

Taking hands to save creation: An African perspective on ecotheology

**Author:**Jaco Beyers¹ **Affiliation:**

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

Corresponding author:

Jaco Beyers,
jaco.beyers@up.ac.za

Dates:

Received: 13 Nov. 2025

Accepted: 06 Apr. 2026

Published: 30 Apr. 2026

How to cite this article:

Beyers, J., 2026, 'Taking hands to save creation: An African perspective on ecotheology', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 47(1), a3696. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v47i1.3696>

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African and Western thought differ in their approaches to the eco-dilemma. The primary difference is rooted in a distinct worldview. A predominant Western dichotomy between the material and the spiritual, and the sacred and profane, results in an attitude of dominion over nature. An African perspective on unity between humankind and nature can foster a peaceful coalition between humans and nature. Humans and nature are not in combat, competing for survival, but rather in a reciprocal relation of interdependence. Whether this ideal is clearly visible is questionable. This African way of existence opens possibilities for a responsible ecotheology. This contribution aims to provide a unique perspective on ecotheology from an African context. An African ecotheology is rooted in Traditional African Religions, Christianity and African philosophy. Some of the main characteristics of an African perspective on ecotheology are: (1) a strong sense of community based on the concept of *ubuntu* that binds people to creation; (2) nature is considered sacred and demands respect; (3) the social connection to land is more than ownership and inheritance, but also the binding factor in society; and (4) healing includes restoring broken relationships between humans and nature. These characteristics are explored through a literature review to identify scholarly work that contributes to these frameworks for understanding ecotheology. This contribution departs from a religious study perspective and does not pretend to be a theological evaluation. One monolithic African perspective on ecotheology is impossible.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: Different perspectives enrich how the global threat of eco-disaster can be addressed through theology. By taking hands, people from different religious perspectives can attain a more responsible way of addressing ecological disasters.

Keywords: ecotheology; African perspective; Western perspective; *ubuntu*; community; healing.

Introduction

Publications on ecotheology abound. One of the most influential publications, by Lynn White, dates to 1967. White indicates how Christianity added to the ecological dilemma. Not more religion or technology will solve the problems, but a sincere reconsideration of the relation of humanity with nature is required (White 1967:7). The vast corpus of publications since then can be divided into four categories: (1) those dealing with religion and ecology, often resulting in many perspectives from a religious view and from the point of view of specific religions (e.g. Jenkins, Tucker & Grim 2017); (2) a Christian perspective on ecology, often resulting in a theology of creation (e.g. Conradie 2006, 2020) or a specific Christian theological perspective like the *imago Dei* (Hove 2024); (3) emphasising ways to sustainable development and environmental justice (e.g. Harper 2015; Northcott 2007; Pope Francis 2015); and (4) presenting a particular ideological angle, for example the relation between ecofeminist theology and ecology (e.g. Eaton 2005; McFague 1993).

Lately, there have been publications from an African perspective on ecotheology. Compare Mugambi (2017), Aidoo (2019) and Hove (2024). These contributions depart from a Traditional African perspective (Mugambi 2017) and a theological perspective focusing on the *imago Dei* (Hove 2024). Aidoo (2019:42) states that theological studies in Africa are incomplete without participation in the land debate. He claims that the message to take care of the land should take precedence in Christian ministry.

This investigation focuses on how Traditional African Religions can collaborate with the African expression of Christianity to contribute to ecological rehabilitation. Although this exercise may

Note: The manuscript is a contribution to the themed collection titled 'Ecotheology in Southern Africa' under the expert guidance of guest editors Prof. Johannes J. Knoetze, Prof. Kenneth R. Ross and Dr. Gertrude A. Kapuma.

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result in syncretism, the focus is not on changing beliefs but on collaborating on practical matters. The intention here is not to emphasise the similarities or even the differences between Traditional African Religions and Christianity. It is rather an attempt at aligning beliefs and practices towards shared ecological responsibilities.

The African understanding of a close connection with the spiritual realm is mitigated through a connection to nature. This connectivity is expressed in *ubuntu*, with an emphasis on strong communal bonds within a community stretching beyond the boundaries of the living.

