HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies
ISSN: (Online) 2072-8050, (Print) 0259-9422

From dominion to communion: Theology as an interlocutor towards planetary well-being

Author:
Johan Buitendag[1]

Affiliation:
[1]Department of Systematic and Historical Theology, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

Corresponding author:
Johan Buitendag,
johan.buitendag@tuks.co.za

Dates:
Received: 03 Feb. 2026
Accepted: 04 Mar. 2026
Published: 13 Apr. 2026

How to cite this article:
Buitendag, J., 2026, 'From dominion to communion: Theology as an interlocutor towards planetary well-being', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 82(1), a11312. https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v82i1.11312

This article advances an integral eco-theology by incorporating two major normative developments of 2025 – the Conference of the Parties (COP) COP30 outcomes in Belém and the Earth Charter+25 renewal – into a coherent theological response to the climate emergency. Building on my earlier integration of Pope Francis's integral ecology and Ken Wilber's 'all quadrants, all levels, all lines, all states, and all types' (AQAL) framework, theology is reconceived as a holistic engagement with reality across subjective, cultural, behavioural and systemic dimensions. This exposes the limits of anthropocentric dominion and opens a path towards kenotic communion with the community of life. A dialectical approach rooted in diastasis sustains creative tension without dissolving differences, allowing true transversal dialogue. Within this framework, the Belém Political Package is evaluated for its progress in adaptation finance and just transition mechanisms, as well as for its shortcomings in achieving a fossil fuel phase-out. Earth Charter+25 presents a renewed moral horizon focused on ecological integrity and intergenerational responsibility.

Contribution: By holding COP30's policy trajectory and Earth Charter+25's ethical vision in diastatic tension, the article provides a publicly accountable theological framework for Christian praxis, in which degrowth and rewilding function as normative expressions of ecodomy.

Keywords: Earth Charter; planetary well-being; integral ecology; AQAL; diastasis; diathesis; degrowth; rewilding; ecodomy; theo-ecology; public theology; COP30; climate justice.

Introduction

From dominion to communion

The climate crisis is far more than an environmental or technical challenge; it is a profound anthropological, axiological and theological issue that demands a fundamental re-examination of how humanity perceives itself and acts in the world. Despite extensive scientific data, advanced technologies and increasingly sophisticated policy frameworks, these alone are insufficient to inspire the deep behavioural and cultural transformations required. Meaning-making, virtue development and nurturing hope ultimately motivate action – and these are precisely areas where theology offers a meaningful and vital voice. When exercised responsibly in the public sphere, theology becomes an essential partner to climatology, ecology, economics and political science: helping to clarify ultimate goals, promote shared moral responsibility and assess visions of human flourishing within the strict boundaries of ecological reality (Haught 1995; McGrath 2019).

This article advocates for a thoughtful shift from domination to communion. The biblical command to 'have dominion' over creation (Gn 1:28) has too often been interpreted anthropocentrically, as a mandate for control or exploitation. In the context of the climate emergency, this mandate must instead be reinterpreted kenotically – through Christ's self-emptying (Phlp 2:5–8) – as an invitation to mutual participation, care and reciprocity within the community of life. Communion is understood here to encompass ecclesial fellowship, social solidarity and ecological interdependence, rejecting dualisms that artificially separate humans from the more-than-human world.

The Earth Charter+25 initiative, marking 25 years since the Charter's launch in 2000, has not revised the original text but has revitalised its principles in light of contemporary ecological and social crises. During the July 2025 gatherings in The Hague and Doorn (Netherlands), themed 'Planetary Consciousness, Ethics of Care, and Intergenerational Justice', the movement intensified its commitment to deepening planetary consciousness – a holistic awareness of humanity's

embeddedness within the wider community of life. It also strengthened the ethics of care as a moral orientation towards people, nature and future generations, and re-emphasised intergenerational justice as a fundamental obligation. These emphases are built directly upon the Charter's core commitments to respect for nature, human rights, economic justice and peace, while addressing the urgent issues of our time: biodiversity collapse, climate tipping points, systemic inequality and widespread disconnection. Rather than adding new principles, Earth Charter+25 positions the Charter as a living ethical compass for urgent, inclusive and transformative action.

The initiative also strategically engaged with COP30[1] in Belém (November 2025). As part of the pre-COP30 process, the International Seminar '25 Years of the Earth Charter – Turning Consciousness into Action' in Ananindeua (Pará) emphasised the Charter's importance as an ethical guide for sustainability, social justice and peace. The Earth Charter movement made significant contributions to the COP30 Presidency's Global Ethical Stocktake (GES) – a reflective process examining why proven climate solutions are not widely adopted. Through global dialogues, collective submissions and advocacy, the movement positioned the Earth Charter as a normative framework that addresses the ethical shortcomings in climate policy. This engagement improved several outcomes of COP30 – including the Belém Political Package, forest-restoration mechanisms and just-transition initiatives – by guiding them towards the well-being of the entire community of life, rather than narrow geopolitical or economic interests (Carbon Brief 2025; UN News 2025; World Resources Institute 2025).

