and destructive industrial activities, which have polluted dams and rivers. Despite this gloomy reality, there has been commendable efforts to promote sustainable mining activities in Africa such as those advocated by International Finance Corporation, World Bank Group (2014). The region is now prone to harsh weather conditions, floods, drought and excessive heat and storms. Some African communities are living in fear of being driven out of their land and livelihoods as a result of climate change and mining or industrial activities.

Africa is a vast continent and so the impact of climate change has been disproportionately felt in different parts of communities – here only a few examples are cited from the southern African perspective:

[N]ot any one African experience is the same. We are a diverse continent full of vibrant cultures. You can see it in the way we talk, the way we live and the way we dance to the beat of our drums ... (Kenyan Airways 2019:1)

The given message is artistically inscribed on the in-flight meal box of Kenyan Airways (2019). This brand articulately captures the diversity and pluralistic realities within African life, something that reminds us that we require diverse methods to respond to challenges posed by climate change.

In Southern Africa, the recent impact of climate change has been associated with El Nino drought, which devastated the region in 2015 and impacted the livelihoods of people in Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Malawi and Zambia. The region later had to contend with:

[C]yclone Dineo which left a trail of destruction in Mozambique, [with] half of the town of Wolmaransstad in North-west province [having] to be evacuated after a dam wall threatened to collapse due to floods ... (Conradie 2017:319)

Until today, South Africa’s Western and Eastern Capes have had a series of droughts and veld fires have become a natural phenomenon during summer and these frequent fires may have a negative effect on biodiversity and water supplies [and] dam levels have been critically low (Conradie 2017:318).

One example of environmental challenges in southern Africa is Musakwa, Mpofo and Nyathi (2020) in their work *Local Community Perceptions on Landscape Change, Ecosystem Services, Climate Change, and Livelihoods in Gonarezhou National Park, Zimbabwe* as they confirmed that:

'... there was a negative transformation of the landscape as a result of agriculture, growth in settlements, and large herbivores ... [and] Challenges such as soil erosion, human-wildlife conflict, and minimal community benefits from conservation efforts hindered sustainable development ... While changes in landscape, climate, livelihoods, and ecosystem services happened at a local scale, the underlying drivers such as politics and the economy were also identified as drivers of landscape change.' (p. 1).

It is therefore important to acknowledge that these natural phenomena have been compounded by destructive industrial activities, which result in the pollution of environment.

In south Africa, the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC 2021) recently published a report lamenting how the Vaal River system has been polluted. According to Gilili (2021), one of the major oil companies, SASOL is to be investigated for polluting the river on which approximately 19 million people depend for drinking water and commercial use, is polluted 'beyond acceptable standards' (SAHRC 2021). The cause of this pollution is the:

[K]ilometres of untreated sewage flowing [and] entering the Vaal because of inoperative and dilapidated wastewater treatment plants which have been unable to properly process sewage and other wastewater produced in Emfuleni, and from the city of Johannesburg metropolitan municipality (including waste from industrial activity) that is also directed towards the waste water systems situated in the Emfuleni municipality. (SHRC 2021:1)

Although this spill is not directly linked to climate change, it does reflect how industrial activities not only generate carbon emissions, which deplete the ozone layer, but also cause devastating environmental damage especially where such industrial waste is toxic and poorly managed. These are all the results of a consumerist global society that thrives on exploitation of natural resources and destruction of indigenous livelihoods, which sustain communities. This is consistent with what Bauman (2007) observed:

... contemporary society relates to its members primarily as consumers, and only secondarily, and in part, involves them also as producers ... The poor and the idlers, those who have neither a decent income, or credit cards, nor the prospect of better days, are not up to these requirements. Consequently, the rule broken by the poor today, the violation of the rule distinguishes them and tags them as abnormal, ... The poor of today (i.e. those that constitute a problem for others) are first and foremost consumers rather than unemployed people. They are defined primarily by the fact of being bad consumers: indeed, the most basic of social obligations, which they do not comply, is the duty to be active and effective purchasers of goods and services offered by the market. (Bauman 2007:157)