The importance of connectivity between humans and nature can support a responsible approach to managing agricultural land and homesteads. Responsible farming and the use of water resources may alleviate drought and poverty, establish food security, while caring for nature.

In this regard, the specific objective of the paper is to investigate how the African principle of connectivity, expressed as *ubuntu*, may inform an African Christian theological impulsion for creation care. I begin with identifying the global ecological crisis, a basic understanding of Traditional African Religion as a substratum or background to African Christianity. I will then move on to analyse the *ubuntu* connectivity principle and conclude by showing how this contributes to an African ecological theology for creation care.

Ecological crisis

The current global ecological crisis refers to the unprecedented degradation of the planet's natural systems due to human activities. This multifaceted crisis entails several interconnected environmental challenges that have escalated in severity over recent decades. This gradual decline in the quality and efficiency of natural systems is evident from the following indicators.

Climate change

Climate change is one of the most intricate aspects of the ecological crisis. It entails rising global temperatures, changing precipitation patterns and increasingly frequent extreme weather events (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC] 2022), leading to intermittent extremes of drought and flooding.

Loss of biodiversity

The planet is experiencing what some scholars call the 'sixth mass extinction', and species are disappearing at an alarming rate (Ceballos, Ehrlich & Raven 2020). The Living Planet Report documents an average decline of 69% in tracked wildlife populations between 1970 and 2018 (WWF 2022). This loss is morally unacceptable and affects ecosystem functioning and stability.

Disruption of natural biochemical cycles

Human activities have interfered with global nitrogen and phosphorus cycles. This results from excessive fertiliser application, fossil-fuel combustion and wastewater discharge (Steffen et al. 2023). These disruptions affect freshwater and coastal ecosystems, creating oxygen-depleted so-called 'dead zones' (Diaz & Rosenberg 2021).

Ocean acidification

High carbon dioxide emissions are changing ocean chemistry, resulting in increasing acidity levels. This acidification threatens marine organisms, such as corals, molluscs and even certain plankton species (Doney et al. 2020).

Freshwater depletion

Unsustainable extraction of groundwater and surface water, combined with climate change, has affected precipitation patterns. This has created water scarcity affecting large parts of the world population (Mekonnen & Hoekstra 2022). Major river systems and aquifers worldwide are being depleted at an alarming rate.

Chemical pollution

The irresponsible discharge of synthetic chemicals, including pesticides, industrial compounds, plastics and pharmaceutical residues, has polluted ecosystems worldwide (Diamond et al. 2021).

The decline in natural processes contributes to a wide range of biological, economic and social concerns, including water availability, agricultural quality, poverty, sustainability and social cohesion. Communities strive for access to diminishing resources, leading to violence. This impacts human health, food security and economic stability. The ecological crisis is not only a biological disaster. It also affects social interaction and economic activities. Mugambi (2017:109, 111, 112) emphasises that inhabitants of the African continent are the most affected by climate change and consequent ecological disasters, but simultaneously, the inhabitants of Africa contribute the least to ecological degradation. The ecological crisis is a comprehensive crisis that requires a comprehensive solution.

Human nature as a root of the ecological crisis

The ecological crisis is largely a man-made disaster. The relationship between humans and nature can be expressed as either monistic or dualistic. Humans are either viewed as being part of nature or as separate from nature. The latter implies being of a different, and often considered superior, essence.

The Greek philosopher Parmenides (beginning of the 5th century BCE) presented a monistic understanding of nature by propagating a 'unity of existence' between humans and

nature. For Parmenides, all existence originates from the same matter.¹ (Russell 2010:55). Human existence is intrinsically part of nature, as humans and nature come from the same matter.

Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677) echoed Parmenides' concept of monism when Spinoza (1996) stated that reality consists of one substance:

[I]n nature there cannot be two or more substances of the same nature or attribute ... One cannot be conceived to be distinguished from another, that is, there cannot be many, but only one. (p. 3)

Humans, as Spinoza states, are part of the things considered to be one with nature.

