

Creation Care in Africa: Theology, Practice and Intercultural Dialogue

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This article reports on a recent 'Creation Care'- themed conference for evangelical church leaders and environmental practitioners in East and Central Africa. It offers some reflections regarding ecotheology and Western Christian responses to the challenges of climate change and environmental degradation. The importance of international, faith-based dialogue about these issues is becoming increasingly recognised, and Christians have a crucial role to play both in the dialogue and the practical response that must result from it.

Introduction

The field of Christian ecotheology is relatively recent, having been primarily developed during the last thirty-five to forty years.¹ In his article 'Towards an Agenda for Ecological Theology', Ernst Conradie states that over the last few decades North American, German and British scholars have clearly led the way in academic discourse on ecological theology.² Whilst acknowledging that this may be an appropriate theological response from the context of affluent countries that have a sizeable environmental impact, Conradie entreats us not to undervalue the many significant contributions to a Christian ecotheology that have emerged from other parts of the world. Conradie's definition of ecotheology is focuses on both *retrieval* and *renewal*. It is 'an attempt to retrieve the ecological wisdom in Christianity as a response to environmental threats and injustice. At the same time, it is also an attempt to reinvestigate, rediscover and renew the Christian tradition in the light of the challenges posed by the environmental crisis'.³ Majority World communities often have considerable ecological wisdom both articulated and unarticulated, found in local cultures and languages, in regional contexts, bioregions, gender perspectives, and theological traditions.⁴

For Ross Langmead, ecotheology is not merely 'a theology of nature, a creation-oriented theology, or a response to the environmental crisis'.⁵ Instead it is a *method* of doing theology, as well as focussing on specific theological *content*, and it is linked to the particular environmental *location* from which it emerges.⁶

Voices beyond the West

In 2012 I sought to follow Conradie's suggestion by researching the work of scholars from parts of Asia, Latin America, Africa and the Pacific to discover where their ecological discourse differs from that of their Western counterparts and find perspectives and challenges which need to be brought to the attention of environmentally-conscious Christians in the West. It became clear during the course of my research that the extent of *what* Western ecotheologists can learn from Majority World theologians is dictated by *how* the knowledge is learned. In order for their work to be published at all, and particularly in English, they often had moved to Western countries to pursue academic careers, inevitably distancing them from their natural environment, the source material informing their writing. Raka Shome has shown that the world of academic publication from which such studies emerge is a context that unequally positions the global traffic of knowledge.⁷ Attempts to internationalise academic conversations on cultural topics 'inadvertently remain oriented towards a western consciousness, framework, and ethos, even as they try to break out of them'.⁸

Lausanne in Africa

Consequently, it was a great privilege to attend the Lausanne Creation Care and the Gospel Conference for East and Central Africa in May 2015, which was held at Brackenhurst Conference Centre near Nairobi, Kenya. This conference was one of a series of events in the Lausanne Creation Care Network's global creation care campaign.

Emerging from the Lausanne Global Consultation on Creation Care and the Gospel held in Jamaica in November 2012, each of these conferences is designed to help participants develop creation care movements in their own countries.⁹

Highlights from the programme included fantastic case studies of creation care as holistic mission. Other topics covered ranged from 'Urban Waste Management in Rwanda' delivered by a knowledgeable Rwandan vicar, 'Farming God's Way' and 'Indigenous Forestry' by Care for Creation Kenya, and 'Tools for Political Advocacy in Africa' by Dr Jesse Mugambi from the University of Nairobi. The event also included practical creation care case studies, such as A Rocha Kenya's ASSETS forest protection and ecotourism scheme, which funds high school students' education, and a project on bio-sand filters being delivered in Kampala by A Rocha Uganda.

Delegates came from South Sudan, Malawi, Rwanda, Tanzania, Uganda, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Kenya, and even Madagascar. Speakers addressed creation care from theological, scientific, practical and economic angles, including the themes of political advocacy, worldview that motivate and empower communities, sustainable economics and conflict as they relate to environmental issues.

There was a general feeling that creation care as an issue had been hitherto neglected within evangelical church teaching in the region. However, a number of Bible colleges and seminaries of various denominations were represented at the conference (Pentecostal, Presbyterian, Anglican, Assemblies of God, independent) and delegates voiced a strong desire to develop curriculum for training theological students, church leaders and material for adult Bible Studies, as well as Sunday school groups.