At the heart of this theological endeavour is Understanding Reality: a disciplined, whole-person engagement that considers the multidimensional nature of existence – including interior (subjective meaning and consciousness) and exterior (objective systems and behaviours), as well as individual and collective. This engagement must meet public standards of coherence (logical consistency), accountability (transparency in relation to evidence and critique) and ethical adequacy (alignment with justice and the flourishing of all creation) (Van Huyssteen 1999, 2006; Wilber 2000). To prevent premature harmonisation or disciplinary collapse, the article employs diastasis as a methodological virtue – a sustained, creative tension that preserves the integrity of distinct perspectives while enabling genuinely transversal dialogue (Stenmark 2004; Van Huyssteen 2006).

This integral posture closely aligns with Pope Francis's concept of integral ecology, which emphasises the inextricable links between caring for creation, social justice and spiritual responsibility (Francis 2015, 2023). Here, theology becomes a scholarly pursuit that involves multidimensional reality 'in a manner that matters', integrating ontology (what is), epistemology (how we know) and axiology (what ought to be) within a cosmotheandric horizon where creation is recognised as contingent, fragile and continually attended to by the divine (Buitendag 2023).

The structure of the article is as follows: methodological foundations; historical and systemic analysis (including COP30); restorative strategies (degrowth and rewilding); theological integration (integral ecology and theo-ecology); the role of public theology at the university; illustrative praxis; and, finally, a covenantal ethical vision.

Theology as an interlocutor in a multidisciplinary discourse

Discussions about the interaction between science and religion are often framed through a simplified Hegelian triad (thesis–antithesis–synthesis). However, this model is historically inaccurate. Kant described unresolved antinomies, while Fichte outlined a dynamic of thetic position, antithetic opposition and synthetic movement without suggesting final closure (Fichte 1982; Kant 1998; Mueller 1958). Kant's antinomies demonstrate reason's tendency to generate mutually conflicting claims, and Fichte's explanation – often but wrongly attributed to Hegel – clarifies how provisional syntheses can arise from tension (Mueller 1958). This philosophical lineage offers a useful context for understanding diastasis: a methodological stance that maintains creative, accountable tension across disciplinary boundaries.

Antithesis refers to boundary-policing models that assign facts to science and meanings to religion. Such models provide clarity, minimise category errors and protect methodological independence. However, global contexts – such as Islamic readings of nature as *āyāt*, Latin American liberation-ecological praxis and African eco-theologies – demonstrate that empirical descriptions and moral claims often intertwine in lived discourse (Boff 1997; Nasr 1996; Scatolini 2022).

Synthesis seeks responsible integrative harmony, as in Barbour's 'integration', Haught's 'consonance', or Polkinghorne's 'motivated belief' (Barbour 2000; Haught 1995). While such approaches enable valuable collaboration in ecological and bioethics, they must avoid over-harmonisation – speculative retrofits or metaphysical overreach – that collapse legitimate differences between domains (Harrison 2015; Stenmark 2004:45–60).

Diastasis describes disciplined tension that neither halts disagreement nor forces synthetic resolution (See Table 1 for a comparison of the three options). Van Huyssteen's postfoundationalist model encourages transversal reasoning rooted in shared warrants such as coherence, scope,

1.The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) established the Conference of the Parties (COP) as the main decision-making body responsible for implementing the commitments made by countries to combat climate change. All countries that have signed and ratified the Convention attend the COP. Currently, 198 countries are involved in the UNFCCC, making it one of the largest multilateral organisations within the United Nations (UN) system. The COP is supported by a Subsidiary Body for Implementation (SBI) and a Subsidiary Body for Scientific and Technological Advice (SBSTA). Additionally, the COP functions as the Conference of the Parties to the Kyoto Protocol (CMP) and the Paris Agreement (CMA). See https://cop30.br/en/about-cop30/what-is-the-cop.

TABLE 1: Comparison of three approaches.