There is, however, a diversity within this unity. Every substance includes many attributes (Spinoza 1996:7). By attribute, Spinoza (1996:1) referred to what is perceived to constitute the essence of a substance. Attributes can never be substances but remain merely characteristics of a substance. Humans, animals and plants are merely attributes of the one unifying substance (being of the same matter).²

The Greek philosopher Plato described the nature of creation in his treatise entitled *Timaeus*. According to Plato, the Creator God created everything (e.g. humans, plants, animals and gods) and called all that exists into order. Intelligence was put in the soul, and the soul was placed inside the body of a human (Russell 2010:143). The soul was created first, and only then came the body. God made the world as a living organism.

Plato identified a dual human existence: the body is matter and belongs to the Earth, but the soul is spirit and belongs to a different dimension (Russell 2010:134). When nature as matter is regarded as of lesser value, an anti-material position is established, leading to an aversion for anything encountered through the senses. This leads to the assumption that all material matter is of lesser value and is available for human consumption. There is no intrinsic value in matter. This eventually leads to a utilitarian outlook on nature. Nature stands at humans' disposal, providing sustenance and comfort. This understanding of a dual human existence was expanded during the Enlightenment period, contributing to an abusive relationship between humans and nature. Humans are superior beings and rule over nature. Nature is subjected to the superior human nature and exists only to sustain human existence. White (1967:3) refers to the historic process mediated by Christianity.

Later, I explain how a Traditional African worldview maintains a monistic understanding of human existence in relation to nature. This monistic understanding of the connectedness between humans and nature can contribute to

1. The teachings of Parmenides are found in a single document written by him; a poem called 'On Nature', of which only 160 lines remain intact. Russell's discussion of Parmenides is in this regard helpful.

2. It is not the purpose of this article to theologically evaluate Spinoza's theory. He is cited here as an example of a monistic thinker.

a potential solution to the ecological crisis. Let us first turn our attention to the nature of Traditional African Religions to determine how they can present principles guiding towards a solution to the ecological crisis.

Characteristics of Traditional African Religions

That which is labelled as Traditional African Religions reflects the characteristics of the larger category of Primal Religions (Bediako 1995:93; Thorpe 1992:28). Primal religions exhibit, among other characteristics, communities that live close to nature (Bediako 1995:93).

African traditional religions have common characteristics that influence their attitudes in and towards the natural environment; what Andrew Walls calls 'the three conventionally identified entities in African religious systems: God, divinities and objects of power' (Walls 2002:124). These components vary depending on which ones predominate in a given culture. Take the case of polytheism among the Yoruba in Nigeria and the absence of the prominence of ancestors among the San in Southern Africa as examples.

Thus, there is not a single homogenous form of African traditional religion. Each culture in Africa has unique spiritual expressions that shape its ecological practices. It is, therefore, more accurate to speak of Traditional African Religions in the plural to recognise their diverse expressions.

Nevertheless, Blas (2020:42) argues that since the 'conventionally identified components' may be distinct from those of non-African cultures, it may not be difficult to construct, based on the common religious components, a model of religiosity called the African Traditional Religion to explain primal African religious ecologies. He echoed the earlier views of Ogbu U. Kalu (1980:39) and John Mbiti (1969:1).

Like Andrew F. Walls, according to Krüger, Lubbe and Steyn (2009:35), there are three main characteristics that Traditional African Religions share: a belief in a Supreme Being, a unity of community (which includes the living-dead 'ancestors' as Walls argues) and a belief in a spiritual realm; vivified by 'divinities and objects of power' as Walls (2002:124) postulated. To reiterate, although African traditional religions may differ in their expressions and cultural formations, they share these three characteristics.

The supreme being

Traditional African Religions are strongly based on the belief in an impersonal power or Supreme Being. This dynamistic understanding of the universe influences all human behaviour. Turaki (1999:78) points out how this power has been given many names in the past: mana, life force, vital force, life essence, dynamism and God.

