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Influence of Christian missions on ecological preservation

Author:
Akinyemi O. Alawode[1]

Affiliation:
[1]Department of Christian Spirituality, Church History and Missiology, College of Human Sciences, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

Corresponding author:
Akinyemi Alawode,
aalawode@nbts.edu.ng

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For many years, Christian missions have focused on the redemption of humans while neglecting the environment that sustains them. The salvation story has always been centred on Christ's sacrifice for humankind. Other creations were conceived as immaterial to God's mission of love and care on Earth. Christian domains witnessed an explosive development and advancement that put other creations at risk. The environment and the ecosystem bore the brunt of those developmental activities, which led to global ecological crises. By the mid-20th century, Christians were awakened to the guilt of exploring the Earth without caring much for it, which led to the development of ecotheology as a strategy to promote a theological understanding of holistic missions to all of creation. Through ecotheology, the knowledge of Christian missions shifted from anthropocentric praxis to the integration of missions with ecology. This article draws on the literature to explore the historical background of integrating missions with ecology, its biblical basis, and its influence on ecological preservation. The findings show that, with a shift in theological understanding of God and His mission as inclusive of all creation, Christian missions have highlighted the need for humans to care for the Earth as part of God's redemptive plan for all creation.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This article serves as an eye-opener, prompting people to rethink how they have been treating their environment (ecosystem) and to make necessary amendments.

Keywords: Christian missions; ecology; ecosystem; ecotheology; creation; redemption; incarnational.

Introduction

Christianity has undergone different stages, with each stage bringing a new understanding of how to face the challenges of its time. Since its inception, Christianity has been known as a missional faith or religion, grounded in the conception of God's purpose for humankind at each period. Christianity spreads based on the conviction that God wants to accomplish His will in the world through those acquainted with Him. Thus, understanding God's nature and His mission on Earth determines the principles and practices of Christian mission. For the better part of Christianity's history, Christian missions have focused on the salvation of humankind and the emancipation of humanity for civilisation, at the expense of caring for the ecosystem. This situation arises because the conception of God's mission on Earth is primarily understood as the salvation of humankind. This anthropocentric focus relegates other creations to the category of unimportant in God's salvific plan. Christianity, in its domain, then strives for academic, social, political, and economic development, leading to the Renaissance, Reformation, and Industrial Revolution. These events had adverse environmental effects because of the theological belief that humans are the most essential part of creation and that other creations are made for them.

However, by the mid-20th century, other creations were showing distress, and the effect of human activities began to show in the ecosystem, prompting some Christian theologians to re-engage the Bible and discover that God is committed to all of His creation to love and care for them and also wants His people to do the same. The rise of ecotheology in the 1970s became a response to the allegation that the conception of Christian faith as anthropocentric faith gave rise to environmental abuse. This article utilises the literature to explore the 'historical background to Christian missions' discourse on ecology' to provide the basis for the study; 'biblical foundation for ecology's preservation' to give a theological rationale for the study; and 'Christian missions' influence on ecology' to practically elucidate Christian missions' response to environmental and climate change. The article concludes that, in recent times, Christian missions have been making a remarkable shift from an anthropocentric focus to caring for the whole cosmos, as churches,

theological institutions, and Christian mission agencies are integrating creation care and earth-keeping into their mission activities.

Historical background to Christian missions' discourse on ecology

Since its inception, Christianity has been at the forefront of bringing growth, development and civilisation to humanity. Many Christian nations experienced eras that championed human emancipation, such as the Renaissance, the Industrial Revolution, and Modernism, at the expense of other forms of creation. Ironically, these nations were also responsible for crimes against humanity, such as wars, the slave trade and colonialism, which had an impact on the global ecology (Arora & Stirling 2023:2). Lynn White's 1967 publication, 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis', triggered discourse on religion and ecology. White accuses Western Christianity of being the culprit of the crisis, blaming it on its anthropocentric and eschatological characteristics (Abdi & Pardosi 2018:276). White's allegation seems to wake Christians to a sense of missional responsibility towards the environment.

Rise of ecotheology

Furthermore, Conradie (2020:1–2) notes that Christian concerns and discourses about ecology that gave rise to ecotheology have been ongoing for 50 years, noting that ecotheology emerged as a scholarly discourse in 1972 as a response to Lynn White's allegation that Christianity is a root cause of environmental degradation due to its anthropocentric orientation. He also notes that this allegation led to a restudy of the scriptures and Christian traditions to reconstruct a theology that encompasses creation care as part of Christians' responsibility. From the 1990s, ecotheology became an amorphous discourse that took many forms and was applied to a wide array of endeavours to emphasise that all life forms matter. Thus, it is not out of place for Christians to review their belief system and shape it in such a way that they would bring reparation to the world their activities had once damaged.

