

## **Community Led Conservation Initiatives and Ecological Crisis in Africa: Towards an African Eco Theology**

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### **Abstract**

*In as much as climate change complaints and effects are ubiquitous and global, these concerns can be resolved if the community reflects on their own way of life; especially when the doctrine of creation is well understood. This doctrine claims that during creation, God blessed mankind, gave them dominion to be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, and subdue it. This teaching is further complicated by the story of the fall of man where Adam and Eve fell into temptation and sin entered the world. This resulted in God's curses coming into the world, including that the ground was cursed. Based on this position human beings can determine their environment by creating their own initiatives using their God-given abilities of creativity and taking care of the natural world by practicing responsibility. Traditionally, Africans identified with nature by conserving some trees as sacred or naming children and places after natural things like animals and plants. Similarly, in the teachings of Saint Augustine, people discover God through His works of creation or natural theology, and so nature ought to be preserved. In an attempt to solve the ongoing ecological crisis and the anxiety it is causing humanity, steps like using renewable energy, circular economy, and reforestation have been done. However, the proposed methods have not satisfactorily offered a solution to the current ecological crisis, as people are still anxious of its effects. Using the correlation of eschatology by Jurgen Moltmann of hope and the ecological crisis, this article creates an understanding of the creation mandate. It explores the correlation creativity theory of Paul Tillich and the human potential for creativity and proposes a theology of care and ecological stewardship as an African Eco theology as a solution to the ecological crisis.*

**Key Words:** *Climate Change, Correlation Method, Creativity, Doctrine of Creation, Eco-theology, Environment, Eschatology, Initiatives, Stewardship.*

### **1.0 Introduction**

The quest for a clean, healthy environment is a concern for all human beings. Since the environment is as old as humans, this anxiety is also as old as humanity. Indeed, it was first experienced in the Garden of Eden, when God gave the first two humans, Adam and Eve, a safe and healthy environment to live in. However, through their falling into the deception of the evil one, sin entered the world and destroyed the good environment; and eventually man was chased away from the good environment (Michael 2015). Instead of realizing their mistakes, the blame game and finger-pointing led to a verdict by the Lord who is holy and punishes all sin (Ibid). Curses were pronounced on all of them: for the serpent, to crawl on its belly and eat dust all its life; enmity was put between his offspring and the woman's. The

woman was to get pain during childbirth and have longed for her husband, and he would rule over her. As for the man, the ground was cursed because of him, and he would eat from it through painful toil all of his life. Lastly, the earth was commanded to produce thistles and thorns and that the man would eat its plants by his sweat until he dies (Ibid).

Ecological crisis is a global issue today. Climate change refers to long-term change in weather patterns (UN 2023). Moreover, this anxiety is accentuated when the United Nations (UN) declares an ecological crisis as an existential threat. Furthermore, the World Health Organization (WHO) reports 250,000 deaths annually by the year 2050 if no action is taken to avert the effects of climate change due to malaria, diarrhea, heat stress, and malnutrition (WHO 2023); including raised mortality rates due to pollutions of water, air, and land (NASA Report 2019). Africa is more affected being in a third world continent. Moreover, Africa depends on land for survival, and the current ecological crisis has exposed her to environmental challenges like lack of food and water, loss of biodiversity, and deforestation, posing an existential risk (Chitando 2022: 14). Theologically, ecological crises are explained by the Christian misunderstanding of the creation mandate in the Genesis 1: 26-31 account, where man was given dominion to subdue the earth, leading to the overexploitation of natural resources (Mabula and Kiboi 2024). Human activities are the main drivers of ecological crisis due to deforestation, urbanization, and industrialization. Kithinji and Chemei assert that the voice of the church is needed in the debate of how to solve Africa's ecological crisis (Kithinji and Chemei 2017: 2).

African communities like the Kikuyu, using traditional religious beliefs, upheld the interconnectedness of all living things. God was believed to be present in creation and lived in sacred trees, like the Mugumo Tree, sacred places, like Mukurwe wa Nyagathanga and sacred hills, like the apex of Mount Kenya (Muriithi, 2019, p. 92). These places were believed to host the presence of the divine and were preserved, thus nature was protected. With the advent of the Christian faith, Western Christianity did not spare the environment as it challenged African traditional narratives that upheld the relationship between nature and religion and introduced Western civilization. The human being was introduced as the pinnacle of creation and given dominion over the earth and other creatures (Whitney, 2015, p. 384). Conversely, St. Augustine's natural theology was about observing God in nature and discovering His natural moral law as revelation to who is God. Thus the effects of ecological crises like global warming, loss of biodiversity, and pollution are a threat to human life in today's world (UNEP 2016:23).