According to Mbiti (1975:3), the African perception of a deity takes on the highest possible position. Although perceived as omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent, transcendental and immanent, the Supreme Being is more accurately defined as being 'incomprehensible and mysterious' (Mbiti 1975:26). The Supreme Being is acknowledged as Creator (Mbiti 1969:39, 91, 1975:45).

Laurent Magesa (2002:35) points out that the structure of Traditional African Religions is based on morality, which originates with the Supreme Being and flows into the ancestors. The Supreme Being is the 'Giver of Life', the 'Power' behind everything (Magesa 2002:35). The way of human life (tradition) has its origin within the Supreme Being (Magesa 2002:35). Tradition has a moral code and prescriptions for an ethical life. The transcendental is experienced as an immanent reality by way of providing the moral code for human life. In opposition to this position, Kwame Gyekyi (1996) refutes this notion. He argues that:

[T]raditional African religion is not a revealed religion and therefore the people do not have access to the commandments of God to use as the basis of their moral system ... [so] it is more correct to say that African moral values ... have a social and humanistic basis, rather than a religious basis. (56–57)

Although there are many myths relating to the exact act of creation, it is seen as an activity in which the Supreme Being is the acting subject, and creation has no beginning and no end (Opoku 1993:70, 73). The Creator is accessible to all humankind (Opoku 1993:70–71). The Supreme Being is spirit (Sundermeier 1990:175). The African perception of a deity has long been held to be polytheistic. As Sundermeier (1990:186) points out, more scholars accept African religion as being monotheistic. The Supreme Being continues to provide for creation to sustain existence.

The African concept and consciousness of ecological morality is based on their holistic and precarious worldviews, which are their 'perception of and inner disposition about reality of the "geosphere" (the earth, its regions and things in it), which informs their outer behaviour in their ecological communities' (Blasu 2020:40–41). The universe has two spheres, one being visible and the other invisible. The visible world is creation as we perceive it around us. The invisible world is the residing place of the Supreme Being, the ancestors and all the invisible spirits and powers (Krüger et al. 2009:35). In some African cultures such as in the East, the inhabitants of the invisible world are called the 'forces of life' or 'vital forces' (Magesa 2002:39). The ultimate power is the Supreme Being, the Creator, the provider of ethics and traditions. Gyekyi (1996:56) argues differently, implying that ethics is purely a social construct. These opposing views may reflect different cultural positions on the origin of ethics.

This connectedness relates to the earlier discussion of monism and is emphasised in the subsequent discussion of community. The whole purpose of life in Traditional African

Religions is to preserve and enhance the life force pulsating through and connecting everyone (Magesa 2002:51). Moral behaviour aims at maintaining and enhancing the community's life force, but disobedience and disloyal behaviour toward the tradition passed on by the ancestors will weaken life force, disrupting the community. The whole purpose of African life is to ensure the capacity of this life force to sustain eco-community bondedness. This is because 'only in relating with other life forms harmoniously or ethically are humans able to experience the fullness of or meaning to their own life' (Blasu 2020:72). Blasus was commenting on Sindima's (1990) assertion that:

[I]n the human sphere the process of life achieves fullness when humans are richly connected to other people, to other creatures, and to the earth itself. Humans realise their own fullness by realizing the bondedness of life. (p. 137)

Therefore, 'the need for humans to experience fullness of life underpins African eco-ethical praxis' (Blasu 2020:73). A close relationship with the Supreme Being, the ancestors and other humans will strengthen the eco-community life force (Magesa 2002:52).

Thus, according to Magesa, Traditional African Religions function on the principle of maintaining balance between the two spheres of the universe (the visible and the invisible). This ethical balance operates through 'the sense of fear and vulnerability to spiritual entities in the precarious ecosystem' (Blasu 2020:73). The maintenance of the balance and harmony is humanity's greatest ethical obligation and determines the (moral) quality of life (Bujo 1998:220; Magesa 2002:73). In other words, sustaining ecological balance is the main reason for both ethical rules (e.g. eco-taboos) to regulate human conduct in the eco-community, and elaborate religious rituals to placate the eco-spirit forces when offended in breaking an eco-taboo (Blasu 2020:73). Humans live through the connectedness with the life force that the Supreme Being provides.

Realm of spirits

The conviction that the physical world as perceived by humanity is merely a part of reality, and that an invisible spiritual world co-exists with the visible world, characterises Traditional African Religions as 'animistic'³ (Momen 2009:357). An undying spirit cannot only inhabit humans but also inhabit inanimate objects, such as minerals (Bujo 1998:208). After death, the human spirit returns to its place of origin in the spiritual world. This conviction makes no distinction between the physical and spiritual worlds, creating a holistic worldview in which everything and everyone is connected.

Krüger et al. (2009:36) identify three categories in the spirit world of Traditional African Religions, namely the spirits of ancestors, nature spirits and deities. Although the border

3. As this is a rather derogatory term, the term eco-spirituality is suggested as an alternative. Eco-spirituality sees the Earth as a living, interconnected system and encourages a sense of kinship with all living beings, often leading to greater environmental activism and a desire to protect nature.

between spirits and gods is perforated (Sundermeier 1990:175; Taylor 2007:37–38), there are differences between the two categories. Spirits roam on the Earth (Sundermeier 1990:175) while deities exist closer to the Supreme Being and have a wider sphere of influence and sphere of activity. Deities live farther from Earth than spirits; they reside in heaven, although some deities reside on Earth. Some of the minor gods in African cultures may be seen as children of the Supreme Being (Sundermeier 1990:178). The belief in ancestors is common, central to Traditional African thought, and an essential pillar of religion in many African cultures (Nürnberg 2007; Stinton 2004:133–134), though it is not the dominant component of their worldview. Among the Sokpoe-Eve in Ghana, 'it is *trɔ̃wo* (deities) that are ultimately encountered and feared for committing environmental crimes in daily life experiences' (Blasu 2020:73).

From a psychological perspective, there is a close bond between ancestors and their descendants. Individuals often consult the ancestors for advice, ranging from life-changing decisions to the proper performance of traditional rituals and customs. This sense of dependence on the permission and advice of the ancestors gives individuals comfort and security (Krüger et al. 2009:36). Advice from the ancestors helps humans cope with the struggles and stresses of their lives and creates a sense of belonging and identity. People know who they are and who they encounter based on their ancestors' identity (Krüger et al. 2009:36). The connectedness of all things extends beyond material elements that share a power source.

A sanctified and unified community

As a third main characteristic of Traditional African Religions, Krüger et al. (2009:38) emphasise the unified eco-community. Traditional African Religions exhibit a specific social understanding of an individual's place within the community. There is a dynamic natural bond between the individual, the extended family, the clan or the tribe, and the ancestors, nature, and the Supreme Being (Krüger et al. 2009:38). This is not merely a social understanding but also an ontological one, grounded in ecological experiences. To this list, Thorpe adds the relationship with coming generations (Thorpe 1991:120). As Thorpe (1991:120) argues, 'Individuals cannot exist alone. They are because they belong'. Sundermeier (1990:22) extends the list even further to include a connection with the mineral world.

The group is the place where religion happens. Membership in a social community immediately entails membership in a religious community. Religion binds and does not divide a community (Opoku 1993:77). The group not only shares similar sacred beliefs and practices, but religion determines every part of community life (Opoku 1993:77). The group becomes a sacred community (Mbiti 1969:200). The sanctity of the community is maintained by regulations of proper social behaviour which may extend to behaviour towards the natural world. Improper or unjust behaviour towards fellow members of the community disrupts harmony and damages

the sanctity of the community (Bujo 1998:220). Only through ritual reparation can sanctity and harmony be restored (Bujo 1998:220). For instance, among the Sokpoe-Eve and Akan in Ghana, there are rites and rituals to either prevent or erase the effects of *busu/mmusu* [ecological crimes] if anyone breaks a serious eco-taboo, such as having sexual intercourse in the forest (Blasu 2020:74).

The holistic worldview of Africa, which portrays humanity as connected to all living and non-living entities (Magesa 2002:46), implies a universal interdependence (Bujo 1998:209). Sundermeier (1990:27) views this as reciprocal dependency. All living things share in the gift of life (Sundermeier 1990:22) and are bound in fate. The death of one provides the other with life. Causing harm to nature can wrong the whole community, alluding to the principle of causation, which opens a new discussion that falls outside the scope of this investigation.

Eco-spirituality provides an argument for the interdependence of humans and nature. There is a spiritual bond between humans, animals and plants. The inescapable bond between humans and nature implies a heavy burden of responsibility for the continued existence of nature and humanity, and for humans to care for the environment (Opoku 1993:77). Opoku (1993:78) stresses the contribution that Traditional African Religions make to the worldwide concern with the environment. Momen (2009:356), however, points out that it is presumptuous to think that followers of Traditional African Religions will have a greater sense of ecological responsibility. Blasus (2025:128) reports on the case of ecological birthing and funerary rites among the Sokpoe-Eve; rites that believably prime and orient people with the sense of earthiness required for environmental care, as they grow up. But these eco-implications and responsibilities are not necessarily observable in Sokpoe. He thus concluded by advocating for continuous education and demonstrating the meanings and implications of the rites for the eco-impact on the eco-community. Thus, people belonging to a Traditional African Religion might have a close tie with nature, but the exploitation of nature is not excluded. Seeing nature as organic and spiritual, and seeing humans holistically interconnected with nature, might be a Western interpretation of Traditional African Religions.

Connection with nature

Adherents of Traditional African Religions are aware of an acute, close relationship to nature. This close relationship to nature has multiple forms of expression in the varied African cultures. Credo Mutwa (1998:590–600) indicates that, according to African tradition (for example, the Zulu tradition in South Africa), the earliest stage in the development of the human soul is linked to plants. The souls of future humans germinate in grass plants, only to reincarnate as trees after the grass dies. After being a tree, the soul transforms into an animal and only then becomes human. After being human, the soul becomes a reptile, and then a bird. After the bird

phase, the soul enters the star phase (Mutwa 1998:610). The soul can then return to Earth to repeat this cycle.

Based on the account presented by Mutwa, the Zulu of South Africa view human existence as existing amid all other living beings. Being human is a middle phase (Mutwa 1998:601). The past and the future of human existence are, according to an African understanding, closely linked to nature.

Bergmann (2017:13) shows how the development of the concept of nature took on different forms among religions. The Abrahamic religions (Islam, Christianity, Judaism) interpreted nature as 'creation'. In African and Asian contexts, the emphasis is less on nature and more on 'Life and Earth'. The indigenous traditions prefer to use the concept of 'Land' when referring to nature (Bergmann 2017:13).

The connection to nature in Africa is based not only on a monistic understanding of a close bond between nature and human origin, but also on the interdependence between humans and nature for survival and identity (Bujo 1998:209). From nature, humans can harvest sustenance, but nature also provides an element of who you are, an identity.

Thorpe states (1991:28) that '[A]ll of nature is invested with a mystical, religious quality'. All of reality is one. Everything (animate and inanimate) forms part of a living community. This holistic understanding of reality holds that all elements in nature (i.e. animals, plants, rivers, mountains and humans) have religious significance and must be treated with respect.

This creates a dilemma: the Traditional African understanding of religion acknowledges the existence of an invisible spiritual world while also maintaining that all things are united and interconnected (Thorpe 1991:112). Carmody (1981:73) introduces the concept of 'consubstantiality' to describe this profound unity. All creation shares a common substance; there is no real differentiation between 'rocks and plants, plants and animals, animals and human beings, human beings and gods' (Carmody 1981:73). The whole cosmos is perceived as a single living system. It implies, at least among some African communities, a core unity of all that exists.

Among African communities that experience this profound unity with nature, it implies a monistic origin of all that exists, and an equality of essence among all things. The implication would be that there is no hierarchy in creation. Humans have no superiority or dominance over nature or any other element. Humans are in the world, part of the world, yet transcend it. This gives humans a responsibility to take care of the world.