Given that this article identifies the exploitative nature of consumerist tendencies and disharmony as it leads towards unpredictable and destructive weather patterns in which the

relationships between human activity and the environment have created patterns and feedback mechanisms that govern the presence, distribution and abundance of species assemblages – there is a link between the destructive global economic activities and the current environmental destruction that has resulted in extreme weather conditions and climate change. Therefore, in order to reverse destructive environmental practices and respond to climate change towards attainment of fullness of life, African communities should strive for harmony with nature – and all of God's creation – in a manner that reflects the African communal life. In my view, this is where African 'cultural landscapes' are instrumental in facilitating embracing of diversity in manifestations of the interaction between humankind and our natural environment as it best describes a [harmonious] symbiosis of human activity and environment. The cultural landscape best articulates the convergence between human relations and ecology, in ways that enhance harmony and restore justice in human interactions with nature. Protestantism has been found wanting within the ecotheological context because of loss of its sense of the sacred (Van Dyk 2010:1). Therefore, protestant theology should be reformed and transformed towards a constructive theology, which takes seriously:

... theological and church traditions as well as modern critiques ... in order to formulate useful, inclusive, fallible guidance for living as Christians in the contemporary world, ... and take [...] as it[s] mode a goodfaith engagement with parallel academic disciplines, often religious studies; an activist/crisis confrontation; or, ideally, both. (Wayman 2017:2)

Such transformation requires a praxis that does not alienate the spiritual from the physical. This is where an African understanding of God's created order has a significant role to play within the broader context of an Africa Christian response to climate change. One example of how such convergence between human relations and ecology can be explored in ways that enhance harmony and restore justice in human interactions with nature is reflected in the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) programme of Climate Change under *Peace, Diakonia and Development* within its strategic plan (AACC 2019:13). This document outlines key strategic areas through programmatic goals and interventions, the member churches to promote the use of renewable energy and amongst other things: '... educate members churches on the challenge of environmental and climate Justice and the imperatives of an eco-theology in African contexts ... [by] address[ing] issues of land and water justice, creatively engage with UN Agenda 2030 and African Union Agendas 2063 ...' (AACC 2019:13).

Ironically, the AACC Strategic Plan document links ethical decision-making with corruption in the context of environmental destruction and by implication, AACC affirms that the challenge of climate change emanates from human greed through unethical means of environmental exploitation and these can only be rectified through 'reverse order' where humanity must restore just and ethical relationships, not just with each other, but also with nature.

As I have suggested, restoration of a harmonious relationships broadens the concept of peace and reconciliation to include human relationships with nature. Some programmatic pillars and interventions identified by AACC extend to the following key focus areas:

- encourage churches to have disaster preparedness and management systems (effective early warning systems)
- assist the churches to play a proactive role in preventing potential conflicts (e.g. related to land, water and other natural resources)
- facilitate reconciliation and mediation initiatives
- encourage the churches to include the issue of migration and human trafficking in the church agenda (AACC 2019:12).

In a way that resonates with what this article identified as a harmonious relationship between humanity and nature, embracing the idea of harmony will ensure that we do not isolate natural disasters from the socio-economic disruptions, which are a result of unethical economic practices such as pollution of rivers and emission of excessive carbon because of unregulated economic activities. When multinational companies destroy the environment in pursuit of profits, it is often the poor communities who suffer the consequences as their livelihoods are destroyed and they experience poor health, drought, severe weather conditions, floods and displacement. Therefore, approaching religion as a resource of ecological praxis and ethos becomes critical as some scholars have demonstrated in their works (ed. Altner 1989; Liedke 1979; Moltmann 1985). It is not enough to only pray for rain (eds. Brown et al. 2017) but there has to be concerted efforts towards locating Religious Agency in Sustainability Transitions through *Innovation and Societal Transitions* (Köhrsen 2018). Such religious agency in environmental sustainability and transitions must link the human conditions to violent and unethical economic and environmental practices.

Similarly, as part of its Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace program, the World Council of Churches (WCC 2017) has invited its member churches to:

[W]ork together in a common quest, renewing the true vocation of the church through collaborative engagement with the most important issues of justice and peace, healing a world filled with conflict, injustice and pain. (p. 441)

This call recognises that healing of the world hinges on the prospects of peace and justice. In this regard, there is a need for churches to raise awareness regarding the impact on climate change in ways that help faith communities to appreciate the complex relationship between socio-economic and environmental issue affecting African communities and become 'people who know the story they are part of ...' (Wright 2010:35). Wright (2010) is one of the scholars who understood God's people as 'people who care for creation' and places emphasis on redemption as God's plan for 'all of God's creation'. For example, this hermeneutical approach is demonstrated in the way he interprets the following scriptures:

The Lord took the man and put him (*sic*) in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it (Gen 2:15)

Here we find two more verbs to describe the mission of human beings. God took the human creature he had made and put him in the special environment within the earth that he had made – the garden in Eden – with a simple task: *to serve it and keep it*. That is the simplest meaning of the two verbs ... [T]he verb 'to serve', with the connotation of doing hard work in the process of serving. So, although most translations render it in this verse with meanings like 'to work it', to 'till it', or 'to cultivate it', the essential core of the word still has the sense of serving. Humans are servants of creation, and that is the way they are to exercise their kingship over it. (Wright 2010:51)

To serve and to keep the earth means that God entrusted humanity as stewards of this creation. The meticulous exegesis of the passages is outstanding and the biblical theology of the Church's mission presented in this book is holistic – approaching all human endeavours from the perspective of God's plan for all of creation. Wright develops his theology of the People of God's mission around themes such as *For God, For Us. Forever* (p. 52); *God's Glory is the Goal of Creation* (p. 53); *Human Life and Creation Are Integrally Bound Together* (p. 54); *The Earth Suffers with US* (p. 55) and *God's Redemption Includes Creation* (p. 55). For Wright (2010):

Creation is not just the disposable backdrop to the lives of human creatures ... we are not redeemed out of creation, but ... part of redeemed creation itself ... God will vindicate the oppressed, restore wholesome relationships, and bring peace and justice to earth. (p. 56)

Whilst all these themes are relevant, it is the last two aspects that drive home some points, which resonate well with this study; God's redemption includes creation and by extension, when the earth (creation) suffers – we also suffer with it because 'we are not redeemed out of creation'. His emphasis of humanity being a part of redeemed creation demonstrates how his theology links human life and the created universe as integrally 'bound together' in the broader scheme of God's created universe. It is for this reason that this article explores the possibility of a world reconciled with itself through harmonious relationships with all things in a manner that seeks restoration of peace and justice with all of God's creation. The relationship between religion and ecology deserves further exploration, especially in the African context where there is a strong conviction that humanity and nature are inextricably bound together. Just like the faith communities had an important role to play during the truth and reconciliation process in South Africa (Meiring 2005), faith communities can also play a key role in reconciling humanity with God's creation today.

African communal life as a resource for *oikodome*

In Africa, the concept of a communal life is based on an African worldview, which places emphasis on 'umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu' (lit: 'a person is a person because of other people'), a construction that views people not as

individuals, but individuals only in relationship to the community and the world of nature around them. The word *ubuntu* basically means humanity and for purposes of this study, the concept refers to the collective unity between humanity, their spirituality and the material world. This unity extends beyond human relations to incorporate nature, as Forster (2010) rightly observed:

... [T]he essential unity between self and others, as well as the self and the entire *Kosmos*, is a vitally important aspect in relating the African world view to an integrated approach to consciousness. (p. 82)

He buttresses this argument by drawing on other scholars to highlight how God maintains 'an orderly and harmonious world' within the African worldview:

The universe itself 'comprising both seen and unseen reality (spirit beings, human beings, plants, animals, mountains, waters, stellar bodies, and all) is a whole, a community with symbolic influences and relationships. It is also commonly believed that, through the laws of nature and various spiritual forces, as well as human customs and institutions, God sustains and upholds the world. Thus, he maintains an orderly and harmonious world so that all can perform their own duties in it.' (Foster 2010:83)

Therefore, in order to maintain harmony in creation, humanity should seek to live respectfully not just with one another, but with all living things (both those that are seen and those that are not seen), this is to say, all creation must enjoy peace and order with each other – human being, plants, animals, rivers, seas and all – and the unseen world – the ancestors and spirit beings and God. This is the reason that in Africa, there are times when it is necessary for individuals, families or community groups to perform certain rituals as a way to restore the equilibrium in creation or to influence change in a particular state of affairs – this is considered as seeking of healing, or reconciliation, prosperity, asking for a blessing, or even seeking guidance (Kudadjie & Osei 2004:37 in Foster 2010).

