



# Book Review: P. Öhlmann and J. Stork (Eds.), Religious Communities and Ecological Sustainability in Southern Africa and Beyond

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## Keywords

Religious communities, sustainability, Church action, social change

## Abstract

This is a book review of Philipp Öhlmann & Juliane Stork (Eds.), *Religious Communities and Ecological Sustainability in Southern Africa and Beyond*, Sustainability Series No. 1, Geneva: Globethics Publications, 2024, ISBN 978-2-88931-548-2. Following the great importance of the Southern African region for the debates on Sustainability and climate change, the book tackles many of the issues around the topic. Extracted from the 2020 expert consultations *Religious Communities and Ecological Sustainability in Southern Africa* (RCSD Berlin) and *Water, Environment and Climate Action* (WECARE), from one side, and the conference *Churches in Southern Africa as Civil Society Actors for Ecological Sustainability* (University of Pretoria), the volume presents a plethora of articles and contributions offering an extensive dive into issues such as the role of local churches and congregations in sustainable development, resources for scholars to analyze the best practice cases, inquiries into the future of the region, and more.

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## The Southern African region and ecology

The timing and publication of this volume could not be more opportune, as the world continues to grapple with climatic change. Religion, though a major player in the ecology and sustainability debate in the Southern African region, has over a long time being side-lined when debates were brought to the round table. This volume addresses that missing gap, not only in the Southern African context but beyond. It further recapitulates and engages with the issues of ecology and sustainability from a multi-dimensional approach, where we read not only about Christian denominational groups, such as Mainline churches, African Independent churches, Pentecostals, Charismatics and Evangelists, but also some religious traditions, such as Bahá'í Faith, Buddhism, Islam, and African Traditional Religions. This interreligious and multifaceted approach makes this publication timely, in the multi-faith world we live in. In the former, roles are being addressed considering the Christian denominations' contribution and roles in the ecology and sustainability debate, while the latter address the same aspect from a pluralist approach respectively. It is through these debates that a plethora of ideas which foster knowledge exchange are conversed, while at the same time raising awareness of the ecological circumstances and engagements of religious communes in Africa.

The volume meticulously highlights the main issues of engagement, capacity building, and active debates as addressed by previous publications. The book's deployment of a transdisciplinary approach, where not only religious traditions are engaged but also religious leaders, environmental activists, as well as representatives of non-governmentals in the field, situates this compendium on a very high pedestal.

It is at the core of the book to show that African countries are among the hardest hit by climate change consequences, as the rise in temperatures is predicted to occur sooner and faster here than in most other parts of the world. The book highlights concrete environmental disasters such as droughts, floods, reduced crop yields, livestock capacities, as well as the spreading of climate-sensitive diseases such as malaria and cholera, which continue to be a constant threat to the African continent. The situation is severe to the extent

of driving the United Nations Environment Programme to give a stern warning due to a low adaptive capacity, which makes Africa highly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. Southern Africa is especially affected by the rising global temperatures. The damaging effects of climate change are already felt by the inhabitants today, where the temperatures are predicted to have risen by 3–4°C by 2100 as stated in the introduction of the book. Fundamental socioecological transformations are needed and recommended in the volume, in dialogue with religious communities who are crucial stakeholders for achieving these paradigm shifts. They are highly relevant, as playing a key role in individual and public life in many countries in sub-Saharan Africa where a substantive number of people recognize and appreciate the meaning of religion in their day to day lives. Religious communities have consequently a central role as agents of socio-economic, political, and ecological change, and to concretely demonstrate, as civil society structure, the effectiveness of their function, as sources of sharing knowledge and political influence.

Since these religious communities bear a fundamental transformative potential, whether in religious or ideological terms, the development of new motivations, activities and institutions can be duly legitimized. This move has been strongly demonstrated to shape the social and cultural values, under condition that religion continues to be seen as an essential source of sustainable development and long-lasting change and not backward-looking tendencies. It is against this backdrop that this volume raises important questions on how religious actors, who act as vital societal stakeholders, can position themselves with respect to the current global ecological crisis. The question rightfully asked is about the possible indifference to, or even the hindrance of, the climate action and care for the environment.

In addition, this volume taps on the increasing number of studies which have recently been conducted in a bid to investigate the relation of some religious communities and ecological sustainability in Southern Africa. Although the existing literature on ecological religious teachings and initiatives in the region has been underscored, it is inadequate because it only provides the initial indications on the role of religion for ecological sustainability. Moreover, it is by no means clear that religious communities always act in

the interest of the environment and ecological sustainability. It has come to the fore that these religious communities can also be an impediment for ecological transformation, concluding that some roles religious communities play regarding ecological sustainability leave great margins for improvement, hence the need to further research in this problematic phenomenon. This volume has identified that as a gap that needs to be filled through intensive research on ecology and sustainability.