'Ecotheology' – African and Western

Comparing creation care priorities in East and Central Africa, as represented at the conference, with the concerns of Western churches and theologians revealed some significant differences and similarities. From the African perspective, and stemming from local, lived experience:

- Climate change denial was less relevant as a problem that needed to be overcome in churches/seminaries/society. Unlike in the West, the impact of climate change seems to be too obvious to be questioned (many local examples were described by conference speakers).
- I saw less evidence of concern about 'deep ecology' (which places humans on par with all creation) compared with Western ecotheology, which must carefully address this approach because it is seen to threaten Biblical human superiority over the rest of creation. There was more emphasis on simply affirming the role of human beings as God-appointed agents of good stewardship.
- A new approach to dealing with witchcraft was proposed. Specifically, it was suggested that evangelicals should learn how to 'tease out' good creation care practices from traditional spiritualities that have often been rejected historically, in their entirety, following the adoption of Christianity.
- The need to explore whether Africa is 'cursed' by God was identified. This stemmed from an acknowledgment of the sometimes inescapable relationship between environmental degradation and poverty, as against the capacity Africans identified within themselves to overcome problems through better environmental management, following the adoption of an empowering Christian worldview.
- Corruption of political and even church leaders was blamed as a large part of the problem, reinforcing environmental degradation.
- The historical proximity of dependence on the land through subsistence farming was highlighted, which can mobilise current adult generations in Africa who still have relevant memories of this compared to the increasingly urbanised and disconnected new generation.
- The importance of Christians as peace-builders in the context of increasing environmental conflict was highlighted. It was noted that this was especially important when natural resources must be shared across national boundaries that were enforced by external colonial powers, without taking into account traditional tribal boundaries that had more closely mirrored natural resource zones. This highlights the opportunity available as a result of the environmental crisis for the global Church to provide vital opportunities for safe and loving dialogue.

Similarities between ecotheology in Africa and the West included:

- A call to ecumenism – the need to work together across denominational boundaries because the physical nature of the problems is so large.
- The need to re-affirm the link between spiritual and bodily practices by overcoming an entrenched theology of dualism, inherited from the Greek tradition, which encourages Christians to focus attention on abstract ‘spiritual’ matters to the neglect of discipline and holiness in everyday physical tasks. The understanding of salvation envisaged by Majority World theologians is often cosmic in scope, far broader than the traditional Western evangelical belief which is centred on the personal salvation of humans.¹⁰ (However, at the conference it seemed that in East and Central Africa, evangelical Christians had inherited the Greek dualism from the teaching of Western missionaries.)
- This is linked to a still-persisting belief that Christians shouldn’t engage in politics, but conference speakers identified the importance of church leadership in political advocacy to address creation care issues.
- Eschatology – the importance of an understanding of the awaited renewed heavens and renewed earth, and consideration of what the values of the Kingdom of God look like today.
- Many of the same key biblical texts were used to explore ecotheology (e.g. Romans 8, Colossians 1, Genesis, the Noah story) and some of the same (Western) theologians were informing the talks (e.g. N.T. Wright was cited by a number of the African scholars; Dave Bookless and Ed Brown, LCCN representatives at the conference, framed many of the issues).
- Repentance for neglect of creation care in the past.
- Evidence of the danger of putting the onus on humans alone to solve the environmental crisis, which happens when theologians over-react to the traditional position of leaving all responsibility to God. (One devotional speaker interpreted Romans 8 as saying that creation is waiting for humans to redeem it by their own effort, rather than in partnership with Christ).

Towards a global dialogue

According to Clive Pearson in his article, ‘Constructing a Local Ecotheology’: ‘For an ecotheology to be plausible there is a need to prepare the ground for the seed of an idea to germinate and bear fruit. One form of preparation is to take the local environment seriously and enable those who comprise the ekklesia in a given place to establish connections between their habits of belief and practical ecological concerns’.

If Pearson is correct, we must consider the most plausible ecotheologies to be those springing from the reflection of a theologian on their local, contextual environmental issues, taking into account cultural responses and then, as a secondary step, fitting their thoughts into the broader, global theological dialogue. For this reason, the above issues that were seen as important from an African perspective should be seriously considered by Western Christians as we evaluate how we may best engage with environmental issues in a way that supports our African brothers and sisters in Christ.