Fullness of life: A model for harmony with nature

The 'concept of cultural landscapes' is useful to reflect on the multifaceted links between people, place and identity '... in which the relationships between human activity and the environment have created... patterns and feedback mechanisms that govern the presence, distribution and abundance of species assemblages' (Farina 2000:320). As I have highlighted, integrating the new scientific perspectives on the natural world with traditional African and theological concepts can help us to produce a new theological paradigm towards a 'constructive Ecotheology', which could facilitate the interrelationships between humanity and nature as means to explore African community based, life affirming and transformative responses to environmental destruction.

Given that in Africa people are not considered individually, but in relationship with the community, the world of nature around them and the unseen spiritual beings or God, it is important to highlight that this understanding of *ubuntu*

underscores the collective unity between humanity, their spirituality and the material world around them. For Africans, '... the essential unity between self, others, as well as the entire *Kosmos*, is a vitally important aspect ...' (Foster 2010:82). Such a holistic understanding of God's created order places humanity at the centre of having dominion (Genesis 1:26) in a way that is sustainable and fruitful (Genesis 1:28) so that the blessing of God extends through all creation. This is what God saw '... it was very good' (Gn 1:31).

Recommendations

- Although it is possible that western and African epistemologies can mutually enhance life affirming practices towards environmental care, there is a need for African communities to promote non-Western epistemologies by teaching indigenous environmental conservation measures through farming practices, reducing carbon emissions and keeping seas and rivers unpolluted as part of Ecotheology.
- African churches can play a more transformative role in raising awareness and developing faith-based initiatives in response to climate change.
- Theological reflection and missional practices for local churches should emphasise the integral link and connection between human activities and nature as a single entity of God's creation whose destiny is bound together in the broader plan of God's redemption.
- We also need to consider integrating environmental justice issues within the broader framework of peace, reconciliation and development agenda in our engagement with local communities.
- Although this was not a method used and explained in this article, faith-based interventions to climate change should be multi-dialogical and draw not just from scriptures but also engage other disciplines through interdisciplinary studies and community-based [with emphasis on Communalism – one of the three Ubuntu values] initiatives in partnership with government, private companies and other stake holders committed to sustainable development and ecological justice.
- Lastly, all stakeholders should engage in advocacy raising awareness and engaging companies that cause environmental damage through local clean-up programmes and demand restorative justice and compensation claims for communities whose livelihoods have been destroyed by unethical industrial activities.

Conclusion

The thesis of this article is that nature has become violent with humanity, because we have been violent with nature. The implications of this is that destructive human activities lead to destructive natural disasters. It is my view that excessive and exploitative human economic activities affect harmony in nature – and all things are competing or at war with each other and humanity is at the centre of this disharmony. In order to address this exploitative relationship, the article highlighted the need for African communities to

draw on notions of African values to restore harmony with nature as illustrated on the concept of unity between humanity and the entire *Kosmos* in African worldview – an idea which presents a potentially constructive African ecotheology. The article highlighted exploitative relationship between humanity and nature to demonstrate disharmony and illustrate how the concept of unity between ‘self and the entire *Kosmos*’ in African worldview presents a potentially constructive African theology of ecology. Recommendations were made and amongst them, article proposed that in order for humanity to restore harmony and attain fullness of life – *oikodome* – with nature; the notions of healing, reconciliation, liberation and restoration should be extended to human relations or interactions with nature and all of God’s creation.

Acknowledgements

The author is indebted to the Faculty of Theology and Religion at the University of Pretoria for identifying Fullness of Life as one of the Faculty themes which inspired this contribution.

Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationships, which may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

Author’s contributions

Buhle Mpofu is the sole author of this research article.

Ethical consideration

Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of Pretoria Faculty of Theology and Religion Research Committee – T027/20.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this article. Data which were collected through a questionnaire cleared by the research committee are yet to be received and analysed.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

References

- All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC), 2019, *AACC strategy: 2019–2023*, AACC Publications, Nairobi.
- Altner, G. (ed.), 1989, *Ökologische theologie: Perspektiven zur Orientierung*, Kreuz, Stuttgart.