Thus, Conradie et al. (2014:1) opine that ecotheology is an attempt by Christian theologians to correct the impression that Christianity has contributed immensely to the ecological destruction brought about by the Industrial Revolution, which is experienced mainly in Christian countries. It focuses on promoting the ecological wisdom embedded in the Christian tradition in response to ecological destruction and environmental mismanagement associated with the development and economic prosperity of Christian nations. Conradie et al. (2014:6) further argued that ecotheology should not only be a response to the ecological sense of crisis in the climate change discourse but also relate to the core of Christian faith. This process requires reinvestigating Christian doctrine to develop a theological rationale for ecological preservation. Doctrinal themes such as the Trinity, creation, salvation, the church, sacraments, and eschatology should be studied to develop an ecotheology that is acceptable in principle and practice. Theological understanding shapes mission practice; if Christians widely understand the sacred responsibility to preserve nature, this will also be reflected in the proclamation of their faith; hence, the efforts theologians have been progressively making to develop ecotheology as a dominant theology within the Christian faith.

Denominational and ecumenical response to ecological preservation

In Roman Catholic circles, concerns for ecological preservation began in 1971, when Pope Paul VI argued that careless exploitation of the Earth would lead to disastrous consequences. In the late 1970s, Pope John Paul II declared St. Francis of Assisi the patron saint of ecology, and in 1990, he elucidated the moral aspect of the ecological crisis. His counterpart in the Greek Orthodox Church, Patriarch Bartholomew I, known as the Green Patriarch in 1997, declared environmental degradation a sin and a crime against the natural universe. In 2002, the Patriarch and the Pope jointly warned the world of the impending ecological crisis facing the Earth. Also, in Anglican circles, Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, and his successor, Justin Welby, have led the Anglican Communion to adopt Creation Care as the fifth mark of mission. Williams led other religious leaders in signing the Lambeth Statement in preparation for the United Nations Climate Change Conference in 2009, and in 2015, Welby echoed Williams' statement, as contained in the Lambeth Declaration, calling on all nations to take climate change seriously. In June 2015, the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Patriarch also jointly stated the need to protect nature, calling the Earth a gift that must be preserved to ensure and sustain abundant lives (Kaoma 2015:2–3). This approach is readily evident in how these traditions promote an eco-friendly atmosphere in their places of worship, as a testament to their theological convictions.

Furthermore, attention to ecological matters in missions moved to the ecumenical circles and was discussed at the World Council of Churches (WCC) gathering as expressed in *The Accra Confession (2004), The Cape Town Commitment (2010)* and *Together towards life – Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes* which all centred on merging creation care with redemptive purpose and commitment to the integrity of creation as one of the components of missiology (Niemandt 2015:2). The World Council of Churches Edinburgh 2010 expressed that creation care is critical to the God's mission, which warrants a change of attitudes towards the creation to mitigate the impending ecological disaster that will gravely affect the upcoming generations. The mitigation is considered a moral and religious imperative for humankind (Kaoma 2015:1–2). Additionally, on 16–19 June 2019, more than 50 participants from 22 countries gathered in Germany for the Wuppertal Conference, themed '*Wuppertal Call 'Kairos for Creation'*, a conference convened to find common ground on ecotheologies, ethics of sustainability and eco-friendly churches. (Werner 2019:15) The positions of Christian bodies

are helping raise global awareness of the growing ecological crisis, demonstrating contextual, missional engagement by Christians in bringing holistic healing to the world.

Biblical foundation for ecology's preservation

Old Testament

God created the world and all that is in it before creating humans in His image and according to His likeness (Gn 1:26). He placed humankind in the Garden of Eden to dress and keep it (Gn 2:1–15) (Umuziranenge 2019:265). The verbs used for dressing and keeping in the original language are '*abad*' [to till or work] and '*shamar*' [to preserve or protect], respectively. This usage affirms the fact that God mandated His crown creation to care for their environment, in protecting and preserving it as they work on it (Damonte 2017:40). This mandate provides a basis for theologians to find a space for ecology in theology, which leads to the formation of ecotheology as a branch of theology.

Explaining ecotheology and its derivatives, Hodson and Hodson (2015:20–22) observe that Christians are developing new approaches to interpreting the Bible to preserve the natural world as a sacred duty. God's love for creation is emphasised in the scripture reading, right from the creation story, where He declared that each part of creation was good (Gn 1:31). Also, God's instruction to Noah to preserve biodiversity before the flood (Gn 6:11–21), and His instructions to Israel on laying siege in Deuteronomy 20:19, which prevented them from cutting down fruit trees around the city shows His concern for all forms of life. Kaoma (2015:8) notes that the acknowledgement that God cares for and shows love to all He has made and his declaration 'very good' in Genesis 1:31 solidifies the position that Christians should be involved in earth-healing and earth-defending enterprises, such as tree planting, protesting against air and water pollution, deforestation, land degradation, and high carbon emissions. These initiatives should be seen as spiritual, theological, and moral concerns that require missiological reflection and action.

New Testament

Additionally, Jesus' reference to God's care for the sparrows in Luke 12:6, that they are not forgotten, shows that God is mindful of all his creation, which Athanasius echoed in his position on incarnational theology as it relates to the creative power and sustainability by the Trinity (Edwards 2014:27–29). Conradie (2014:96) also notes that the biblical metaphors to describe creation theology in re-imaging the world as a fountain of life, the potter's clay, product of artisanship, a work of art, God's body, God's own child or household will help sustain an ecological praxis, ethos and spirituality which reveals inherently that the world belongs to God and Christians should draw from His identity and character to care for His world. Incarnational theology emphasises that Jesus did not despise the physical world but was part of it, and even announced God's ownership of and care for the whole world through His teachings. Thus, if Christians were also to be incarnational in missions, other creations should not be neglected when proclaiming the redemptive story.

Therefore, the biblical basis for ecological concerns has been advanced by many scholars, including the creation story in the Old Testament and the New Testament ideology of a cosmic Christ, which serves to evoke ecological awareness. Also, Paul, in his teachings in Acts 14:15, 17:24, 1 Corinthians 8:6a, Ephesians 3:9, Romans 8:19–23, and Colossians 1:15–20, reflects on an ecological perspective on God's mission on Earth. He states categorically that creation is involved and included in manifesting the glory of God the Creator (Kanagaraj 1998:293–295). The rendering of the groaning of creation by Paul in Romans 8:19–23 shows his sense that creation awaits the discovery and performance of humans as co-redeemers with God, which involves recognising God's care for them as the basis of caring sacrificially for their environment, which connotes the freedom desired by the created glory (Southgate 2014:114). The redeemed humans should also extend their redemption to other creations, so that they feel God's love and care through them (Christians) in the temporal world, a shadow of the eschatological reality of the new heaven and new Earth, where all of creation shows the peace and harmony God granted when creating them. This fact points Christians to the reality of the afterlife that Christ promised: blissful enjoyment of nature, free from the ecological calamities of the present world.

Christian missions' influence on ecology

Christian missions should then reflect on the care of nature by emphasising God's care and love for all that He has made, and by making the redeemed aware that care for creation is a sacred responsibility. Seaman (2016:74), in the review of Creation Care in Christian mission, edited by Kapya J. Kaoma, quotes the editor as stating that 'Christian mission cannot remain faithful to God while ignoring the worsening depletion of life-supporting planetary ecosystems'. Also, John Haught (2004:284) posits that the Christian story of redemptive hope encompasses the cosmos as part of the promise, and that nature should be well preserved to fulfil it. Likewise, Dalia Baba (2022:46) recognises that for Christian missions to remain relevant in a dynamic world, they need to develop an understanding of the forces shaping the globe and their implications. Ecological issues are the foremost global challenge today, and Christian mission cannot ignore them.

Moreover, Dennis Edwards (2006:2–4) notes that the WCC, the Greek Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church, and other churches have taken several steps to raise Christians' awareness of the ecological crisis and their sacred responsibility to mitigate it. Pope John Paul II was said to affirm the integrity of creation as a moral issue, lamenting that while humanity might have disappointed God through

the abuse of the Earth, there is a new beginning in ecological awareness and action, which he called 'environmental conversion'. Also, in 2012, Pope Francis's *Laudato si'* emphasised love as the guiding principle for ecological, spiritual and anthropological conversions and as a tool for resolving environmental crises (Purwanto & Silalahi 2024:161). This theme has mandated that Western Christianity move from an emphasis on traditional anthropological doctrines to creation theology or creation spirituality. In WCC's *Together Towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes,* article 51 recognises mission as healing and wholeness, and affirms that the social, political, and ecological dimensions of personhood and wholeness are conditions related to God's promise of eternity and the present possibility (WCC 2013:8). The Anglican communion seems to have the most comprehensive documented ideologies on mission with its five marks of mission. The fifth one focuses explicitly on ecological conservation and states that 'To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth' (Wiher 2022:56). These laudable efforts have started to pay off, as many parishes and church mission stations are showing a consciousness of making the Earth a better place through the beautiful natural scenery for which they are known.

Furthermore, the Catholics have recently made tremendous efforts to promote Christian missions with ecological consciousness. In his *Laudato si'*: On the Care for our Common Home, Pope Francis emphasised the need for urgent action against the ecological crisis and suggested integral ecology as a fitting response. He spoke about an integrated approach that accounts for economic, social, cultural, daily life, and human ecology factors. The study of *Laudato si'* led some priests to begin Bethany Life Institute (BLI) in Uganda to integrate ecology with missiology. The BLI projected four main themes for using integral ecology as a method of missiological engagement which are integral ecology as conversion, integral ecology as spirituality, integral ecology as social love and integral ecology as ecclesiology which respectively represents curriculum matters, land matters, institutional matters and Bethany matters (using biblical Bethany illustrative characters as Mary's home, Martha's market and Lazarus trees as symbolism of what integral ecology is all about) (Katogonle 2022:166–177). In its mission, the contemporary church is radically promoting creation care as a missional objective.

Until this ecological consciousness emerged, Christian missionary tasks had rarely been linked to Christian responsibility for creation care. At the Annual Conference of the Missiological Society of South Africa in 1991, the ecological scope of God's Mission was discussed, and participants consensually agreed that the church's responsibility to the world should be comprehensive. Mission should be regarded as the means of proclamation and of establishing God's justice towards the whole universe. In contrast, areas where Christian missions have contributed to environmental degradation should be acknowledged. This position has led some missionary organisations and personnel, such as the association of earth-keeping churches in Zimbabwe, to promote ecological preservation. It has led Marthinus Daneel to embark on tree-planting projects (Conradie 2006:187). These practical steps are helping project Christianity as the pace-setting faith tradition poised to rejuvenate the Earth and sustain other life forms.

Ecological concerns have taken centre stage in global discourse. Among Christians and in the church, it is also being argued that her mission should engage with and promote awareness of the contemporary world's ecological crisis. Missionary education is also encouraged to include the study of ecology, with the Christian mission teaching that garbage be separated at the source, the environment cleaned and greened, and the Earth cared for as a sacred responsibility from God (Bag 2024:1051). Deane-Drummond (2014:50) advances Gegersen's deep incarnation missional concept to connote an ethical demand to love God and neighbour and act responsibly and with sensitivity towards the Earth and its creatures, created by God's providence. He advocated further work on deep incarnation to develop practical implications for relating ecological concerns to creature-care perspectives. As incarnational missiology dominates the discourse on contextualisation, the same kenotic focus is being advanced for environmental preservation, drawing on Christ's identification with the physical world to argue that Christians should attend to environmental care. This emphasis seems to be the best approach in convincing Christian mission practitioners to include ecological preservation in their holistic missions.

Furthermore, Conradie (2011:2–3) posits that three dominant models of Christian missions in Southern Africa engage with ecological concerns. The first is the mission station model, which is patterned after the missionary societies' (not churches') method of spreading the gospel in a foreign land. One Christian nature conservation organisation campaigns for ecosystem conservation as a non-governmental organisation. The second model is the cross-cultural model, in which churches raise their members' awareness of earth-keeping. Some even started eco-congregations in South Africa, using their environment and structure to promote ecological conservation. The third model is the prophetic critique, in which church leaders encouraged one another to pay attention to climate change and environmental issues rather than relying on the government. The churches are mobilising one another towards ecological preservation actions in view of the eschatological hope. Conradie's three models illustrate the stages of modern missionary approaches concerning Christian mission bodies' engagement with environmental issues. Just as modern Christian missions began with missionary societies, then moved to churches, and eventually to ecumenical conception, so too is ecological missiology progressing.

Moreover, Conradie (2011:5–8) gives the thesis that brings a balance between missiology and ecology: (1) Christian discourse on ecology gives secular discourse a moral vision; (2) Christians are to base their moral vision on their confession

of faith in the triune God; (3) Christian's moral vision should provide the proper perspective for seeing the world as God sees it; (4) worship practices reflect a theological ascription that presents the world in a multidimensional way; (5) engaging missiological discourse in a way that the redemptive story is told is a way to reflect the care and love of God for all creation; (6) alluding to illustrations about the Spirit as an agent of mission to reflect the beauty of creation; (7) mission concerning ecology should be contextualised and not labelled as a Western concern but as a universal concern for God's creation; (8) promoting a theology that reveals that God's work of salvation is for the sake of creation; and (9) decentralisation of mission to allow a holistic approach to how missions help the world and not just about church institutional ephemera. These theses provide direction for ecological missiology, offering principles and practices that present Christian missions as eco-friendly.

Furthermore, from an African theological perspective, the Earth community is understood as co-existing with nature, and respect for the Earth and all life forms is sacrosanct. During planting, harvest, and rainy seasons, many ecologically sensitive communities conduct rituals to show gratitude to 'Mother Earth'. However, this essentialist ecological approach does not prevent deforestation, bush burning or other activities needed for agricultural purposes, which is at variance with the Western concept of environmental preservation. While Africans' attachment is to land, Westerners are concerned about vegetation, climate, and the preservation of life forms (Ngwena 2020:23). Therefore, Christian missions in Africa already have an ecological basis for promoting creation care, grounded in the concept of interrelatedness between humans and the cosmos. Missions must then be done in a way that does not denigrate their ecological consciousness but rather proclaims the Sovereign Creator who loves and redeems His creation. He expects His devotees to care for His works and not worship them as deities or consider them tools to serve human greed, which is the leading cause of ecological crises.

In Rwanda, Protestant churches have been active in incorporating ecology into their missions in various ways. The Protestant University of Rwanda, in conjunction with the United Evangelical Mission, launched an environmental awareness programme to help communities combat climate change and protect the environment from degradation, using biblical perspectives to teach them environmental stewardship. Also, Église Anglicane au Rwanda (EAR) conducted community mobilisation for environmental conservation, provided training in soil management, erosion prevention, and tree planting, distributed seedlings and ceramic water filters, and sensitised communities to energy-saving stoves (Umuziranenge 2019:266–268).

Therefore, missiology in the context of ecological crises then seeks to demonstrate God's missions to people facing creation degradation to concretely and contextually proclaim the gospel of a new creation to the people, who in turn symbolise their transformation through the reinstatement of the integrity of environmental health, thereby pointing to biblical emphasis on cosmic salvation according to Paul's theology (David n.d.:6). With the ecological emphasis, Christian mission is then understood as being for the world created, loved and redeemed by God and thus Christians are called to participate in God's work for his creation (Sunquist 2013:25). Redemption has an extension to the whole cosmos through humankind, the crown creation purposed to be the Creator's delegate, through which His love and care can reach His world. It is a sacred responsibility that will benefit all on the temporal Earth and serve as a preparatory phase for eternity, prepared for the souls of humans, where creations relate as one.

Conclusion

Christianity in previous times might have championed anthropocentric ideology to the detriment of other creations, leading to abuse of the environment. Nevertheless, one thing is clear: most people who advanced the causes of environmental degradation and focused on scientific development that heralded ecological crises could not be said to be devoted to the tenets of Christian faith; their minds were only set on exploiting the universe for human advancement and neglecting the serious ecological consequences that follow. For this reason, Christian missions should proclaim a redemptive story that requires the redeemed to see themselves as caretakers of the cosmos, in accordance with the original plan of its Creator. The Gospel Proclamation and its attendant activities should transform the world into a more liveable place for all creation. These are the thoughts of Christian theologians and missiologists who saw the need to right the wrong of the anthropocentric belief system that formerly characterised Christianity, one that neglects the environment at the expense of human advancement.

This new understanding, therefore, has awakened the world to the responsibility of humans not to destroy their world in an attempt to make their lives better. Integrating ecological consciousness with Christian faith, which began as a theological discourse, has blossomed into the practical practice of renewing the cosmos as the extended blessing of salvation granted to humans. Therefore, saved humans have a new realisation that, as part of their salvation package, they have the sacred responsibility to love and care for their world; this has given rise to ecotheology and eco-friendly missions, recognised as part of God's mission on Earth.

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Writing – review & editing, Funding acquisition. 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 the findings.

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