It became obvious during the conference that there are very deep theological questions stemming from the economic disparity between Africa and the West, as well as the impact this has on increasing competition for global environmental resources. Climate change affects every person on the planet because natural resources must be shared on a global scale. Just as the work of Christian ecotheologians in the UK involves helping people to understand why they should ‘suffer’ (i.e. sometimes denying themselves things they take for granted) for the sake of others ‘far away’, so too must theologians and leaders in the Majority World explore what these issues mean in their own communities. For example, a question coming from a young Congolese man was, ‘Why should we suffer for the sake of others far away?’ – in reference to limitations placed on the consumption of natural resources through protection of threatened state forests. These forests play a vital role in absorbing global carbon emissions, but protecting them can also lead to women not being able to harvest woodfuel for cooking.

Here we can follow the example of Christ, who suffered for the sake of others ‘far away’. The challenge for us in the West is to consider how our different level of exposure to climate-induced suffering may restrict our capacity to participate equally in international dialogue about these issues. Is it a question of having the ‘rights’ to access resources or having the ‘responsibility’ of caring for and preserving them? It requires courage and

sacrifice to really address them, but if we can do so as the global Church we may be in a position to assist the rest of the world struggling with these increasingly pertinent questions.

Towards the end of the conference it was exciting to see each national group develop goals for application of the knowledge they had gained during the week. These fell into three categories: personal, e.g. many delegates were church leaders who committed to speaking on creation care regularly in church services and leading by example with their actions; organisational, e.g. seminary lecturers would develop courses on eco-theology and mission organisations would include creation care as part of their missional activity; and national, e.g. many planned to organise conferences at the national level to pass on what they had learned to their counterparts within their own country.

Conclusion

Although North American, German and British scholars have clearly led the way in academic discourse on ecological theology during the last few decades,¹¹ the Lausanne Creation Care conferences are clearly demonstrating the importance of contributions from Majority World ecotheologians in global dialogue. Analysing the priorities of African contributors that were evident both in my research and at the conference in Kenya suggests several themes for Western ecotheologians to consider: justice for the poor as a key factor; the need for an urgent response to the environmental crisis; a humbler view of human status compared with the rest of creation; the vital role of human action nonetheless; the normality of holism and the importance of context. Western ecotheology needs to have the courage to let itself be probed, tested – and perhaps found wanting – in the light of the challenges of global ecotheology.

For further reading

- Celia Deane-Drummond, *Ecotheology* (Darton, Longman and Todd, 2008).
- David G. Hallman, *Ecotheology: Voices from South and North* (WCC Publications/Orbis Books, 1994).
- Kapya John Kaoma, 'The Fifth Mark of Mission: To Strive to Safeguard the Integrity of Creation and Sustain and Renew the Life of the Earth', in *Life Widening Mission: Global Anglican Perspectives*, edited by Cathy Ross (Regnum Books International, 2012), 75-92.
- Clive Pearson, 'Constructing a Local Ecotheology', *Ecotheology* 3 (1997), 23-38.
- Carla Wilson, 'Decolonising Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples: a review', *Social Policy Journal of New Zealand* 17 (2001), 214-217. http://www.msd.govt.nz/documents/about-msd-and-our-work/publications-resources/journals-and-magazines/social-policy-journal/spj17/17_pages214_217.pdf.

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¹ David G. Hallman, *Ecotheology: Voices from South and North* (WCC Publications/Orbis Books, 1994), 3.

² Ernst Conradie, 'Towards an Agenda for Ecological Theology: An Intercontinental Dialogue', *Ecotheology* 10.3 (December 2005), 283.

³ Conradie, 'Towards an Agenda for Ecological Theology', 282.

⁴ Conradie, 'Towards an Agenda for Ecological Theology', 283.

⁵ Ross Langmead, 'Ecomissiology', *Missiology* 30 (2002), 505.

⁶ Langmead, 'Ecomissiology'.

⁷ Raka Shome, 'Post-Colonial Reflections on the Internationalization of Cultural Studies', *Cultural Studies* 23, Issue 5/6 (September-November 2009), 696.

⁸ Shome, 'Post-Colonial Reflections', 696.

⁹ For more on the global campaign see: <http://www.lausanne.org/gatherings/related/global-campaign>; for the Jamaica Call to Action see: <http://www.lausanne.org/content/statement/creation-care-call-to-action>.

¹⁰ Langmead, 'Ecojustice Principles: Challenges for the Evangelical Perspective', *Ecotheology* 5 & 6 (1998-9), 164.

¹¹ Conradie, 'Towards an Agenda for Ecological Theology', 283.