- Anim, E., 2019, ‘Environmental sustainability and eco-justice. Reflections from an African Pentecostal’, in L. Andrianos, M. Biehl, R. Gütter, J. Motte, A. Parlindungan, T. Sandner et al. (eds.), *Kairos for creation: Confessing hope for the Earth, The Wuppertal Call – Contributions and recommendations from an international conference on eco-theology and ethics of sustainability*, Wuppertal, Germany, 16–19 June 2019, Foedus-Verlag, Solingen, pp. 107–119.
- Barker, D.C. & Bearce, D.H., 2013, ‘End-times theology, the shadow of the future, and public resistance to addressing global climate change’, *Political Research Quarterly* 66(2), 267–279. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1065912912442243>
- Bauman, Z., 2007, *Consuming life*, Polity Press, Cambridge.
- Beyers, J., 2016, ‘What does religion have to say about ecology? A new appraisal of naturalism’, *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies* 15, 96–119.
- Binay, S. & Khorchide, M. (eds.), 2019, *Islamische Umwelttheologie. Ethik, Norm, Praxis*, Herder Verlag, Freiburg.
- Brown, S.G., Chitando, E. & Conradie, E. (eds.), 2017, ‘Praying for rain? African perspectives on religion and climate change’, *The Ecumenical Review* 69(3), 425–435. <https://doi.org/10.1111/erev.12304>
- Conradie, E., 2017, ‘Praying for rain? Reformed perspectives from the Southern African context’, in S.G. Brown, E. Chitando & E. Conradie (eds.), *Praying for rain? African perspectives on religion and climate change*, *The Ecumenical Review* 69(3), 315–326. <https://doi.org/10.1111/erev.12295>
- Conradie, E.M., 2011, ‘Knowledge for sale? The impact of a consumerist hermeneutics on learning habits and teaching practices’, *Koers* 76(3), 423–447. <https://doi.org/10.4102/koers.v76i3.36>
- Conradie, E.M., Mtetwa, S. & Warmback, A. (eds.), 2002, *The land is crying for justice: A discussion document on Christianity and environmental justice in South Africa*, Ecumenical Foundation of Southern Africa, Stellenbosch.
- Deane-Drummond, C. & Bedford-Strohm, H., 2013, *Religion and ecology in the public sphere*, T & T Clark, London.
- De Gruchy, S., 2015, *Keeping body and soul together: Reflections by Steve de Gruchy on theology and development*, Cluster Publications, Pietermaritzburg.
- Farina, A., 2000, ‘The cultural landscape as a model for integration of ecology and economics’, *Bioscience* 50, 313–320. [https://doi.org/10.1641/006-3568\(2000\)050\[0313:TCLAAM\]2.3.CO;2](https://doi.org/10.1641/006-3568(2000)050[0313:TCLAAM]2.3.CO;2)
- Foltz, R. (ed.), 2003, *Worldviews, religion, and the environment: A global anthology*, Thomson/Wadsworth, Belmont, CA.
- Forster, D.A., 2010, ‘A generous ontology: Identity as a process of intersubjective discovery. An African theological contribution’, *THS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 66(1), Art.#731, 12 pages. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v66i1.731>
- Gillili, C., 2021, ‘Sasol plant to be investigated for air pollution blanketing Gauteng’, *Mail and Guardian*, 18 February 2021, viewed 19 February 2021, from <https://mg.co.za/environment/2021-02-18-sasol-plant-to-be-investigated-for-the-air-pollution-blanketing>.
- Gottlieb, R.S. (ed.), 2006, *The Oxford handbook of religion and ecology*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Grau, M. & Wyman, J. (eds.), 2020, *What is constructive theology?: Histories, methodologies, and perspectives*, T and T Clark Publishing, London.
- Hancock, R., 2018, *Islamic environmentalism: Activism in the United States and Great Britain*, Routledge, New York, NY.
- Haw, S., 2021, *Micah global mission*, viewed 26 February 2021, from www.micahglobal.com.
- Heidel, K. & Bertelmann, B. (eds.), 2018, *Leben im Anthropozän: Christliche Perspektiven für eine Kultur der Nachhaltigkeit*, oekom verlag, Munich.
- International Finance Corporation, World Bank Group, 2014, *Sustainable and responsible mining in Africa – A getting started guide*, viewed 26 February 2021, from <https://www.ifc.org/wps/wcm/connect/14d1fb8c-8d63-47c9-acb7-35b20a488ff2/Sustainable+Mining+in+Africa.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CVID=knWL6Rr>.
- Jenkins, W., Tucker, M.E. & Grim, J., 2016, *Routledge handbook of religion and ecology*, Routledge, New York, NY.
- Ives, C., 2016, A mixed Dharmic Bag: Debates about Buddhism and ecology’, in W.J. Jenkins, M.E. Tucker & J. Grim (eds.), *Routledge handbook of religion and ecology*, Routledge, New York, NY.
- Kaunda, C., 2016, ‘Towards an African ecogender theology: A decolonial theological perspective’, *Stellenbosch Theological Journal (STJ)* 2(1), 177. <https://doi.org/10.17570/stj.2016.v2n1.a09>
- Kenyan Airways, 2019, *Message on the inflight meal box, seen inflight* _____, King James Version, Life Application Study Bible (1989), Tyndale House Publishers.
- Kloop, F., 2021, *Climate change is drying up Colorado River*, viewed 06 February 2021, from <https://www.zmescience.com/science/climate-change-is-drying-up-the-colorado-river/>.
- Köhrsen, J., 2018, ‘Religious agency in sustainability transitions: Between experimentation, upscaling, and regime support’, *Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions* 27, 4–15. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eist.2017.09.003>
- Liedke, G., 1979, *Im Bauch des Fisches: Ökologische Theologie*, Kreuz Verlag, Stuttgart.
- Luo, T., Maddocks, A., Iceland, C., Ward, P. & Winsemius, H., 2015, *World’s 15 countries with the most people exposed to river floods*, World Resources Institute (WRI), viewed 23 February 2012, from <https://www.wri.org/blog/2015/03/world-s-15-countries-most-people-exposed-river-floods>.
- Meiring, P.G.J., 2005, ‘Truth and reconciliation in South Africa: The role of the faith communities’, *Verbum et Ecclesia* 26(1), 146–173. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v26i1.217>