This article uses desk research and collects secondary data from scholarly works. Delving into the eschatological views of Jurgen Moltmann of hope, renewal, and reconciliation of creation to God and the correlation method of Paul Tillich, this article poses the question: How can an African Eco-theology be developed as a solution to the ecological crisis in Africa? Using the understanding of the creation mandate to subdue the earth, this article develops an African Eco-theology of care and ecological stewardship and proposes a possible end of ecological crisis via responsibility. The article explores the theology of end times and postulates a theology of care driven by the human determinism. It introduces a correlation mandate, reflecting on man as *Imago Dei* (or created in the image of God).

## **2.0 Literature Review**

Ecological crisis as advanced by Jurgen Moltmann means that God desired a relationship with His creation, the universe and man, included. The God-human-nature relationship was in His sovereignty, His good intention, but this relationship was not kept. He states, “The sacredness of creation and the way human beings should harmoniously coexist with nature is confirmed in the Trinitarian relationship of God, man and creation (Resane 1988: 2). He supports this argument with Genesis 2:15, “The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to fill it and keep it.” This position is echoed by Thomas Aquinas, when he states that the human being is created in the image of God (or *Dei*) and is different from all other creatures. But man’s position should not be used to dominate creation and exploit the natural world; instead, it should be used by man to partner in His work of creation (Schoot 2020: 4). This presupposes that there was the expected relationship between God, man, and the creation in the Genesis account of creation.

Proponents of this doctrine of creation like Ben Dare (2012) aver that this relationship is evident in the theology of Luke in Acts 17: 28 where he says, “In Him we live and move and have our being.” The creator is God who inhabits man and His creation. Dare further notes that God loves his creation and has given it its inherent value; and he intended it to be an intimate one of mutual indwelling (Dare 2012:47). Such interpretations denote that there was a divine blessing in the creation mandate and thus a covenant between God and all creation.

In the doctrine of creation, it is God who is the creator of the universe, *ex-nihilo* and His work of creation continues in His preservation works of the universe. This tells us God is in the business of taking care of the creation and this work will be culminated in the new creation; human beings should live in anticipation of this hope, thus also become partakers of the new creation by taking care of the universe (Moltmann 1978: 34). In his commentary on

Genesis 9:7, Moltmann (1964:19) says the promise to bring forth in abundance, multiply, and be fruitful was not given to man alone but to all life in creation. Therefore it is important to see the life of God in all of His creation.

In a brief analysis, the historical roots of the African ecological crisis are attributed to Western civilization which both introduced Christianity and challenged the African traditional relation with nature as per Lynn White (Muriithi 2019: 88). Theories behind ecological crisis include Greenhouse Theory, postulating that gases are trapped in the earth's atmosphere from emissions of industries and are harmful to health (Romero-Lankao 2008: 10). The Theory of Environmental Pollution asserts that water, air, and land are polluted by poor waste disposal, emissions from industries and chemicals (Helfand 2003 249). While Ecological Footprint Theory explains that the natural world has its capacity of sustaining demands of human being on the ecosystem and it can be overstretched by high demands (McManus and Haughton 2006:113). Anthropocene Theory tells how human activities have dominated the ecological system (Conradie 2023: 18). Lastly, the Sacramental Approach Theory puts forward the sacredness of creation (McDougall 1999:2).

Climate change needs to be urgently addressed globally, as it is causing threats to life. Future risks include drivers of the ecological crisis like increased rates of floods, destruction of the ozone layer, and human activities (UN 2023). Although Africa is not the main contributor of the causes of ecological crisis, it is more affected as a third-world continent. Food and water insecurity, raised mortality rate, poverty, and displacement of communities following catastrophes, like floods and fires, are experienced in Africa (Chitando 2022:24). The fallen nature of man births social causes of ecological crisis like poverty, inequality, and overexploitation of resources and political causes like poor governance and policies (Mabula and Kiboi 2024; Muriithi 2019:531). This is echoed in Romans 8: 22, "creation is groaning like in birth pains as it awaits its redemption." Furthermore, the impacts of ecological crisis globally include global warming and loss of biodiversity (Conradie 2023: 8). While pollution has raised mortality rates by over fifty per cent especially in Africa (WHO 2016: 40).

Several measures to curb this menace have already been taken around the continent such as the renewable energy and circular economy (Okonjo-Iweala 2014:14-20). Notably, tree planting initiatives in Kenya have not satisfactorily solved the current ecological crisis (The National Treasury of Kenya 2025:10). Even so, the church has been silent in this battle of ecological crisis, whereas the Bible can speak to it (Kithinji and Chemei 2017:2).

### **3.0 Methodology**

The study employs the Correlation Method which correlates existential questions brought about by human experience with theological answers (Tillich and Barth 2010:108). The Correlation Method (Tillich 1957:2008) entails an understanding of Christian theology in such a way that it is relevant and that its theological concepts can be placed into the context of modern existential worries like the ecological crisis faced in Africa today. For instance, the Christian message is connected with existential concerns like ecological crisis in Africa by bridging the gap between theology and philosophy (Tillich 1964:5-7). The method begins by identifying deep existential questions faced by human beings concerning the fate of life, meaning of life, guilt and suffering and the search for their final meaning (Tillich 1944:44-46). These questions originate from the condition of human being resulting from existential crisis like ecological crisis faced today worldwide that raises a lot of fear and anxiety to man due to threats like ozone layer depletion and global warming. After which is a dialogue or a two-way communication between existential concerns and divine revelation (Tillich 1957:200). The study collects its data from the secondary scholarly sources like books and journal articles. From the researchers' view, Paul Tillich's correlative method is an ideal methodological method of finding a solution to the current ecological crisis in Africa, as it is used as a guide using the eschatological views of Jurgen Moltmann. In conclusion, the Correlation Method entails use of philosophy to articulate questions of concern from human experiences. Response from Christian theology is that this interaction allows for a dynamic process of conceptualizing where philosophy informs theology and the way theology shapes philosophy.

### **4.0 Results and Discussion**

#### **Correlation Theory of Paul Tillich Considered**

In Africa today, there exists the question of human survival brought about by current ecological crises. Many have experienced floods, droughts, water scarcity, food scarcity and insecurity, desertification and deforestation, biodiversity loss and global warming all as negative impacts of ecological crisis (Last and Weaver 2024:269). There are severe consequences of ecological crisis to human; we live with daily fear and anxiety of what tomorrow holds for us and our future generations. There is also displacement of people following floods and risk of ecosystem destruction. We have an existential question in Africa born out of the current ecological crisis and the question about future hope.

However, in light of Paul Tillich's Correlation Method, we can get a theological answer using the Eschatological Hope of Jurgen Moltmann. We can start by recognizing our suffering, existential fear, and actual anxiety caused by ecological crisis in Africa. This crisis exposes our vulnerability as human beings and also raises deep questions of how our future will be like and the value we give to creation (Muriithi 2019:80). Theologically speaking, these thoughts lead us to reflect on God as the source of all existence or the Ground of Being. According to this research, this situation of ecological crisis points to how man has not understood his position in the creation mandate to subdue the earth and that the fallen nature of man has continued to cause an estrangement from God and alienation from the natural world. Evidenced in the overexploitation of natural resources and disregard for creation (Mabula and Kiboi 2024:11).

In the researchers' view, there appears to be a spiritual crisis whereby man by failing to understand the command of God in the creation mandate is now in conflict with God and the natural world. This is because the ecological crisis is a failure to take care of what God created. Paul Tillich's method of correlation gives us a profound way of making a diagnosis to Africa's existential problem brought about by the ecological crisis; and the eschatology of hope in Jurgen Moltmann's theology gives us a strong theological framework to respond to this problem. Moltmann explains eschatology not as a future idea only but a promise of God that is in contact with today's world of renewal and redemption (Bauckham 1918:209-215). Moltmann's Eschatological Hope assures humankind of a renewal of creation by God and therefore the devastation caused by ecological crisis has an expiry date. The work of sustaining and renewal of creation by practicing a theology of care and ecological stewardship is put forward by this study. In the researchers' view, Kenya being eighty percent Christian in its population allows for a good understanding of the mandate to subdue the earth to transform the world by practicing a theology of care and ecological stewardship and eventually the remaining twenty percent of the people living in Kenya will comply and change Kenya and Africa at large.

In conclusion, African theologians and beyond have a call to build hope and action to our communities so we can transform Africa. Using the eschatological hope of Jurgen Moltmann (1978), we as theologians can be the long-awaited beacon of hope by becoming ecological activists, create awareness and promote sustainable practices. We can reorient our people on the new way of relating with creation; that is, not to as opportunities practice our greedy behavior and exploit it for our own good, but rather to see creation as God's gift

entrusted to our hands. Thus our only option being to be good and faithful stewards of God's gift of creation and take care of her.

#### **4.2 Justification of the Theory**

By using the lens of Paul Tillich's Correlation Theory, the researchers reinforce the idea of getting a response based on theology to solve the ongoing ecological crisis in Africa using Jurgen Moltmann's eschatology. It is a holistic approach, dealing with the present problem of ecological crisis linked to the promise of God at a transformed future. The correlation method of Paul Tillich gives us a method to connect our existential questions posed by ecological crisis in Africa to theological answers from Moltmann's eschatological hope. The hopelessness in human beings' life today in Africa caused by the ecological crisis finds an answer in the hope of renewal of creation in Moltmann's eschatology. Correlation of these existential threats with theological concepts like sin as the main cause of ecological crisis and salvation as in the eschatological hope of Jurgen Moltmann of renewal of creation, reconciliation of creation to God and consummation of God's Kingdom.