Having said that, the diverse roles that religious communities play about ecological sustainability still remain an important subject of further investigation. The volume uses Zion Christian Church, which has the largest following in Southern Africa, with a membership estimated at around 15 million across the region, as an example. As the book maintains, the voice of Bishop Barnabas E. Lekganyane, for instance, can be a breakthrough in the dialogue between him, government, companies, and churches, to act for environmental protection while exerting care for creation as a matter of restoration. The same move could be echoed by Pentecostal churches in their bid towards engagement with climate change and ecological sustainability which is remnant in the church. The volume further points out that engagement with climate change and ecological sustainability is not peculiar to Christianity. Other religious traditions like Bahá'í faith, Buddhism, Islam and African Traditional Religions are fully engaged in climate change and ecological sustainability with the dynamics ranging from interfaith environmental advocacy to tree protection, to mention but a few.

Likewise, the volume covers and deliberates at length the Mainline Christian and African churches perspectives in the bid to be relevant to ecotheologies globally. One such example is of tree-planting during the Eucharist ceremony in an African Independent Church in Zimbabwe. It is worth noting, disseminating learning materials on ecotheologies through the influential Christian media channels in sub-Saharan Africa (as well as the academic field of religion and development) has been singled out as one of the main drivers in the translation of the different theologies into actions. Although African Pentecostal churches do not come across as vocal on issues of ecology and sustainability, there has been some remarkable milestones covered on their part, where contributions on Southern African eschatologies and their

implications for their environment have been evident. The volume reiterates that the outlook lingers on an anthropocentric dominion theology, which draws from Genesis 1, where humans are afforded dominant position above other creatures. Hence, engaging this approach culminates in the human soul as favoured over saving any other part of creation. However, due to the sacred relationship with God’s gift of nature, the philosophical life principle of Ubuntu—a concept, that highlights the interdependence of all life—, statements on the importance of the preservation of the natural environment should not be taken at face value because they are critical when we talk ecological sustainability.

Contrary to popular belief, the volume pinpoints African Traditional Religions as always the main players, specifically when one talks of religious-cultural rules or taboos that stipulate appropriate behaviour in relation to the natural environment, such as the sacredness of specific animals, trees or rivers. However, as traditional values are eroding, the relevance of these rules are decreasing, and with them the spiritual restrictions of environmental exploitation. Therefore, there is need to encourage ecological sustainability based on religious-cultural values, predominantly applicable to settings in which such traditions continue to be relevant. Though not taken on board and left out of the main dialogues on ecology and sustainability, this volume recapitulates the significant impact that traditional leaders have in policy-making processes and fostering environmental values based on African traditional culture and religion, while contributing to fostering mindsets of ecological sustainability in society, hence the urgency of their inclusion in the debate.

Furthermore, as shown in the tenth chapter, Bahá’í faith institutions have been active because they have initiated communications calling for an urgent response to climate change more than a decade ago. Their main tasks envisaged faith communities educating their believers to take up the knowledge of the environmental sciences, while implementing practices aligned to stewardship of the environment, a very crucial matter in the ecology drive. Last but not least, the importance of Bahá’í interfaith dialogue becomes a driver in the diversity of perspectives offered in the inter religion dialogue. This platform will enable South Africans to liaise with other voices,

thus impacting political decision makers on the topic of environmental protection since in the majority of cases, the decisions were not inclusive. This is a very important contribution to the volume to say the least.

The volume also takes us through the religion of Islam, especially on the importance of ecology and sustainability, with special emphasis on preservation of water. This contribution to the volume further accentuates its participation to ecological studies. The preciousness of freshwater as a source of life to all creatures, that is subject to the power and goodwill of Allah, is emphasized throughout the Quran. Therefore, accessibility to freshwater should be a continuous reminder to all creatures to be thankful to their creator. That is why it is important to distribute water freely so that it is accessible to all, especially in cases where some have abundance, while others nothing. That explains why water is a right that every living species on the earth must have.

Having said that, the volume makes a remarkable contribution in the women and ecology debate. The role women play in the ecology and sustainability should not be swept under the carpet because they have made remarkable strides in that regard. It must be noted that this is a subject of interest in the ecology debates making rounds and even to the layman. Ecofeminism comes into the picture where one comes across different branches of the women's environmental movement, which have developed since, which acknowledges that women's contexts and how their personhood and livelihood is affected by climate change are not the same for all women. Ecofeminism emphasizes that the domination and degradation of nature and the exploitation of women have significant connections. Therefore, there is need to reconsider the concept of "androcentrism", which situates maleness at the centre of one's worldview, casting women aside and leaving them open to exploitation by colonizing powers.

In the process, women function as the mediators of nature's benefits to their families, and may be caretakers of nature in this context, which would have been ignored. This relationship of motherhood and Earth was originally derived from spiritual understandings of the caring, giving, nurturing, Earth that humans are dependent on, like the child upon the mother. However, this

notion has been debated and strongly rejected in the academic discourse for its essentialist perspective on women, who are according to this approach more linked to nature, to giving, caring, and nurturing, and also to a spiritual connection to the world than men are. Instead of following along with the image of the nurturing woman, men should also be taken into the responsibility of caring for the earth. These contrasting dynamics have been clearly stipulated in this volume making the women’s contribution to ecology and sustainability more visible than ever before. The volume takes a bold step in issuing a stern warning of the proliferation of stereotypes of first- and third-world divides, possibly enforced by this notion. Instead of being antagonistic, the book contends, it is important to concentrate on a joined struggle to contest the handling of women and nature, while distinguishing variances in perceptions and framework. In the light of this distinction, the absence of leading women who could function well is clear, since such role models in the Pentecostal movement, and in the mainline ecumenical movement, were criticized as an impediment to progress, rendering the painstaking effort unproductive especially to the women already engaged in the debate.

With the developing deforestation and the close approach to climatic tipping points, the volume expands its scope globally to incorporate the best engaged practices when it comes to ecology and sustainability. As shown in the fourteenth chapter, the Buddhist community in Thailand has been singled out as one such community, which saw degradation of the environment, hence a need for urgent environmental action. As wandering monks, their livelihood and existence centres in the forest, so they established new religious sacraments and started to “ordain” trees as Buddhist monks. This consecration of trees into the rank of a monk was represented by the wrapping of the trees in Buddhist monk robes. The actions paid off because the trees were not felled, resulting in ecological sustainability for the group.

One interesting aspect that this volume brings to the table is the community and its engagement regarding water accessibility and preservation. The central role of religious communities zeroes in conserving natural resources through gentle religious practices and stances towards the environment. The natural water scarcity of Southern Africa, exacerbated by the unequal access to water, leaking, and aged water pipe systems, as well as climate change, has

been a cause for concern. While drought has been a continuous threat to the agricultural sector, and at the same time water is universally known as a religious symbol, there is urgency in the treatment of the matter at hand. This is further due to the spiritual character of water, which should be strongly emphasized and made fruitful during the development, interpretation, and analysis of water laws. Therefore, there is a need for religious communities with there is a strong connection with water resources, through ceremonial uses as a spiritual symbol and as an object of worship to be fully engaged in the ecology and sustainability debate. Environmental pollution on a daily basis with polluted air leads to respiratory illnesses and contaminated water causes major health problems; illegal garbage dumping in the neighbourhood exposes the lives of children to dangerous pollutants when playing at these illegal dumpsites; overpopulation and electricity shortages lead to health problems, as people have to resort to the use of lung-damaging paraffin and wood fires. All these result in environmental pollution and climate change in the form of heatwaves. As a result, there are decreasing harvests from small-scale gardening, community outreach programmes in gardening, and a cooperation with the schools for environment education programmes, and clean-up campaigns in the neighbourhoods have been implemented. Furthermore, we see recycling is being promoted and the implementation of environmental cleaning habits into members' daily lives in a bid to conserve natural resources, reduce energy consumption and reduce global warming.

For all these initiatives to become probable and a potential reality, this volume looks towards faith, where it points to church leadership, which has proved to be influential and trusted by all age groups, making congregations ideal centres of life-long learning on sustainable living practices. As shown in the seventeenth chapter, SAFCEI (Southern African Faith Communities' Environment Institute) has worked on the supposition that the way humans treat nature depends on their perception of it. SAFCEI adopts a religious narrative that centers human salvation rather than stewardship, willing to end the lack of environmental knowledge and of dialogue between science and religion. Additionally, as one of the outstanding features of this volume, a link between ecology and social class is evidenced, while the South African perception revolved around the idea that the environmental conservation is a



middle-class or *privileged* area of concern, and not for the poor neighbourhoods. It was not until a decade ago that this perception eased among many marginalized communities in the country.

Lastly, the volume unearths yet another important and relevant movement in the ecology and sustainability in South Africa, namely, the Green Anglicans movement, whose main focus is tailored to address the ecological actions to the community. However, the importance of the movement is not only in the planting of trees but caring for them, while connecting tree-planting with a long-term action or personal celebrations of rites of passage ceremonies. Such tree-planting ceremonies emphasized the slogan “change the spiritual DNA” which has been popularized in Malawi, for example. Similarly, The Green Teaching and Learning Community –Green TLC– aims to spread specifically targeted scientific environmental knowledge about Southern Africa and to connect scientific information with different religious perspectives on the environment. The steering group of the Green TLC has since been drafting interdenominational learning materials and has established a growing WhatsApp channel that provided inputs on environmental sciences and environmental theologies. In conclusion, the volume captures meticulously the effects of the climate change in Southern Africa, thus emphasizing the urgency of the problem at hand. Last but not least the book offers possible solutions that would be fundamental and necessary in addressing the current situation in Southern Africa, hopefully assisting at curbing the rampant devastation as currently experienced by inhabitants of the Southern African region and beyond.

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## Short biography

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