The shared responsibility of Traditional African Religions and African Christianity

How then can the beliefs and practices of Christianity and Traditional African Religions be aligned towards a shared ecological responsibility?

Over centuries, Christianity has made significant inroads into Africa, becoming one of the three dominant religions in Africa (the others being Islam and Traditional African Religions). Despite the difficult relationship, Christianity in Africa has been influenced by Traditional African Religions (Maluleke 1998:132–133). Andrew Walls (1978:11–13) and, later, Kwame Bediako (1995:ix) stated that this was an influence and that Traditional African Religions, as Primal religions, are the most fertile soil for the Gospel. For both these scholars, the Primal Religions underlie Christianity. Bediako (1995:60) believes that the expression of Christianity in Africa is a genuine answer to African religiousness. This leads to the contention that Christianity is not an African religion but an African's religion (Bediako 1995:60). In Christianity, the African experiences an appropriate expression of Africa's religious needs.

The African philosophy and worldview, in particular, contribute to the expression of Christianity in Africa. It should be emphasised that when discussing Traditional African Religions, one needs to be aware that there is no single, monolithic block of belief that can be labelled as Traditional African Religion. It would be more correct to talk about African Religions in the plural (Krüger et al. 2009:35; Mbiti 1969:1). The same principle would apply to Christianity in Africa. There is not a single form of Christian expression in Africa. Africa is a vast region, encompassing many perspectives cultivated over centuries and shaped by multiple views.

The belief in Traditional African Religions that there exists an unbreakable connection within all reality can serve as a point of contact to which Christianity can link, arguing for a responsible treatment of nature to address the ecological crisis. The principles of interconnection of reality (holism) and communal responsibility converge in the concept of *ubuntu*.

Ubuntu and holism

According to Dolamo (2013:2) even if *ubuntu* is not unique to African culture, it stands at the core of being human and expresses the ideal of being human (compare in this regard Broodryk 2008:41). *Ubuntu* expresses the process of socialisation through which one becomes human through being connected to others (Dolamo 2013:4). This process entails the acquiring of skills and ethics required for harmonious co-existence. The community established through *ubuntu*, however, extends beyond human interaction. Humans are connected to other humans and to a whole system of relationships (Dolamo 2013:5). *Ubuntu* creates awareness that humans depend on creation for their livelihood. Hove (2024:42) emphasises that *ubuntu* refers to unity and proximity to fellow humans and nature. Bujo (1998:208) also argues that African traditional views of community encompass humans and the entire natural world, which includes animals and plants. Magesa (2002:52) emphasises this by pointing out that for Africans, 'the universe is perceived as an organic whole'. In African

religion, 'humans maintain the bond between the visible and invisible spheres of the universe' (Magesa 2002:72).

The close spiritual connection to nature would, according to Dolamo (2013:9), lead to places such as lakes, rivers, mountains and forests being declared sacred to protect them from destruction. Allison Howell observed that spiritual engagement with land and water bodies was once part of the fabric of African spirituality; unravelling this in our generation contributes significantly to the rise of illegal mining and the degradation of land in Ghana (Howell 2017:12).

Maake Masango (2006) interprets the concept of *ubuntu* from a Christian perspective. He emphasises that one can discover one's humanity through the principle of *ubuntu*: I become human once I recognise you as human. Kwame Gyekyi, arguing that African moral values are humanistic, asserts that 'in African morality, there is unrelenting preoccupation with human welfare. What is morally good is that which brings about human wellbeing' (Gyekyi 1996:57). This helps to restore human dignity.

The concept of *ubuntu*, however, needs critical reflection. Equality and recognition of the humanness of the other is not only to be extended to family, clan, or tribal members – the familiar. Then *ubuntu* would maintain an exclusivity over who is recognised as deserving of dignity and respect. *Ubuntu* needs to be defined by acknowledging the humanity in others, regardless of their race, language, or descent. Gyekyi, rightly, explains with the Akan maxim *honam nni nhanoa* (the flesh or humanity has no boundary) that 'all humankind is one species' and so there is no limit in the cultivation of friendship and fellowship in Africa (Gyekyi 1996:28).

For Masango (2006:932), Black identity and African spirituality centre on the concept of *ubuntu*. According to Masango (2006:938), *ubuntu* entails mutual respect among human beings, respect for elders, commoners, family, strangers and nature. In the commonality of existing together, one discovers the true meaning and wholeness of life (Masango 2006:939), expressing an understanding of *ubuntu* as a way of life in which a person is considered a person because of other people.

For Masango (2006:932), *ubuntu* means discovering and restoring humanity's image and likeness of God. This will cause humanity to respect each other. *Ubuntu* will instil values that will shape the next generation who will work towards peace (Masango 2006:942). *Ubuntu* implies the restoration of the image of God in humanity. Hove (2024:41) discusses how, through *ubuntu*, the *imago Dei* in humanity is restored. By creating humans, God put something of God's self in humans. Once we understand ourselves to be created by God, we cannot but seek to love and protect God's creation (Hove 2024:41). Just as *ubuntu* makes humans neighbours to one another, we are also neighbours to nature (Hove 2024:42).

Ubuntu emphasises that humans are never seen as the owners of the land, merely because they are drawn from it and will return to it (Boulaga 1981:182). Most humans are called to administer the land. They are not the masters of the land but are linked to nature.

The African concept of *ubuntu* and holism reflects a connection between the living, the dead and nature, and adds important dimensions to the ecotheology debate. The Western dichotomy, as evidenced in ancient Greek philosophy (see the discussion earlier) by a separation between the sacred and the secular, spirit and matter, is countered from an African perspective by an extreme connection among the living, the dead and nature, bound by origin and fate. *Ubuntu* offers a model of ultimate community that inherently includes environmental responsibility for all humanity. *Ubuntu* provides a framework for understanding environmental issues in terms of strong relationships between humans and nature, and it emphasises the healing and restoration of nature rather than the management or conservation.

Conclusion

The African expression of the understanding of religion is the connectedness of all things. There is a close relationship between all things. There is one reality, with no distinction between physical and spiritual. Meaning in life is derived from unity. Rituals express this unity. Morals and ethics are concerned with maintaining unity. Diverse expressions of religion do not always preserve this unity. Religion is not the method by which to create unity, but the celebration of unity. This unity is captured in the concept of *ubuntu* and reflects a connection among the living, the dead and nature. This connectedness becomes the foundation for a responsible ecotheology.

God as Creator provides life and sustenance through disposing of created matter for consumption. The relation between humans and nature is, however, not to be reduced to a relation between acting subject and dominated object, but a unity between all created matter. In this way, the beliefs and practices of Christianity and Traditional African Religions can be aligned towards shared ecological responsibilities.

Humans have the responsibility to create and maintain a healthy environment for nature to sustain human existence. This unity in diversity brings humanity closer to nature and carries the responsibility to protect and preserve it. An ecological rehabilitation is only possible once this close bond with creation is understood. Humans and nature are part of the created matter brought into existence by God. This unity between humans and nature, expressed through *ubuntu*, binds them by a common origin, a common past and a shared future, whether in harmony or in disarray due to the ecological crisis. The connection between humans and nature can be maintained by value-infused relationships. Common respect and dignity are acknowledged and drive the relationship.

How the connection between humans and nature is depicted in Traditional African Religions and maintained in African Christianity can serve as motivation for responsible ecotheology.

Acknowledgements

This article is based on a conference paper originally presented at the Ecotheology Conference, held at Kutchire Lodge, Liwonde National Park, Malawi, on 12–15 August 2025. The conference paper, titled ‘Taking hands to save creation: an African perspective on ecotheology’, was subsequently expanded and revised for this journal publication. This republication is done with permission from the conference organisers.

Competing interests

The author declares that no financial or personal relationships inappropriately influenced the writing of this article.

CRedit authorship contribution

Jaco Beyers: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration. 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

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 study.

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