Model	Key feature	Strength	Limitation
NOMA (Gould 1999)	Non-overlapping magisterial	Clear boundaries	Avoids shared moral questions
Consonance (Barbour 2000)	Heuristic alignment	Facilitates collaboration	Risks vague convergence
Diastasis	Creative, reversible tension	Prevents imperialism; sustains dialogue; mutual aims	Requires ongoing effort

Note: Please see the full reference list of the article, Buitendag, J., 2026, 'From dominion to communion: Theology as an interlocutor towards planetary well-being', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 82(1), a11312. https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v82i1.11312, for more information.

integrative depth and ethical adequacy (Van Huyssteen 1999, 2006). Theology and science thus engage as distinct yet mutually accountable partners – not as adversaries but as a duet, each retaining its own methodological integrity. Recognising this guards against teleological assumptions that all tensions must resolve harmoniously. Instead, diastasis serves as a constructive virtue that sustains meaningful dialogue, prevents methodological imperialism and keeps claims open to revision.

Climate change and ecological sustainability reveal the limitations of relying solely on technical or economic problem-solving. Scientific models demonstrate empirical realities; policy frameworks coordinate collective efforts, but questions of meaning, responsibility and relationality demand deeper interpretative engagement. Here, theology acts as an interlocutor: expressing visions of the good, forming virtues, encouraging care and mediating values alongside the sciences.

Ken Wilber's Integral Theory proposes that reality is understood through at least four fundamental perspectives (Wilber 2000:45–60). Neglecting any of these can result in distorted explanations of complex phenomena, such as ecological degradation. Exterior perspectives include the upper-right (objective: individuals' behaviours and structures) and the lower-right (interobjective: collective systems and structures). While these are essential, they cannot fully inspire transformational action without integrating the upper-left (subjective: consciousness, emotion, intentionality) and the lower-left (intersubjective: shared cultural meanings and ethics) (Esbjörn-Hargens & Zimmerman 2011; Ferreira 2010; Wilber 2000:112–120).

Integral ecology, therefore, advocates recognising experience (subjective), culture (intersubjective), behaviour (objective) and systems (interobjective), avoiding reductionism and fostering a holistic, motivating ethic. The next section demonstrates how these quadrants inform practical action and covenantal ethics.

Historical and contemporary markers of Shablon patterns

Humanity has long been warned about the consequences of crossing planetary boundaries. Malthus warned of population pressures on limited resources, while the Club of Rome's influential *Limits to Growth* (Meadows et al. 1972) modelled the complex interactions among population, industrialisation, pollution, food production and non-renewable resources – introducing the familiar idea of 'overshoot', where human demand exceeds the biosphere's regenerative capacity. Later reviews, such as the Meadows et al. (2004) update and Herrington's (2022) analysis, confirm that current global paths most resemble the 'business-as-usual' scenarios, signalling imminent declines in welfare unless there are major shifts in societal values and economic frameworks.

Within this context, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) remains the leading global governance mechanism. At COP30 in Belém (November 2025), the Belém Political Package – adopted under the Mutirão Decision – marked several significant advances: political commitments to triple adaptation finance by 2035; operationalisation of funding arrangements for loss and damage; establishment of implementation platforms such as the Global Implementation Accelerator and the Belém Mission to 1.5°C; development of voluntary indicators for the Global Goal on Adaptation; strengthening of just-transition mechanisms; and the introduction of forest-finance facilities. Over 120 parties submitted updated 2035 Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC) targets following the first global stocktake.[2] Independent assessments praised progress in adaptation, equity in finance and implementation architecture, while also criticising the lack of a negotiated fossil fuel phase-out and the overall insufficiency of ambition to keep the 1.5°C target within reach. Although technical and financial mechanisms were consolidated, the failure to secure explicit commitments to transition away from fossil fuels revealed persistent gaps between scientific urgency and political resolve.

This tension – incremental technical progress without corresponding normative transformation – highlights the need for theological reflection. Theology aids by reframing human vocation through a kenotic rather than a hubristic approach and by framing environmental responsibility within an eco-cosmic perspective. Faith communities are well-positioned to encourage the 'different thinking' that leads to 'different acting', making covenantal ethics not only doctrinal, but also socially credible in a time of planetary overshoot (Buitendag 2025).

Ecological economics clarifies the difference between growth (quantitative expansion) and development (qualitative flourishing). Mature economies should prioritise well-being within ecological limits rather than endless throughput (Von Weizsäcker & Wijkman 2018). Degrowth and post-growth proposals advocate conscious reductions in material and energy use in high-consumption societies, the redistribution of resources, the internalisation of ecological costs and the fostering of civic solidarity (Hickel 2020; Jackson 2021). Ethically, this aligns with covenantal culture – embodying sufficiency, neighbourliness and restraint – and with de-anthropocentric responsibility grounded in intergenerational and interspecies justice (Brueggemann 2014; Cobb 1992).

2.The NDC targets of South Africa are to be seen at: https://www.climatecommission.org.za/publications/south-africas-ndc-targets-for-2025-and-2030

Development involves qualitative changes and does not necessarily imply quantitative expansion.