- Moltmann, J., 1985, *Gott in der Schöpfung: Ökologische Schöpfungslehre*, Kaiser, Munich.
- Musakwa, W., Mpofu, E. & Nyathi, N.A., 2020, 'Local community perceptions on landscape change, ecosystem services, climate change, and livelihoods in Gonarezhou National Park, Zimbabwe', *Sustainability* 2020(12), 2–19.
- Ntshong, B.A., Aidoo, M.S. & Aryeh, D.N.A. (eds.), 2019, *Essays on the land, ecotheology, and traditions in Africa*, Resource Publications, Eugene, OR.
- Oikos Study Group, 2006, *The Oikos journey: A theological reflection on the ecological crisis in South Africa*, The Diakonia Council of Churches, Durban, on behalf of the Oikos Study Group, Durban.
- Pillay, J., 2015, 'An exploration of the idea of eodomy in Calvin's view of God and the world: Its implications for churches in South Africa today', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 36(3), Art. #1474. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v36i3.1474>
- South African Council of Churches (SACC), Climate Change Committee, 2009, *Climate change: A challenge to the churches in South Africa*, SACC, Marshalltown.
- South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC), 2021, *Vaal river pollution is beyond acceptable levels*, viewed 19 February 2021, from <https://www.timeslive.co.za/news/south-africa/2021-02-17-vaal-river-polution-is-beyond-acceptable-levels-sahrc/>.
- Troster, L., 2013, 'What is eco-theology?', *Cross Currents* 63(4), 380–385. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cros.12043>
- Tucker, M.E., 2003, *Worldly wonder: Religions enter their ecological phase*, Open Court, Peru, IL.
- Tucker, M.E. & Grim, J. (eds.), 2014, *Religions of the world and ecology book series*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.
- United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), n.d., *Cultural landscapes*, viewed 16 April 2021, from <https://whc.unesco.org/en/culturallandscape/>.
- Van Dyk, P.J., 2010, 'Eco-theology and losing the sacred', *Old Testament Essays* 23(3), 822–833.
- Vogt, M., 2009, *Prinzip Nachhaltigkeit: Ein Entwurf aus theologisch-ethischer Perspektive*, oekom verlag, Munich.
- Watling, T., 2009, *Ecological imaginations in the world religions: An ethnographic analysis*, Continuum, London.
- World Council of Churches (WCC), 2017, *Pilgrimage for justice and peace*, viewed 26 February 2021, from <https://archived.oikoumene.org/en/what-we-do/pilgrimage-of-justice-and-peace>.
- Wright, C.J.H., 2010, *The mission of God's people*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Wyman, J.A., 2017, *Constructing constructive theology: An introductory sketch*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN.