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Reimagining Eco-theology for Sustainable Development

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Abstract:

This paper examines the role of eco-theology in promoting sustainable development. All religions consider the natural world as sacred due to its divine origins and thus deserving of care. However, humanity has not consistently fulfilled its responsibility to protect the environment. Consequently, this paper reevaluates the potential of eco-theology in fostering ecological stewardship and ensuring sustainable development. The study focuses on two main objectives:

- *First, to determine the contribution of eco-theology to sustainable development in Kenya and*
- *Second, to identify the challenges faced by eco-theology in promoting sustainable development in Kenya.*

A qualitative research approach was employed, which involved analyzing data from secondary sources, including scholarly journals, books, and government records. The collected data was qualitatively analyzed based on emerging themes and patterns. The study reveals that eco-theology encompasses four main roles: education, advocacy, action, and funding. The findings indicate that despite the current climate change crisis and unpredictable weather patterns, it is not too late to address these challenges. Eco-theology can play a crucial role in achieving sustainable development for the benefit of present and future generations. Consequently, the insights from this study are valuable for eco-theologians, governments, and scholars.

Keywords: *Eco-theology, sustainable development, sacred, ecological stewardship, climate change*

1. Introduction

The interconnectedness between ecological well-being and sustainable development has become increasingly evident in today's world. Recognizing the significance of this relationship, eco-theology has emerged as a field that seeks to reconcile religious beliefs with environmental concerns, emphasizing the sacredness of the natural world. All major religions acknowledge the divine origins of the created order and advocate for its preservation and care. However, human actions have often fallen short of this noble responsibility, resulting in ecological degradation and a growing need for transformative action.

In light of these challenges, this paper aims to explore the role of eco-theology in promoting sustainable development. Specifically, it seeks to rethink and reassess the potential of eco-theology to address ecological issues and ensure a path towards sustainable development. The focus of this study is on Kenya, where the intersection of religious beliefs and environmental challenges presents a unique context for investigating the impact of eco-theology.

To achieve this objective, the study employs a qualitative approach, drawing insights from a range of secondary sources such as scholarly journals, books, and government records. By analyzing and synthesizing this information, we aim to identify the multifaceted roles of eco-theology, evaluate its contributions to sustainable development in Kenya, and examine the hurdles it encounters in its pursuit of environmental advocacy.

The findings of this research are intended to inform and inspire eco-theologians, governmental bodies, and scholars interested in sustainable development. By shedding light on the transformative potential of eco-theology, we hope to contribute to the ongoing dialogue on addressing ecological challenges and fostering a harmonious relationship between humanity and the natural world.

As we delve into the exploration of eco-theology and its implications for sustainable development, it becomes increasingly apparent that despite the current global climate crisis and erratic weather patterns, there is still hope. By embracing eco-theological principles, we can actively work towards sustainable development, safeguarding the well-being of both present and future generations. Through this study, we aspire to unveil the significance of eco-theology as a catalyst for change and a pathway to a more sustainable and harmonious world.

1.1. Problem Statement

Theology endeavors to study the relationship between God and the universe. However, at times, theologians have tended to be otherworldly and just focused on life in Heaven, forgetting that we have a universe to bequeath to future generations. Buddhism, Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Hinduism are just a few of the major religions that have doctrines that emphasize the sacredness of the environment. Nevertheless, the careless overuse of our planet's resources by humanity has created a serious environmental problem. The relationship between organisms and their environment is vital for sustainable development. Accordingly, the field of Eco theology attempts to show that religious believers have a

role to play in preserving the environment. This study aimed to show how eco theology can contribute to sustainable development.

1.2. Objectives

This study was guided by two objectives:

- To determine the role of eco-theology in sustainable development in Kenya and
- To establish the challenges eco theology faces as it seeks to enhance sustainable development in Kenya.

2. Research Methodology

This part of the paper describes the research methodology used to investigate the role of eco-theology in sustainable development. A qualitative approach was employed, involving a thorough review of data from secondary sources such as scholarly journals, books, and government records. The selection of these sources aimed to capture a comprehensive understanding of eco-theology and its relevance to sustainable development by leveraging existing knowledge and insights in the field. The data collection process entailed a systematic review of relevant studies, articles, and reports from reputable sources, ensuring academic rigor and alignment with the research objectives. Scholarly journals provided scholarly contributions, while books offered a comprehensive overview of eco-theological concepts. Government records were incorporated to gain insights into policy frameworks and initiatives related to sustainable development in the context of Kenya. After data collection, a qualitative analysis was conducted to identify recurring themes, patterns, and key findings. This analysis allowed for a nuanced exploration of the research topic, revealing underlying complexities and interconnections. By utilizing a qualitative approach and reviewing diverse secondary sources, this study established a solid foundation for comprehending the role of eco-theology in sustainable development, with the subsequent analysis generating meaningful insights.

2.1. Eco-theology

Eco-theology, a term derived from the combination of 'theology' and 'ecology,' represents the intersection between these two disciplines. It aims to strengthen and enhance the connection between theology and the environment for the mutual benefit of both realms. The relationship between theology and ecology is multifaceted, as outlined by Taylor (2015). Theology focuses on human interactions with the environment, while ecology delves into the study of the environment itself. Consequently, theology helps us understand the impact of our actions on the environment, while ecology provides insights into the functioning of the natural world. Additionally, both theology and ecology address the concept of stewardship, emphasizing the responsibility humans have to care for the Earth. Theology teaches that humans are stewards of the Earth, while ecology highlights the fragility of the ecosystem that requires protection.

Wesley's three guiding principles for living a Christian life, as articulated by Snyder (2020), also have implications for eco-theology. These principles—do no harm, do good, and observe the commandments of God—can be extended to environmental considerations. However, the focus has primarily been on doing good, often neglecting the principle of avoiding harm. Therefore, it is crucial to reflect on how our actions and consumption habits impact the environment. Through prayerful contemplation, we can begin to mitigate the harm caused by our choices, considering the origin and disposal of the resources we utilize.

In the creation narrative of Genesis, as noted by Kanu (2022), humans are given a specific commandment to care for the Earth that God created. Eco-theology asserts that being created in the image of God entails the duty to protect the quality of the cosmos. It prompts us to examine our beliefs and actions that may undermine the goodness of creation. Questions are raised regarding the contribution of our car emissions to air pollution and our consumption habits without considering their environmental implications. Eco-theology challenges religious followers to evaluate their role in pollution and the damage it inflicts on creation.

Taylor (2015) highlights the extensive history of eco-theology, with various religions promoting the preservation of God's creation. For example, Islam and Hinduism have emphasized eco-theology as a means of demonstrating reverence for the environment. Early pioneers in the field, such as Sayyed Hossin, recognized the spiritual roots of environmental problems and advocated for a deeper engagement between theology and ecology. Hindu eco-theology, represented by authors like Vandana Shiva, emphasizes the transient nature of human existence and the responsibility to leave the Earth in a better state for future generations. Jewish philosophers-theologians such as Martin Buber and Abraham Joshua Heschel have also contributed to ecotheological discourse, influencing Christian thinkers. Christianity, with its rich heritage, has a deep-rooted tradition of eco-theology. Isaac of Nineveh, Seraphim of Sarov, and Francis of Assisi are among the influential theologians who have emphasized the doctrine of stewardship, and their ideas continue to shape modern ecotheological perspectives.

However, Leary et al. (2016) note that some argue that Christianity has perpetuated the global environmental crisis by promoting the notion that humans transcend nature, as seen in the interpretation of Genesis 1:28 as a call to dominate the Earth. This perspective, known as "The Ecological Complaint," has significantly influenced the development of eco-theology as a theological discourse. Nonetheless, it is essential to consider the accurate interpretation of Genesis 1:28, which emphasizes stewardship rather than domination. True stewardship involves caring for and preserving the entire created order. Eco-theology has gained traction in Christianity and has become increasingly mainstream.

Waqinabete (2018) asserts that human activities are responsible for adverse weather patterns resulting from climate change and global warming. Excessive carbon footprints, driven by consumeristic lifestyles, have contributed to

these challenges. Seeking God's guidance enables individuals to save both themselves and the Earth. As stewards of God's creation, Christians must recognize environmental preservation as an essential aspect of their stewardship responsibility.

Love for God and neighbor, as eloquently stated by John Wesley, includes a love for all of creation (Allen, 2018). The emphasis on loving our neighbors encompasses caring for the environment. By revering and protecting the universe, we demonstrate love for God, who created and declared it to be good. Neglecting the care of our surroundings hinders our ability to love both near and far neighbors. Therefore, following our respective faiths entails not only caring for our neighbors' environments but also loving and respecting our neighbors. This foundation establishes a framework for sustainable development.

Stewardship, as an integral concept in eco-theology, is closely connected to the commandment to love. No religion, including Christianity, advocates for the destruction of the environment for the sake of profit. Stewardship entails recognizing that humans are entrusted with the created order and will be held accountable for how they handle it. The mission is to care for and improve the Earth, leaving it in a better condition than we found it.

Furthermore, ecotheologians emphasize that economic endeavors must be aligned with a value system that respects creation. Exploitative wealth accumulation is critiqued in eco-theology, as it often exacerbates inequality. A balanced approach that acknowledges God's goodness and the Christian command to love all people equally is advocated. Sustainable development can only be achieved through responsible creation care, recognizing the interdependence and interconnectedness of the physical world and all its inhabitants.

In summary, eco-theology emerges as a crucial field that bridges theology and ecology, emphasizing the need for a harmonious relationship with the environment. It draws from various religious traditions, promoting the responsibility of stewardship and calling for sustainable practices. By integrating theological perspectives with ecological insights, eco-theology strives to foster reverence for creation and establish a foundation for sustainable development.

2.2. Key Areas of Concern in Eco-theology

2.2.1. Population

Population growth is often recognized as a significant factor contributing to environmental stress on the planet. According to Chungyalp (2015), the world's population doubled between 1960 and 2000, demonstrating an exponential increase in the second half of the 20th century. As of 2022, the global population has surpassed 8 billion people.

2.2.2. Molecular Ecology

Molecular ecology, as explained by Vucetich and Nelson (2016), investigates the interactions between living organisms and their environment at the molecular level. It has opened up new avenues of inquiry into ecological issues that were previously challenging to understand. This field has shed light on subtle nuances in the smallest natural details, allowing for a better understanding of behavioral and biogeographical ecology.

2.2.3. Organismal Ecology

Organismal ecology, according to Taylor (2015), focuses on studying how individual organisms respond to environmental pressures in terms of their behavior, morphology, physiology, and more. It explores how specific species interact with both living and non-living components of their environment. Understanding these adaptations and connections to the divine will is a key aspect of eco-theology.

2.2.4. Community Ecology

Community ecology examines the interactions among a group of species coexisting in a particular area. Ecologists specializing in this field investigate the factors influencing patterns and interactions between two or more species. Research in community ecology may include studying the relationship between soil fertility and species diversity in grasslands, dynamics of predator-prey relationships, competition among closely related plant species, or mutualistic relationships between crabs and corals.

2.2.5. Global Ecology

Global ecology focuses on understanding the interactions between ecosystems, lands, atmosphere, and oceans on a global scale. It is essential for comprehending global interconnections and their impacts on the planet (Nelson & Vucetich, 2016). Studying global ecology is crucial for finding ways to reduce human impact on the environment, especially in the context of climate change. Changes in temperature caused by greenhouse gas emissions alter the distribution of plant and animal species, particularly in regions closer to the poles.

2.2.6. Landscape Ecology

Landscape ecology examines the movement of resources, living organisms, energy, and ecological processes across different landscapes. It investigates how human activities affect the characteristics and functioning of landscapes. This field also explores the distribution and interactions of ecosystems within a specific area and how spatial heterogeneity influences ecological processes (McLeod & Palmer, 2015).

2.2.7. The Importance of Ecology

Ecology plays a vital role in sustaining the planet and ensuring human well-being and prosperity. It provides a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness between humans and nature, which is crucial for food production, clean air and water preservation, and biodiversity conservation in the face of climate change (McMichael, 2018).

Ecology provides a framework for nature conservation by maintaining a diverse range of habitats that ensure the survival of various species. For example, research has contributed to preserving heathland, a valuable environment rapidly disappearing in Western Europe.

Additionally, ecology plays a role in addressing climate change. The effects of air pollution and global warming are increasingly recognized by governments and individuals worldwide. Climate change, primarily caused by human activities and greenhouse gas emissions, leads to long-term changes in weather patterns. These changes have devastating impacts on both human communities and various forms of life on Earth, including more frequent and extreme droughts, storms, heat waves, rising sea levels, melting glaciers, and warmer oceans (Leary et al., 2016).

Furthermore, ecological management is crucial for the survival of species populations. Small remnants of forests, for example, may not support one-third of forest bird species. Mangroves are another example, providing essential ecological functions such as debris removal and serving as nurseries for juvenile fish. They also have cultural and economic significance for local communities. Sustainable management practices are necessary to maintain the biodiversity and functionality of such ecosystems, which are particularly vulnerable to change (Taylor, 2015).

In summary, eco-theology acknowledges key areas of concern within ecology, including population growth, molecular ecology, organismal ecology, community ecology, global ecology, and landscape ecology. Ecology is essential for understanding the interconnectedness of humans and nature, preserving biodiversity, addressing climate change, and ensuring sustainable management of ecosystems. These areas of concern emphasize the critical role of eco-theology in promoting ecological stewardship and fostering a harmonious relationship between humans and the environment.

2.3. Sustainable Development

Development, as Grasse (2016) explains, encompasses growth, progress, positive change, and the addition of physical, economic, environmental, social, and demographic elements. Its goal is to improve the standard of living while safeguarding environmental resources and promoting local and regional employment opportunities. Sustainable development involves both enhancing the quality of something and creating conditions for long-term change.

In the latter half of the 20th century, development emerged as a crucial global agenda, as Allen (2018) highlights. It became evident that economic development alone did not ensure an improved standard of living for all individuals. It required specific policies that allocated resources and fostered social and economic mobility for various segments of the population. Sustainable development emerged as a response, recognizing that growth and progress should consider the environment and the needs of future generations.

The foundation of any development, as Mcleod and Palmer (2015) assert, must be sustainability. This means meeting present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Sustainable development seeks to enhance living conditions while preserving the environment.

According to Niamir-Fuller et al. (2016), there are multiple approaches to sustainable development, and caution must be exercised. One approach is to prioritize the needs of both present and future generations, known as environmental sustainability, which aligns with the core principles of eco-theology. However, for the average person, development often implies constructing infrastructure such as roads, access to utilities, and industrial development.

2.4. The Role of Eco-theology in Sustainable Development

The urgency for ecological justice has intensified in response to the serious threat of climate change and environmental degradation, as confirmed by environmental experts and climatologists. Religious groups and faith leaders worldwide, recognizing their role in achieving justice for the Earth and future generations, are joining governments, NGOs, and international research bodies in addressing these challenges. Eco-theology can make significant contributions to sustainable development.

Firstly, eco-theology serves as a teacher, as emphasized by Allen (2018). It must raise awareness among all living beings about their responsibility to protect the environment for sustainable development to occur. This involves imparting important conservation principles, such as recognizing the intrinsic value of the Earth and its interconnectedness, understanding the dynamic cosmic design, and embracing the concept of reciprocal custodianship.

Secondly, eco-theology must continue the tradition of speaking truth to power by advocating for climate justice and acknowledging climate debt, as highlighted by Grasse (2016). The World Council of Churches has played a leading role in framing environmental issues as matters of justice. It is essential, however, that those advocating for change are recognized members of established religions, and ecological preservation does not become an end in itself, overshadowing the role of faith and the broader aspects of human civilization.

Thirdly, eco-theology must emphasize the significance of praxis, actively engaging in actions that promote sustainable development. This includes initiatives such as tree planting to combat climate change and ethical investment practices that divest from fossil fuels and support green initiatives. Religious organizations, with their significant financial resources, can play a vital role in funding environmental programs. Additionally, eco-theology can address issues such as poaching and overfishing.

Moreover, eco-theology can contribute to sustainable development by critically examining Christian traditions, sacred texts, doctrines, moral standards, and praxis. There is a need to reinterpret scripture and reevaluate theological

approaches to environmental matters, ensuring a balance between human needs and responsible stewardship of the Earth. This requires engaging in theological reflection and hermeneutics to align religious teachings with ecological principles (Leary et al., 2016).

Furthermore, eco-theology can promote the use of renewable resources and encourage energy efficiency practices. It can advocate for adopting the reduce, reuse, and recycle (RRR) approach to minimize waste generation and promote responsible consumption. Additionally, eco-theology can support sustainable agriculture practices and contribute to the protection of natural ecosystems, including wetlands, forests, and other habitats. Access to clean water and sanitary facilities is another aspect that eco-theology can address to ensure human well-being and environmental preservation (Waqainabete, 2018).

In conclusion, eco-theology plays a vital role in sustainable development. It encompasses teaching, advocacy, action, funding, and critical reflection to promote ecological conservation, climate justice, and responsible resource management. Integrating ecotheological principles into development practices can foster a more sustainable and harmonious relationship between humans, nature, and future generations.

2.5. Challenges Faced by Eco-theology in Promoting Sustainable Development

Ecotheologians encounter various challenges as they strive to promote sustainable development. Firstly, the issue of resources poses a significant obstacle, as highlighted by McMichael (2018). Many people fail to recognize the importance of investing substantial funds in activities like tree planting or reducing greenhouse gas emissions. This lack of support makes it difficult for conservation groups to secure reliable funding for their long-term conservation initiatives.

Another challenge, as pointed out by Allen (2018), is the limited ecological knowledge of ecotheologians. They may not possess specialized expertise in ecology, which hampers their ability to effectively address ecological challenges on the ground. This can be mitigated by collaborating with professionals in the field.

Theological difficulty presents a third obstacle. Some Christians perceive the regeneration of the environment as a peripheral concern, with the redemption of the soul being the primary focus (Taylor, 2015). Additionally, certain theological beliefs, particularly within eschatology, suggest that faithful individuals will be raptured from the Earth, leading to a disregard for the present environment. Educating and influencing such individuals becomes a challenging task for contemporary eco-theology.

Furthermore, the lack of clearly defined goals, as mentioned by McCleod and Palmer (2015), poses challenges. Conservation initiatives benefit from having straightforward objectives with measurable short- and long-term goals based on the best available scientific knowledge. Ambiguous or conflicting goals can severely hinder conservation efforts.

The prevailing consumer culture in the world adds to the difficulties. Many countries have failed to fulfill commitments made after the 1997 Kyoto Protocols, which poses a significant obstacle to sustainable development. Governments often prioritize the impact of emission reduction measures on their industries rather than considering the broader environmental implications (Grasse, 2016).

Lastly, the absence of law and order, often resulting from inadequate support from national governments, presents a significant issue. Widespread poaching of rhinos and elephants serves as an illustration of this problem. Gaps in the law, weak governance, and insufficient law enforcement allow poachers and traffickers to evade punishment. Studies have shown that parks with a higher number of well-equipped and trained guards are more effective in preserving biodiversity. Stricter penalties can deter, but forest guards sometimes lack the necessary tools and training to effectively patrol parks and confront armed poachers (Niamir-Fuller et al., 2016).

In conclusion, despite the challenges faced, eco-theology can make valuable contributions to sustainable development. Its roles encompass education, advocacy, and practical actions to protect the environment. It can also promote the use of renewable resources and advocate for resource-efficient agricultural practices.

Imagine a world where the message of eco-theology is embraced by all living beings on Earth. In this vision, humans would gain a deeper understanding of the beauty and fragility of the natural order. They would recognize the need to preserve the environment for future generations, just as their ancestors enjoyed pristine and clear ecosystems. Taking care of the entire created order aligns with the divine command to have responsible stewardship over the planet.

Ultimately, objections to eco-theology, such as limited resources, inadequate ecological understanding, theological and philosophical limitations, and insufficient government support leading to a lack of law and order, can be overcome. Through perseverance and continued efforts, eco-theology has the potential to drive sustainable development and foster a harmonious relationship between humans and the environment.

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