Rewilding offers a complementary approach, restoring self-regulating ecosystems by reducing human intervention, reintroducing keystone species across trophic levels and allowing natural processes to regain their complexity (Perino et al. 2019). Research indicates that trophic rewilding can enhance biotic resistance (such as against invasive shrubs), increase carbon sequestration and boost ecosystem resilience and biodiversity (Guyton et al. 2020). Global conservation targets – like protecting or restoring 30% of land and sea by 2030 – connect rewilding to climate mitigation efforts, while emerging Rights of Nature frameworks provide normative and legal foundations (Bleeker, Hooft Toomey & Lambooy 2025; Dinerstein et al. 2019). Overall, degrowth and rewilding serve as civic virtues of restraint and renewal, vital for advancing planetary well-being. Consequently, society should prioritise a development path based on a symbiotic relationship with the rest of nature and on conserving and restoring planetary ecosystem health.

A covenantal toolkit should be created to integrate these virtues into faith communities. Such a toolkit might include: weekly Sabbath practices that challenge consumerism; seasonal lamentations for ecological loss, followed by acts of repair like tree planting and invasive species removal; watershed-scale stewardship projects over many years; biodiversity pledges that establish habitat corridors; and liturgical actions aligned with the pillars of the Earth Charter. For example: Advent (fostering a community of life through hospitality to other species); Lent (practising integrity by fasting from excess); Eastertide (advancing justice through solidarity gardens); Ordinary Time (promoting peace through deliberative forums on the Rights of Nature). These practices foster gratitude, restraint and neighbourly solidarity, embodying degrowth and rewilding within the rhythms of everyday life.

Southern African examples further illustrate how such a covenant is practised. The Faith and Ecology Network's rewilding campaigns in degraded mining areas (e.g. Mpumalanga) incorporate degrowth principles – reducing extractive consumption – alongside communal rituals that honour ubuntu and the Rights of Nature (cf. SAFCEI n.d.). These initiatives activate all AQAL quadrants in localised climate-justice settings. As noted in previous work (Buitendag 2025), similar initiatives in Mozambique demonstrate how ecological repair can link with community formation and moral imagination.

In summary, the idea of Planetary Well-Being encompasses both environmental health and the pursuit of equity, justice and flourishing across natural, human, political and economic systems – a transformative vision for aligning societies and economies with Earth's limits (Espinosa 2025). Seen through the AQAL framework, degrowth and rewilding activate all four quadrants: subjective (promoting dispositions of restraint and gratitude), intersubjective (fostering cultural narratives of care), objective (enabling measurable behavioural changes) and interobjective (restructuring systems and governance towards planetary boundaries).

Integral ecology and covenant ethics

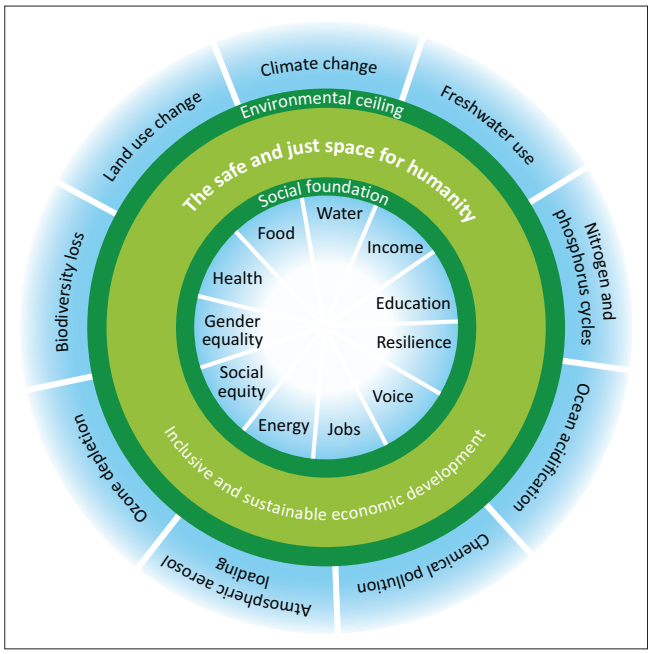
The Earth Charter, launched in June 2000 as a global declaration of interdependence, outlines key ethical principles to promote a fairer, more sustainable and peaceful world. It serves as an urgent moral call to action. By the early 21st century, numerous organisations – including United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and the World Conservation Congress – had endorsed the Charter. Significant progress was made in 2015 towards achieving its vision with the adoption of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and broad international backing for the Paris Agreement on Climate Change (COP21). However, the world has changed considerably over the past 25 years: efforts to uphold the Charter's principles, achieve the SDGs and tackle climate change now face increased challenges, including backlash against globalisation, rising nationalism and authoritarianism and escalating geopolitical conflicts.

Planetary consciousness, central to the Earth Charter+25 initiative, signifies a deeper, holistic awareness of humanity as an inseparable part of the wider community of life, rather than as detached from or dominant over it. It encourages a shift from narrow national or cultural identities towards a sense of belonging to the planet as a whole – recognising that all people share a common home and destiny with other species, ecosystems and future generations. For an accessible synthesis of these developments, see Vilela et al. (2025).

The United Nations' efforts to develop a comprehensive framework for monitoring sustainable development started at the 2012 UN Conference on Sustainable Development. The Rio+20 Conference called for the creation of the SDGs to replace the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which concluded in 2015. Like their predecessors, the SDGs include specific targets and indicators to track progress.

During Rio+20, the Oxfam Doughnut played a significant role in guiding the SDG agenda. Its outer ring symbolises the environmental ceiling – the planetary boundaries that must not be crossed – as outlined in early work presented at the Tällberg Forum in 2008. Its inner ring represents the social foundations essential to ensure a 'safe and just space for humanity'. Today, humanity surpasses several planetary boundaries, while millions remain below vital social thresholds. The aim is to bring human activity back within the 'safe operating space' between the ecological ceiling and the social foundation (Raworth 2012:4).

This model expands on the Earth Charter's preamble, which states: 'We stand at a critical moment in Earth's history, a time when humanity must choose its future' (Earth Charter International 2000:1). Planetary consciousness supports this view by encouraging people to see themselves as members of a single Earth community, alongside – not instead of – their local or national identities. It counters fragmentation,



Source: Raworth, K., 2012, *A safe and just space for humanity: Can we live within the doughnut?*, Oxfam Discussion Paper, Oxfam GB, viewed from https://www-cdn.oxfam.org/s3fs-public/file_attachments/dp-a-safe-and-just-space-for-humanity-130212-en_5.pdf, p. 4

Note: The 11 dimensions of the social foundation are illustrative and are based on governments' priorities for Rio+20. The nine dimensions of the environmental ceiling are based on the planetary boundaries.

FIGURE 1: The safe and just space for humanity.

disconnection and anthropocentrism by promoting respect for life's mystery, appreciation for Earth's gifts and humility about humanity's role in the web of life (see Boff 1997:67–71).

Within the Earth Charter+25 framework, planetary consciousness is crucial for tackling today's interconnected crises – biodiversity loss, climate tipping points, rising inequality and escalating conflict (See Figure 1 for these boundaries). It calls for:

- An expanded ethical perspective, recognising that planetary well-being is inseparable from human well-being.
- Transforming conscience into action through education, dialogue, policy, business practices and personal choices that prioritise long-term planetary responsibility over short-term advantage.
- Integration with complementary principles, particularly an ethics of care (relational responsibility towards people, nature and the vulnerable) and intergenerational justice (ensuring our actions do not harm the well-being of future generations).

Ultimately, planetary consciousness functions as an ethical guide – a form of 'radical hope' in uncertain times – inspiring transformation towards an ecological civilisation. It energises educational initiatives (including those linked to UNESCO), youth leadership, Indigenous knowledge movements and global citizenship, fostering a shared planetary identity and moral responsibility.

Integral ecology, a key part of Pope Francis's magisterial teaching, rejects technocratic reductionism by emphasising that ecological degradation, social exclusion and spiritual alienation are interconnected (Francis 2015, 2023). It advocates holistic care that addresses root causes – such as anthropocentrism, consumerism and inequality – while promoting integral human development. Theo-ecology expands on this idea, examining not only what ecology means for theology but also what God represents in relation to ecology. In this view, creation becomes a space of divine communication, and human participation in Trinitarian life is expressed through kenotic stewardship (Moltmann 1993:86–93; 215–243; 276–296).

Kenotic Christology reinterprets dominion not as domination but as self-giving service, emphasising virtues of restraint, solidarity and ecological restoration (McFague 2021; Moltmann 2003). Within the Earth Charter's first pillar – 'Respect and Care for the Community of Life' – this aligns with humility, understood as the refusal to be arrogant towards the community of life in every context.

Understanding reality in a comprehensive way involves four interconnected dimensions: anthropological (embodied and embedded cognition that defies dualisms); epistemological (constructive-critical realism fostering reciprocity between scientific models and theological interpretation); ethical (ecodomy guiding actions towards justice, dignity, reconciliation and stewardship); and meaningful (theo-ecology integrating care within divine participation). These dimensions suggest curricular pathways such as modules on cosmotheandric vocation, planetary boundaries ethics, restoration practices and ecodomy laboratories – community projects that observe, for example, biodiversity or soil health (Buitendag & Simut 2020; Clugston 2025).

In practical terms, climate action connects external elements (biophysical data, infrastructure) with internal elements (cultural meaning and personal significance) and their interactions across development, practice and policy. Diastasis – disciplined tension – offers the methodological stance needed to preserve these elements without blurring their distinctions (Esbjörn-Hargens & Zimmerman 2009; Wilber 2000).

Deep ecology, articulated by Næss (1973), emphasises this holistic perspective. It advocates a fundamental shift from anthropocentrism to ecocentrism or biocentrism – recognising the intrinsic value of all life regardless of its usefulness to humans (Næss 1973). Unlike shallow ecology, which concentrates on technocratic solutions to environmental problems, deep ecology challenges the fundamental values, lifestyles and structures that lead to ecological damage. It promotes a holistic view in which humans are regarded as part of, not separate from, the web of life.

Næss (1973) identifies five core themes:

- Biospheric egalitarianism: all life has intrinsic value 'in principle', even if practical needs vary (p. 95).
- Ecological self: personal identity broadens through a deeper connection with ecosystems and other beings (pp. 96–97).

- Holism and interconnectedness: harm to any part reduces the integrity of the whole (p. 96).
- Simple living and decreased consumption: voluntary simplicity and harmony with nature (p.98).
- Critique of industrial-growth society: fundamental systemic change is necessary to prioritise ecological integrity over unlimited expansion (pp. 98–99).

Conclusion

Towards a covenant of ecological renewal

For theology to serve as a credible interlocutor in the public sphere, it must be practised with scholarly rigour – particularly within the context of a public university. This involves clarifying faith claims under shared standards of inquiry, engaging constructively in peer critique and collaborating with other disciplines without undermining methodological boundaries (McGrath 2019). Theology also interrogates normativity and ultimate orientation, partnering with the sciences to address the profound ethical demands of the climate crisis (Buitendag 2025; Mendiola 2023).

Deep ecology closely aligns with the vision of planetary well-being outlined in the Earth Charter+25 affirmation. Both perspectives promote a holistic view of humanity's role within the broader community of life, honouring all living beings and bearing moral responsibility towards future generations. The four pillars of the Earth Charter 2000 (i.e. Respect and Care for the Community of Life, Ecological Integrity, Social and Economic Justice and Democracy, Nonviolence and Peace) strongly reflect deep ecology's core commitments to biodiversity, interconnectedness and ecological flourishing. Although the Earth Charter encompasses a wider range of themes, including social justice and peace, deep ecology provides a philosophical foundation for its ecological principles.

Deep ecology continues to inspire environmental activism, conservation ethics, Indigenous rights movements and campaigns for wilderness protection and systemic change. It encourages personal growth – broadening one's sense of self – and collective engagement in ongoing ecological crises. Human embeddedness in nature is an inherent fact, and our thoughts shape our actions: 'The world is not just a perception; it is in part a conception. And that means we don't just see the world, we interpret it' (Wilber 2024:60).

When dominion is reinterpreted kenotically, the posture shifts from domination to service; power becomes participation; ownership yields to communion. Moving forward requires integrating integral ecology, diastasis and understanding reality to form accountable and adaptable praxis. Degrowth and rewilding, therefore, become more than policy proposals: they emerge as virtues – expressions of restraint and restoration. Theology, in dialogue with the sciences, fosters shared hope and institutions worthy of a finite, beautiful planet (Francis 2023; Haught 1998).

This covenantal toolkit intentionally involves all quadrants of the AQAL model to foster holistic renewal: subjective (upper-left) through personal lament, gratitude and kenotic formation; intersubjective (lower-left) through communal gardens, shared rituals and cultural reinterpretations of dominion; objective (upper-right) through tangible actions such as habitat restoration, tree planting and disciplined simplicity; and interobjective (lower-right) through systemic commitments like habitat corridors, watershed stewardship and advocacy for forest-restoration funds aligned with COP30 outcomes. By resisting reductionism, these practices embody diastasis – sustained creative tension – and promote integral, motivationally compelling responses to planetary well-being (Stenmark 2004; Van Huyssteen 2006).

This covenantal vision aligns with the Earth Charter's call for a sustainable global society rooted in respect for nature, human rights, economic justice and peace (Earth Charter International 2000). In the Anthropocene, hope must be nurtured as a habit: expressed through kenotic anthropology within a Trinitarian theo-ontology, an integral theological approach, degrowth and rewilding praxis and a covenant ethic that guides meaningful thought and action (Buitendag 2023, 2025). A proleptic ethic urges us to act today in ways that anticipate a reconciled and flourishing creation, thereby restoring the commons for Earth and all its creatures.

Ultimately, this covenantal vision operationalises the AQAL framework by ensuring that kenotic theology influences not only inner conviction, but also cultural norms, individual behaviours and systemic change. Climate change, in this view, is not the root problem but rather a symptom of a deeper civilisational crisis – namely, a distortion of values, a fractured relationship with nature and unsustainable modes of production and consumption.

Acknowledgements

During the preparation of this work, the author used Grammarly (version 6.8.263) and Copilot to check grammar and for identification of sources. The content was reviewed and edited by the author, who takes full responsibility for its accuracy.

Competing interests

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

CRediT authorship contribution

Johan Buitendag: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Resources, Software, Visualisation, Writing – original draft, and Writing – review & editing. The author confirms that this work is entirely their own, has reviewed the article, approved the final version for submission and publication, and takes full responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding information

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Data availability

The author declares that all data that support this research article and findings are available in the article and its references.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and are the product of professional research. They do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency or that of the publisher. The author is responsible for this article's results, findings, and content.

References

Barbour, I.G., 2000, *When science meets religion: Enemies, strangers, or partners?* HarperOne, San Francisco, CA.

Bleeker, T., Hooft Toomey, E. & Lambooy, T., 2025, 'Corporate climate transition plans: Mapping the fluctuating legal landscape', *European Company Law* 22(4), 118–124. https://doi.org/10.54648/EUCL2025026

Boff, L., 1997, *Cry of the earth. Cry of the poor*, Kindle edn., Orbis Books.

Brueggemann, W., 2014, *Sabbath as Resistance. Saying No to the Culture of Now*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville.

Buitendag, J. & Simut, C.C., 2020, 'Ecodomy as education in tertiary institutions', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 76(1), a5956. https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v76i1.5956

Buitendag, J., 2023, 'Integral ecology: Response of an emeritus professor to the contributions of his septuagenarian Festschrift', *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 9(1), 1–20. https://doi.org/10.17570/stj.2023.v9n1.a8a

Buitendag, J., 2025, 'Resilience of planet Earth: A call for degrowth and rewilding', *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 11(1), 1–24. https://doi.org/10.17570/stj.2025.v11n1.7

Carbon Brief, 2025, *COP30: Key outcomes for food, forests, land and nature at the UN climate talks in Belém*, viewed 12 January 2026, from https://www.carbonbrief.org/cop30-key-outcomes-agreed-at-the-un-climate-talks-in-belem/.

Clugston, R., 2025, 'Towards planetary well-being', in M. Vilela, R. Clugston & D. Aggarwal (eds), *Envisioning and evaluating our contributions to planetary well-being through the lens of the Earth Charter*, pp. 13–23, UPEACE Press, San José, Costa Rica.

Cobb, J.B., 1992, *Sustainability: Economics, ecology, and justice*, Wipf & Stock, Eugene, OR.

Dinerstein, E., Vynne, C., Sala, E., Joshi, A.R., Fernando, S., Love Joy, T.E. et al., 2019, 'A global deal for nature: Guiding principles, milestones, and targets', *Science Advances* 5(4), eaaw2869. https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.aaw2869

Earth Charter International, 2000, *The Earth charter*, viewed 20 November 2025, from https://earthcharter.org/the-earth-charter/.

Esbjörn-Hargens, S. & Zimmerman, M.E., 2011, *Integral ecology: Uniting multiple perspectives on the natural world*, Shambhala.

Espinosa, M.F., 2025, 'Planetary well-being: Rebuilding our relationship with nature is key to the survival of the human species', in M. Vilela, R. Clugston & D. Aggarwal (eds.), *Envisioning and evaluating our contributions to planetary well-being through the lens of the Earth Charter*, pp. 11–17, UPEACE Press, San José, Costa Rica.

Ferreira, I., 2010, 'Die ontwikkeling van die menslike bewussyn: Ken Wilber se AQAL-teorie [The development of the human consciousness: Ken Wilber's AQAL theory]', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 66(1), 1–8. https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v66i1.180

Fichte, J.G., 1982, 'Outline of the distinctive character of the Wissenschaftslehre with respect to the theoretical faculty (D. Breazeale, Trans.)', in *Early philosophical writings*, pp. 232–280, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY.

Francis, 2015, *Laudato si': On care for our common home*, viewed 20 November 2025, from https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html.

Francis, 2023, *Laudate Deum: Apostolic exhortation on the climate crisis*, viewed 20 November 2025, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/20231004-laudate-deum.htm.

Gould, S.J., 1999, *Rocks of ages: Science and religion in the fullness of life*, Ballantine Books, New York, NY.

Guyton, J.A., Pansu, J., Hutchinson, M.C., Kartzinel, T.R., Potter, A.B., Coverdale, T.C. et al., 2020, 'Trophic rewilding revives biotic resistance to shrub invasion', *Nature Ecology & Evolution* 4(5), 712–724. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41559-019-1068-y

Harrison, P., 2015, *The territories of science and religion*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago & London.

Haught, J.F., 1995, *Science and religion: From conflict to conversation*, Paulist Press, Mahwah, New York, NJ.

Haught, J.F., 1998, *God after Darwin: A theology of evolution*, Westview Press, Boulder, CO.

Herrington, G., 2022, *The Limits to Growth model: Still prescient 50 years later*, Club of Rome, Winterthur, viewed viewed 21 November 2025, from https://www.clubofrome.org/publication/earth4all-ltg-model/

Hickel, J., 2020, *Less is more: How degrowth will save the world*, Kindle edn., Random House, New York, NY.

Jackson, T., 2021, *Post growth: Life after capitalism*, Kindle edn., Polity Press, Cambridge.

Kant, I. [1781] 1998, *Critique of pure reason*, transl. P. Guyer & A.W. Wood (eds.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

McFague, S., 2021, *A new climate for Christology: Kenosis, climate change, and befriending nature*, Kindle edn., Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN.

McGrath, A.E., 2019, *The territories of human reason: Science and theology in an age of multiple rationalities*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Meadows, D.H., Meadows, D.L., Randers, J. & Behrens, W.W. III, 1972, *The limits to growth*, Universe Books, New York, NY.

Meadows, D.H., Randers, J. & Meadows, D.L., 2004, *Limits to growth: The 30-year update*, Chelsea Green, White River Junction, VT.

Mendiola, R.V., 2023, *Are we all theologians? Definition and contours of theology*, pp. 31–40, viewd from https://www.academia.edu/120983974/DEFINITION_AND_CONTOURS_OF_THEOLOGY

Moltmann, J., 1993, *God in creation: A new theology of creation and the Spirit of God*, transl. M. Kohl, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN.

Moltmann, J., 2003, *Science and wisdom*, transl. M. Kohl, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN.

Mueller, G.E., 1958, 'The Hegel legend of "thesis–antithesis–synthesis"', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 19(3), 411–414. https://doi.org/10.2307/2708045

Næss, A., 1973, 'The shallow and the deep, long-range ecology movement: A summary', *Inquiry* 16(1–4), 95–100. https://doi.org/10.1080/00201747308601682

Nasr, S.H., 1996, *Religion and the order of nature*, Oxford University Press, New York, NY.

Perino, A., Pereira, H.M., Navarro, L.M., Fernández, N., Bullock, J.M., Ceauşu, S. et al., 2019, 'Rewilding complex ecosystems', *Science* 364(6438), eaav5570.

Raworth, K., 2012, *A safe and just space for humanity: Can we live within the doughnut?*, Oxfam Discussion Paper, Oxfam GB, viewed 12 January 2026, from https://www-cdn.oxfam.org/s3fs-public/file_attachments/dp-a-safe-and-just-space-for-humanity-130212-en_5.pdf.

Scatolini, S., 2022, 'From spiritual ecology to balanced spiritual ecosystems', *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 78(2), 7 pages. https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v78i2.7202

Southern African Faith Communities' Environment Institute (SAFCEI), n.d., *Faith in Action*, viewed 21 November 2025, from https://safcei.org/about-us.

Stenmark, M., 2004, *How to relate science and religion: A multidimensional model*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, MI.

UN News, 2025, *Belém COP30 delivers climate finance boost and a pledge to plan fossil fuel transition*, 22 November, viewed 20 January 2026, from https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/11/1166433.

United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), 2025, *Belém political package: COP30 decisions and presidency consultations*, viewed 12 January 2026, from https://unfccc.int/documents/.

Van Huyssteen, J.W., 1999, *The shaping of rationality: Toward interdisciplinarity in theology and science*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI.

Van Huyssteen, J.W., 2006, *Alone in the world? Human uniqueness in science and theology*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI.

Vilela, M., Clugston, R. & Aggarwal, D. (eds.), *Envisioning and evaluating our contributions to planetary well-being through the lens of the Earth Charter*. UPEACE Press, San José, Costa Rica.

Von Weizsäcker, E.U. & Wijkman, A., 2018, *Come On!: Capitalism, Short-termism, Population and the Destruction of the Planet*, Springer. Kindle Edition, New York, NY.

Wilber, K., 2000, *A theory of everything: An integral vision for business, politics, science, and spirituality*, Shambhala, Boston, MA.

Wilber, K., 2024, *Finding radical wholeness: The integral path to unity, growth, and delight*, Kindle edn., Shambhala, Boulder, CO.

World Resources Institute, 2025, *COP30: Outcomes, disappointments and what's next*, viewed 20 January 2026, from https://www.wri.org/insights/cop30-outcomes-next-steps.