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Adam cried bitterly: Ecotheology in the lives of urban Malawians

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This article explores how urban Malawians construct moral and theological meaning of waste and how these constructions shape environmental practices, in densely populated areas of Blantyre. Challenging the assumption that environmental behaviour can be improved primarily through education, the study argues that moral action is grounded in contextual 'immanent logics' shaped by lived experience, social realities and religious belief. Drawing on interdisciplinary collaboration between theologians and environmental researchers, the project builds on earlier social-scientific studies of the problematisation of waste. It incorporates a second round of interviews to probe theological interpretations. Findings show that Christian frameworks play a significant role in shaping respondents' understanding of waste, human responsibility and environmental order. Most participants interpret waste not as part of God's original creation but because of human sin and misuse of otherwise good materials, often framed through narratives related to Genesis. Contrary to expectations, charismatic motifs such as spiritual warfare or divine healing were absent. Instead, respondents' reasoning more closely reflected a wisdom-theology framework emphasising divine order, human responsibility and the moral contrast between peace and chaos. Eschatological beliefs, including anticipation of Christ's return, were present but integrated into this broader moral logic rather than producing environmental disengagement.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: The article concludes that environmental interventions in similar contexts are more likely to succeed when they engage existing theological narratives rather than relying solely on technical education. Framing ecological practices as participation in God's created order and wisdom may resonate more deeply with local moral reasoning and encourage sustainable behavioural change.

Keywords: Malawi; ecotheology; waste management; morality; urban; charismatic theology.

Introduction

Educating morality

How do those who know more about good environmental practices help those who know less? The answer is implied in the question: education. If you knew what I know, then you would act like me, the logic goes. However, this logic fails on several fronts. Firstly, ethicists, especially Christian ethicists, will remind us that just because someone knows the right thing does not mean they will do the right thing. What Paul writes in Romans 7:19 (NIV), 'For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do – this I keep on doing', continues to apply to humanity today. Mere knowledge is insufficient to ensure ethical behaviour.

Secondly, implicit in the idea of education is that someone knows more than another; there is superior knowledge that will help overcome inferior ignorance. This is not necessarily true, especially when it comes to complex human behaviour. Knowledge can be different, even complementary, not just superior or inferior, because knowledge is always contextual and situated. Feminist and postcolonial scholars point to the difference between a patriarchal and colonial mindset versus one that considers the knowledge of women and the colonised (Belenky et al. 1997; Santos 2018). The existence of contextual or situated knowledge implies that the hierarchical relationship between superior and inferior is not as clear as it might first appear.

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Thirdly, implicit in the idea of 'good' environmental practices is a kind of moral clarity that is not necessarily attainable or universally agreed upon. The ambiguous moral status of some environmental practices is revealed in the hypocrisy of developed economies that dictate 'good' environmental practices to developing countries while ignoring their own. For instance, while we are aware of 'good' waste management practices, the dynamic of ever-increasing consumption, one of the underlying principles of capitalism and a primary driver of waste production, is rarely seriously questioned. What is moral in one context might contradict another moral imperative in another. It is moral for Westerners to reduce waste, but this does not impinge on their lifestyle. In other contexts, reducing might affect quality of life, thus contradicting the moral good of the right to life.

For example, the average waste production per capita in Malawi is approximately 0.5 kg/person per day. This figure is consistent for urban centres such as Lilongwe and Blantyre, although some variation occurs in high-income areas where waste production can reach up to 0.61 kg/person per day (African Clean Cities Platform 2022). This is compared to the US, which is approximately 2.22 kg/person per day (United States Environmental Protection Agency [US EPA] 2017). Furthermore, most household waste in Malawi (about 82%) is organic, with plastic constituting only 7%, paper 4%, glass 3% and metals 1%; most organic waste is consumed by animals, burned or left to compost, leaving comparatively very little trash for collection or as litter (Sustainable Inclusive Business n.d.).

At root, each of these three limits points to a logic at work in people's lives. 'Ignorant' people are not so much irrational or immoral as they act out of their own immanent logics. Various moral sentiments inform these logics, making it impossible to summarise them as 'people act out of self-interest'. Parents make many choices that are not self-interested. Sacrificial actions on behalf of another make sense within a moral order, but they are not strictly self-interested. It is only partially accurate to attribute immoral behavior on vices such as pride, jealousy, or greed. We may break a moral rule while still behaving out of a virtue, such as love. At times, people are unaware of the logic underlying their behaviour, but if pressed, they might offer a moral justification that makes sense within their context and particular moral framework.

Knowing this immanent logic, what makes sense to the person in this context and with these particular circumstances, is a prerequisite for changing moral behaviour. It is not sufficient to know what moral action we want to see because that moral action is entirely predicated on our own context and particular circumstances. We must enter into the moral universe of the other person so that a new morality might emerge that takes both moral logics into account.

The other's immanent moral logic, the insufficiency of education, its contextual nature and the scale of moral action are not simply abstract problems. Recently, we sought to address an environmental issue in Blantyre, a large urban area in southern Malawi. Among the many environmental problems they faced, residents of densely populated areas, such as Ndirande, lived surrounded by mountains of waste. Simply put, many Malawians were not engaged in 'good' waste management practices. Waste such as plastic containers clogged precious waterways, made streets impassable and created a locus for disease. The city, for all its efforts, routinely runs out of petrol to keep its insufficiently small waste-collection fleet on the road, leaving residents largely responsible for their own waste management.

Waste management experts concerned with the well-being of large numbers of everyday Malawians face severe limits in what they can do to change behaviour. While governments have various levers to change behaviour, for instance, they can sanction through fines and incentivise through payouts, non-governmental agents cannot compel behaviour change. This places more pressure on the means they do have available. Education becomes the primary engine driving behaviour change.

This article explores the immanent moral order of everyday life of Malawians regarding solid waste. Without understanding this, no educational campaign will succeed. As the research proceeded, it became clear that Malawians construct their understanding of waste and thus of moral action surrounding waste, using their Christian faith. This was not the only framework they used, but it is an important one. It is important because waste management tends to understand the world in strictly material terms. Christianity, on the other hand, understands the world as both material and spiritual. How the material and spiritual relate, and how people live out that relationship, is critical to understand whether we want to influence behaviour around waste management.

Discussion: Theoretical frameworks

Waste, problems and morality

The moral and theological significance of waste has long preoccupied scholars across anthropology, sociology and cultural theory. Mary Douglas's *Purity and Danger* remains foundational, defining dirt as 'matter out of place' and showing that what societies label as pollution or waste reflects moral and symbolic boundaries – distinctions between the pure and impure, the sacred and profane, order and disorder (Douglas 1978). Later theorists, such as Zygmunt Bauman, Gay Hawkins, Susan Strasser, John Scanlan and Joshua Reno, have extended this insight, showing that waste provokes anxiety precisely because it unsettles these boundaries: it is simultaneously familiar and abject, useful and rejected, integral to daily life yet threatening when encountered outside prescribed spaces. For scholars such as Hawkins and Scanlan, waste therefore

embodies a productive ambivalence – a space where material, moral and cultural values are negotiated (Hawkins 2006; Scanlan 2005).

This article expands on prior research by Marc Kalina and Elizabeth Tilley (Kalina & Tilley 2020; Kalina et al. 2022).

The study, '"Bad" Trash: Problematising Waste in Blantyre, Malawi' examined the perspectives of subsistence maize growers and informal waste pickers at the Mzedi Dump Site, using Foucault's problematisation lens (Kalina & Tilley 2020:187). The study '"Where Does It Go?": Perceptions and Problems of Riverine and Marine Litter among South Africa and Malawi's Urban Poor' conducted extensive interviews (28 in Ndirande, 18 in Likhubula, 18 in the Central Business District of Blantyre, and 32 with Johanna Road residents in South Africa) using the same theoretical framework.

Both articles use Foucault's concept of problematisation, 'the process through which inert, apolitical, and fixed objects (such as waste) transform into sets of fluid, conditional, political relations' (Kalina & Tilley 2020:190). Problematisations are not inevitable or clearly self-evident but rather the results 'of particular social relations, contingent on human practice' (Kalina & Tilley 2020:190). As Kalina and Tilley (2020:190) go on to say, problematisation is a way of 'referring to the ways in which individuals put an issue, object, etc. forward or designate something as problematic' (Kalina & Tilley 2020:191). Individuals will take the information they have and consider what constitutes a 'problem' based on their particular social location, including their needs and the roles they play.

It is not accidental that Kalina and Tilley (2020) use the moral terms 'bad' and 'good' to describe trash. They build on Greg Kennedy's (2007) *An Ontology of Trash: The Disposable and Its Problematic Nature*, and the insight that:

> [*M*]ost of our refuse, aside from perhaps a scuff or a bit of dirt marring its surface, undergoes little qualitative change in its transition from desirable commodity to something that must be separated from society, hid, or destroyed. (p. 187)

There is no significant qualitative difference, but there is a moral difference. Some things are good, and others are bad, but the line between the two is thin. Yet, as sociologists of waste have argued, these problematisations are never only political or technical: they are moral and affective, revealing the cultural logics that underpin what is valued or abjected. The 'badness' of trash, as Kennedy and Hawkins suggest, is inseparable from the moral discomfort it evokes. When Kalina and Tilley note that 'bad trash is not problematised because it is a hazard … it is problematised because it has no value', their respondents are echoing precisely this moral ambivalence that Douglas and later scholars describe – that waste's danger lies in its capacity to blur categories and disrupt social order (Kalina & Tilley 2020:198). This firmly fits within a utilitarian ethical framework, which in turn depends on the immanent logic of the moral agent to make sense. Utilitarianism judges moral behaviour by a criterion inherent in the moral agent. Foucault's method, therefore, inadvertently reveals theological commitments because it raises moral issues. Problematisation calls for a response. In this regard, it asks the basic moral question, 'What ought to be going on?' (see Osmer 2008 for a fuller vision of how the moral theology fits within practical theology). A problem, however framed, calls for a response, and this response is grounded in a moral reality.

Waste and pentecostal and charismatic theology

Kalina and Tilley were frustrated with the moral framework, which led to this project. Malawians use theological categories to challenge their understanding of waste. This is according to a study conducted by Kalina and Tilley. In an extended quote, they report a respondent saying, 'God has his ways of ensuring that no impacts happen and that plastic does not get into oceans' (Kalina et al. 2022:14). There is a certain amount of theological thinking at work here. The respondent believes that God has the power and will to ensure that polluted rivers filled with waste from Ndirande will not pollute the sea but has no rational reason for this belief beyond what they know from their Christian faith. Although it is underdeveloped, a doctrine of providence is inherent in the response. To use the categories of the Reformed theologian Karl Barth, the respondent has faith not only in the creative power of God but also in the preserving, accompanying and ruling power of creational providence (Barth 2004:58–288, specifically paragraph 49: God the Father as Lord of His Creature). This was not an isolated incident. Respondents in the 'Where Does It Go?' study consistently used theological categories to problematise waste in their local environment.

As scientists, Kalina and Tilley lack categories to account for spiritual interpretations of the world, which is more fully explored in a study by Bertrand (2025). Recognising this, they invited this theological collaboration. They reoriented their subsequent research questions to capture how Christian worldviews shape environmental thought and practice. This collaboration produced a second round of interviews incorporating explicitly theological prompts. All interviews were conducted in Chichewa, transcribed into English, coded thematically in NVivo and analysed for recurring theological motifs.

One of the most helpful lenses through which to understand these data are A.J. Swoboda's *Tongues and Trees: Towards a Pentecostal Ecological Theology* (Swoboda 2013). This is true because Malawian Christianity in all its forms has been influenced by the pentecostal and charismatic movement (Munyenyembe 2011). Swoboda offers a comprehensive survey of ecotheology from all theological perspectives, with a special focus on the pentecostal and charismatic movement. In Chapter 2 *of Tongues and Trees: Towards a Pentecostal Ecological Theology*, Swoboda maps out four main schools of ecotheology, namely: Roman Catholic; Orthodox; Protestant; and Ecofeminist. In Chapter 3, he reviews the relevant

literature in pentecostal and charismatic circles. Notably, his review largely focuses on the West for the usual reasons; he is in the West, and it has produced more written sources. This limits his review, at least for the purposes of this study, in two ways. Firstly, his focus on the African charismatic experience is limited (but not entirely absent). Secondly, his account is academic and thus distant from the lived experience of the average person living in southern Africa. Still, he provides some universally true frameworks and, as he notes, pentecostal and charismatic theology is never far from religious experience.

Two of Swoboda's categories, Roman Catholicism and Protestantism, map relatively well onto the religious makeup of a country such as Malawi. Between the Catholics and Presbyterians, a majority of Christians are covered. While there are Orthodox Christians within Malawi, they remain a minority. Swoboda's category of Ecofeminism crosses denominational boundaries, including Roman Catholics such as Elizabeth Johnson and Protestants such as Sallie McFague. This way of thinking may have shaped the everyday beliefs of Malawian believers. Still, even Swoboda admits that the ecofeminist stream has more influence in academic circles than in the lives of everyday Christians. It suffices to say that the majority of Malawian believers would get captured by the first two categories.

Published in 2013, Swoboda's account of these schools of thought is succinct but comprehensive. For Roman Catholics, he cites thinkers such as Matthew Fox, Raimon Panikkar, Charles Murphy and Leonardo Boff. To update the Roman Catholic ecotheology, he would need to take into account 'Laudato Si' (Kiel 2019; Kiel & Rossing 2017). In Protestant thought, he points to the towering figure of Jürgen Moltmann and his influence on 20th-century ecotheology. Notably, Swoboda dismisses ecotheologies based on the stewardship motif. He notes that the word does not appear in Scripture in relation to creation. While he mentions Douglas John Hall, a proponent of an environmental approach grounded in stewardship, he does not address Hall's work (Hall 2004). Nor does Swoboda address any of the various ecumenical statements regarding the environment. These are not sufficiently constructive in their theological formulations, a point that is perhaps true, at least from an academic perspective.

Swoboda works to develop a fifth category: the Pentecostal Charismatic. He puts forward his own constructive proposal for a pneumatologically based ecotheology, grounded in the classic marks of pentecostal and charismatic theology. While his particular constructive proposal may have merits, it is unclear whether it has had a significant influence on the lived, everyday theology of Malawians. Nor it is clear that the African pentecostal and charismatic ecotheology movements that Swoboda points to have had a long-lasting effect. He dwells on M.L. Inus Daneel and his work with the Association of Zimbabwean Traditional Ecologies and African Association of Earth-Keeping Churches (Swoboda 2013:77). While Daneel is undoubtedly influential, he does not appear to have a significant impact in Malawi. Munyenyembe does not cite Daneel, for instance (Munyenyembe 2011).

Rather, it is the foundation of Swoboda's work, the marks and characteristics of pentecostal and charismatic ecotheology, that offers the best heuristic lens. For instance, he notes that 'Pentecostal theology has been more strongly situated in action over and above theological reflection' (Swoboda 2013:155). This is a point that other pentecostal and charismatic theologians, such as Jamie Smith, have pointed out (Smith 2010). It has also been observed that this is one reason that the pentecostal and charismatic movement has resonated 'well in African cultures and religious practice where charismatic, experiential, and ecstatic expression is in the nature of the *homo religiosus* of the African sphere' (Swoboda 2013:76). It should not surprise us, then, that the respondents don't have a fully articulated ecotheology. Rather, their actions and experiences inform what they believe.

While there is diversity among pentecostal and charismatic believers, the 'full Gospel' is very common among them. The full Gospel is: (1) justification by faith; (2) sanctification by faith as a second work; (3) healing of the body through the atonement; (4) premillennial return of Christ; and (5) baptism followed by glossolalia (Swoboda 2013:100). Again, not all pentecostal and charismatic believers hold to these exact tenets. Some would not strictly connect baptism and glossolalia, but the majority would, and those who do not will still expect the Spirit to work in miraculous ways in the believer's life. Of note here is the premillennialism. Eschatology plays a significant role in ecotheology. If, as many pentecostal and charismatic believers hold, Jesus will return after a time of tribulation, then there is less incentive to take environmental action. This world must suffer before Jesus returns; to alleviate that suffering is to delay the return of Christ. This theology fosters a focus on heaven (hastening the return of Christ so that the millennium can begin) and pessimism (the world is coming to an end, which is seen as a positive development), both of which hinder an activist ecotheology (Swoboda 2013:88). Where the postmillennial Protestant vision might be for the transformation of the world, the premillennial pentecostal and charismatic vision is for the annihilation of the world (Swoboda 2013:72). This, as Swoboda points out, has been a major issue in developing a pentecostal and charismatic ecotheology. In contrast, Swoboda claims that Roman Catholics operate with a largely realised eschatology, which sees the need for an ecotheology framed with the Kingdom that has come (Swoboda 2013:35).

In addition, there are several pentecostal and charismatic traits that Swoboda points to that may impact ecotheology

but have not to this point. For instance, a mark of the pentecostal and charismatic movement is an emphasis on healing. This can range from miraculous healing in a large-scale revival meeting to a soteriology that includes the full embodiment of humanity. But, as Swoboda points out, 'healing is viewed, in pentecostal practice, in anthropocentric terms rather than cosmic terms' (Swoboda 2013:104). We would not expect healing to be a motif among our respondents. Connected to this is the difficulty that the pentecostal and charismatic movement has with the source of sickness. Often, 'Pentecostals who have little to no context for comprehending death, sickness, and pain aside from the demonic' will struggle to understand larger systemic causes (Swoboda 2013:149). With this understanding, we might expect that ecotheology could include exorcism (getting rid of the demonic causes) but would not centre the healing of the world.

Ecotheology of urban Malawians

The focus on pentecostal and charismatic theology is evident in the respondent demographics from the second round of interviews (58 total). The largest group of churchgoers, 28% of the total, attend pentecostal and charismatic churches. The second-largest group is the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP), at 22%. Other well-known evangelical denominations (Seventh-day Adventist [SDA], Zambezi Evangelical, etc.), which make up 19%, slightly fewer than the CCAP. Other missionary churches, such as the Anglicans, accounted for only 3%. Roman Catholics and Muslims accounted for similar shares, 12% and 14%, respectively. A single African Independent Church believer was identified. These numbers are somewhat affected by convenience bias, as the interviews were conducted as people traversed well-known bridges over small rivers. It is clear from the timing of the interviews that some respondents were travelling as a group with local friends or family. Still, while not statistically significant and thus not generalisable, these numbers correspond to the felt reality of Blantyre's religious landscape. While the pentecostal and charismatic movement has spread across Malawi, as it has across sub-Saharan Africa, many historians will point to Blantyre as its Malawian genesis. We would expect this demographic distribution.

When queried about whether God created waste, about 14% affirmed that God did create waste because it served a purpose. For some, that purpose was to have humans exercise the responsibility of stewarding creation. For others, it was because waste serves a purpose within God's created order. This often refers to using biowaste, especially leaves, as fertiliser. In all cases, God's purposes were in relation to humans. An even greater percentage, 15%, struggled to answer, ending up suggesting they did not know. In both cases, most respondents struggled with the seeming paradox of God creating all things good, yet some things seeming bad. The problematisation present in Kalina and Tilley's article is at work here. Good and bad are tied to an anthropocentric moral understanding. When faced with a question of why God would do something, they struggle to find God's logic. The theocentric logic of creation makes sense, but not when contrasted with the anthropocentric problematisation of 'bad' parts of creation.

For the majority of the remaining respondents, more than 70%, it was clear: God did not create waste; humans did. The transcripts commonly note '[laughs]' before giving the respondents' answer; they clearly thought the idea to be absurd. For the majority, human sin leads to waste. A fascinating Biblical interpolation represents the general logic of this majority. For CBD04 (male, marketing consultant, Seventh Day Adventist), 'Everything changed after Adam sinned; nature changed, the environment changed – before Adam sinned leaves weren't falling from trees'. In poetic language, the respondent says, 'Adam cried bitterly when he saw a leave falling from a tree because it had never occurred before'. In a further commentary on this interpretation of Genesis 3, the participant says:

> [*W*]e hear that after God created everything, he said that everything was good. After sin, that's when we learn that they took tree leaves to cover their nakedness, and then the leaves would get dry and they would dispose them of [*sic*], and so on, creating waste … so, biblically we can connect waste and sin. (CBD04, male, marketing consultant, Seventh Day Adventist)

Genesis 3:1–7 makes no mention of leaves falling or Adam crying bitterly. Nor does it mention the fig leaves getting dry and falling away. Interpreters usually focus on the shame of nakedness, connecting Genesis 2:25 (NRSV), 'and the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed' with Genesis 3:7 (NRSV), 'then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves'. CBD #04's reinterpretation is both theological and conventional in that it recounts the Fall and creative in that it clearly connects sin to the environment. Other respondents were less creative but followed the conventional theological reasoning.

Of note, only one respondent named Satan as the creator of waste. In a pentecostal and charismatic cosmology that attributes much that ails humans to spiritual forces such as demons, it is surprising that only one respondent used this as a framework to understand waste. While not directly related to the source of waste, it is important to note that no respondent used healing as a paradigm for understanding any of the questions posed to them. Like the spiritual cosmology, miraculous healing is a common characteristic of pentecostal and charismatic theology. It is absent from these interviews.

What is present, however, is Kalina and Tilley's interpretation of how Malawians problematise waste.

A participant voiced the following, an opinion supported by the majority:

> My opinion is that God did not create anything as waste, but our perspective on whether an object is useful or not is what makes an object to be considered as waste or not. Thus, what's waste to you, doesn't not automatically mean is waste to me. So, I don't think what we consider as waste, when God was creating such objects was like let me create waste. It's just time and context which defines how one views an object as waste or not. If it's useful at that particular moment, then any object can be considered as waste by that particular person at that particular time – And when it's becomes not useful to you, it becomes a nuisance, and you don't know what to do with it, and you end up disposing it. (Chilomoni07, male, small business owner, Church of Central Africa Presbyterian)

The only thing lacking in this interpretation is that the determination of what is waste or not is tied to sin.

When pushed, the majority resort to the following theological logic to understand the origin of waste and how it plays out in their lives. God created all things good, and human sin makes some things bad. Sin is a corruption of God's intended purpose, for all things were created for the good of humans. The overwhelming example used to demonstrate this logic was trees and leaves. God created trees for the good of humans, and thus all parts of the tree, including leaves, must serve some human purpose. The God-given and good purpose of leaves, after they fall, is to become composted fertiliser. If humans do not do this but instead dispose of them in some other way, such as piling them by a river, they sin and create waste. A form of this logic extends even to human-made waste, with the most common example being plastic bags that proliferate across the Malawian urban landscape. God gave humans wisdom, and the creation of these bags was part of exercising that gift and thus is good because it fulfils humans' created purpose. Sin enters when humans no longer wisely use the bag for its intended purpose.

This understanding finds deep theological resonance with the Biblical Wisdom tradition. For the more conservative Wisdom tradition typified by Proverbs, God has created the world with a distinct order. To be wise is to follow this created order. This kind of order appears to be an immutable law of the universe given by God. Wisdom leads to a good and blessed life. The alternative, foolishness, is to go against this order. Wherever chaos reigns, there is a contravention of the order of the universe that God has set forth. Foolishness leads to death. While other parts of the Wisdom tradition, especially Job, will complicate this picture, they still maintain the basic premise that God created an ordered universe with knowable laws and that humans should follow those laws for a good life.

One way this pattern is expressed is through a recurring theme of peace versus chaos. Peace is part of the created realm in harmony with God's will. In heaven, a place where God's perfect creative will find perfection, there is no 'waste' because everything there follows that will. There may be trees, but those trees will shed leaves that only get used for God's intended purpose, i.e. creating compost. In contrast, the end times will be characterised by chaos. As one of the participants says, 'The last days will be days of unrest and havoc. And where there is no peace, there can't be cleanliness. Cleanliness is a sign of peace' (Ndirande02, male, small business owner, Charismatic Redeemed Ministry International). Contextually, this participant connects order with Kamuzu Banda and chaos with multiparty democracy:

> You can recall in early 1990s we used to have youth week in schools whereby we would clean the streets in the city and schools. There is a road which we used to clean for Kamuzu to pass, and you could not litter sugarcane residues because it was like Kamuzu was seeing you do that, and you would get in trouble. But now because of multiparty there is too much freedom and irresponsibility. For example, if I start consuming sugarcane and someone asks me to stop littering; I would say I have freedom to eat, and it doesn't matter where I'm eating or littering. Most of us don't know the laws of the land, and also there are lots of misunderstandings of freedom; the problem is our leaders do not enlighten us on crucial issues. (Ndirande02, male, small business owner, Charismatic Redeemed Ministry International)

This quote, framed within a discussion of Judgement Day and the end times, has an implicit connection between Banda and the Second Coming of Christ: those who know the law will create order and those who do not know the law will exercise their ignorant freedom to their detriment. One leads to life, the other to death. While few go as far as Ndirande02 in connecting the Wisdom tradition and Judgement Day to the Malawian context, there is an underlying, pervasive desire for order over and against chaos. Order is associated with God's creative will, and God's judgement comes against chaos.

A large number of respondents, about 75%, did not connect the idea of waste with any particular Bible story. A few, as seen above, used Genesis 1–3. A few others cited specific passages, such as Revelation 22, but most struggled with the question. The interviewer would often prompt the respondent by reframing the question away from 'waste' to 'hygiene'. After this rephrasing, several respondents would similar views, like:

> [*T*]hat Islam encourages hygiene such that you cannot go to a mosque without bathing; you need to wear clean clothes, and also you have to ensure that where you are coming from is clean. (Chilomoni20, male, works at Kamuzu Stadium, Muslim)

One of the participants connected hygiene to the teachings they have heard in their SDA congregation. Teachings about cleanliness are common, 'especially about cleanliness of the body, around home and community' (Ndirande10, female, shopkeeper, Seventh Day Adventist). This concern

with hygiene spills over into congregational life. Another participant relayed stories of leaders in their congregation who conduct monthly home visits, with hygiene included in the inspection. Still, neither the Christian nor the Muslim affirmations of hygiene cited particular Bible verses or Muslim writings. This is despite the fact that the Bible is replete with references to hygiene, especially in the Old Testament, because part of covenantal faithfulness is to keep kosher, a system of hygiene integrated into religious life. No respondents made this connection.

If respondents are to make a specific Scripture reference, it would most likely be to Genesis. Besides the obvious creation stories in Genesis 1–3, the second most-referenced story is the account of Noah and the flood (Gn 6–9). While two respondents (about 3%) draw a direct connection between creation and judgement, it does exist. A participant points out that, 'the story about the ark of Noah that's where you hear about the rapture', and proceed with:

> Okay, when Noah built an ark, he asked people to get on board, but people refused; only Noah's family got into the ark. Many things like animals, the environment were damaged by the floods. And as you know floods affect so many things – As a result, there was devastation after the floods – the floods brought chaos and waste. (Chilomoni11, male, unemployed, non-denominational Christian)

This interpretation brings together several themes common among the respondents: God created the world; humans have agency in carrying out God's will; sin is a corruption of that will, leading to chaos; judgement is chaotic but leads to a new order for the faithful fragment.

Conclusion

The initial hypothesis of this research, Kalina and Tilley's exploration of how Malawians problematised waste, revealed a gap in understanding. Malawians used theology, in part, to problematise. The second round of interviews used more theological questions, enquiring about the origin of waste, human agency and eschatology. These questions were formulated using a pentecostal and charismatic theological framework in mind. All of this was undertaken to understand the immanent logic and moral reasoning behind waste management practices in communities such as Ndirande.

The pentecostal and charismatic theological framework proposed was partly borne out. While the majority of believers interviewed were from pentecostal and charismatic churches, with most of the rest coming from denominations influenced by the charismatic movement, the dominant theological lens tended towards the Wisdom tradition rather than the charismatic one. The most common characteristic of the pentecostal and charismatic tradition touched on was premillennial eschatology, although not in the ways expected. A premillennial eschatology could lead to an otherworldly pessimism. In this case, the second coming of Christ was keenly anticipated but caught up in the more Wisdom-influenced understanding of God's creational purpose. The world has a purpose given by God, and humans have a responsibility to live in accordance with it. Those who do will find that the natural world gives life. Those who don't will descend into chaos. With the Second Coming, there will be a great sorting, a final chaos, where those elements that have not worked within God's purposes will be destroyed. Those elements, including believers and the natural world, will find perfect fulfilment in heaven.

This finding was surprising and prompts two further lines of thought. The first is to interrogate why pentecostal and charismatic adherents who regularly participate in a faith life that includes elements such as exorcism (deliverance ministries) and healing (prophetic words) do not carry that over into their understanding of waste. Adequately answering this would require more data than we have available at the moment. It would also need to include further study of particular pentecostal and charismatic faith communities. For instance, is the idiosyncratic interpretation of Adam weeping bitterly, indigenous to a particular faith community or is it a novel interpretation? The interaction between worship and its preaching, prayers and music in shaping attitudes and understandings would need to stand at the centre of any further study of pentecostal and charismatic adherents.

The second would be to further explore the roots of the Wisdom inclinations witnessed in this study. It is likely that something in Malawi's culture contributes to a certain degree of conservatism. This comes out as an inclination towards Wisdom. One piece of our data pointing to a cultural impetus towards Wisdom is that Muslim respondents did not differ significantly from their pentecostal and charismatic counterparts. In our study, the differences between Muslims and Christians were not as significant as the commonalities found between Malawians living in the same place. If it is true that a cultural factor inclines Malawians to understand the world through a Wisdom lens, it only raises more questions we cannot answer with our current data. For instance, why do Malawians identify as pentecostal and charismatic adherents but have inclinations towards Wisdom? How do these get reconciled within the individual believer?

Moving forward, educational efforts that promote certain practices as part of God's way, aligning with the created wisdom that leads to life, have a chance of success because they tap into the underlying moral logic at work in everyday Malawian lives. An anecdote may give an inkling of how non-governmental agencies (NGOs) concerned with the environment might use this understanding. In a Malawian university undergraduate class on solid waste management, students were attentive but not overly so. They took in the content, which was framed within a scientific understanding, but were not passionate about their learning. How the information they were learning would get used in the real world was a very real question for them. Solid waste practices

seemed scientific and distant from their lived experience. Near the end of the course, the students did a field trip to a Christian ministry called 'Farming God's Way'[1] that explicitly invoked the Wisdom theology described here. This demonstration farm used the exact techniques taught in the class but within a framework that centred on God's intent and design. Students loved it. They enthused about the very same things they had been studying because they now made sense to them. How to apply it was right there in front of them, and they could grapple with how to get others to participate in God's design for farming. Based on our research, it is possible that framing common eschatological understandings within an ecological framework centred on the wisdom tradition may also make sense to how Malawians already think.

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The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

CRediT authorship contribution

Elizabeth Tilley: Conceptualisation, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Supervision, Writing – review & editing. Blair D. Bertrand: Conceptualisation, Investigation, Methodology, Supervision, Writing – review & editing. Marc Kalina: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – review & editing. Jonathan Kwangulero: Conceptualisation, Investigation, Writing – review & editing. Thoko Chilembwe: Investigation, Writing – review & editing. All authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the National Committee on Research in the Social Sciences and Humanities. The ethical clearance number is NCST/RTT/2/6.

1.See more about 'Farming for God's way' at https://farming-gods-way.org/

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Data availability

The underlying data from this study are available from the corresponding author, Blair D. Bertrand, upon reasonable request.

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