Paul Tillich gives us a method of finding meaning in the face of ecological crisis (Tillich 1951:198). Theology speaks to the suffering and desperation experienced by human beings in Africa today by creating a theological awareness in the crisis in the light of God's redemptive plan. The correlation theory of Paul Tillich encourages dialogue between current human experiences and theology instead of holding theology in isolation from the world (Tillich 1957:22-27). This dialogue helps this study in finding a solution to the ongoing ecological crisis in Africa since environmental degradation is a physical as well as a spiritual crisis. Paul Tillich's correlation method helps us correlate this moral failure as sin with theological concept of brokenness and estrangement. This sharpens our knowledge of ecological crisis not just as a political or economic failure but a spiritual failure rooted in the Christian misunderstanding of the creation mandate. Correlation method also helps theology to engage with Africa's indigenous understanding of creation which views creation as sacred (Muriithi, 2019:89-93). This bridges the gap between African cultural values with the Christian message that puts forward reconciliation between culture and human being.

Jurgen Moltmann's eschatology helps us to overcome the despair caused by ecological crisis by giving us a way forward in gazing at the vision of hope in the promise of God's renewal of creation (Althouse 2014:116). This is not a call to hide the head under the sand for Africans and ignore the current realities of ecological crisis but it is a call to transform the world by taking responsibility and practicing a theology of care as put forward by this study. It teaches us that the future is both in human hands as well as the redemptive

plan of God. We need this hope in Africa where we are hard hit by the effects of ecological crisis as a third world continent (Muriithi, 2019:78-79). The integration of Paul Tillich's correlation method to Jurgen Moltmann's eschatological hope helps Africa both get a diagnosis of our problem as far as ecological crisis is concerned and a solution to our problem as we embrace the vision of renewed and reconciled creation to God.

#### **4.3 An African Eco-Theology as a Response to the Ecological Crisis in Africa**

In Africa, ecological crisis is not merely a physical truth but also a cultural and spiritual crisis. African traditional religion upholds nature as sacred and has a special regard to certain trees, rivers, animals, mountains, and forests and thus views nature as interconnected with God (Muriithi 2019:92). Africa's natural resources have been over extracted to meet the demands of the global market that this has left Africans poorer and vulnerable (Muriithi 2019:89). Ecological crisis in Africa therefore brings a sense of separation from God and the natural world since the African culture and religion holds creation as sacred (Muriithi 2019:90-91). This agrees with Paul Tillich's existential concerns and leads to the question of the role of human being in creation. The African Eco theology discovered in this study is guided by Paul Tillich correlation method and it correlates experiences in African Christians of ecological alienation with the theological concepts of estrangement, sin and salvation. The fallen nature of human beings has led to ecological crisis giving birth to systemic failure like in corruption, poverty, and poor governance as causes of ecological crisis (Romans 8:19-22). All this have caused separation of man from nature and God. African Eco-theology acknowledges the environmental degradation as a symptom and also as a result of alienation from the sacred order (Chitando et. al 2022:27).

Human beings in Christian theology are created as *Imago Dei*, in the image of God, and have a special calling to be stewards of God's creation in the creation mandate (Weelden 2018:9). Using Jurgen Moltmann's eschatology, African Eco-theology of care and ecological stewardship finds hope in the renewal of creation. Thus African Christians are called upon in this study to start working toward ecological healing and restoration now. This study urgently urges the African Christian to be at the forefront in upholding the African Eco-theology of care for creation and ecological stewardship. The Christians' mission as commanded by God is to restore, protect, and nurture the environment being part of their witness to the future plan of God (Chitando et al, 2022:16-17).

In conclusion, the African Eco-theology of care incorporates the sacredness of creation and the interconnectedness of life to God. This agrees with Moltmann's eschatology that views creation as a living entity, participating in God's redemptive purposes as opposed



to seeing creation as a resource for exploitation. Therefore, African Eco-theology views the ecological crisis as a violation of God's laws and failure of human duties. Secondly, African Eco-theology views man as a steward of God's creation. This opposes the exploitation of nature experienced in the Anthropocene theory. The stewardship spirit redefines dominion to respect, care, and responsibility. African Eco-theology draws from the Genesis account of the creation mandate to subdue the earth as a call to tend and keep the earth. This vocation agrees with the African belief of sacredness of creation and therefore human beings should be responsible in handing creation. Thirdly, African Eco-theology embraces Moltmann's eschatological hope as motivation and the theological engine for the African Eco-theology. This motivation leads the African Christian to take the lead in ecological restorative measures like water conservation, sustainable agriculture and advocacy in matters of environmental conservation. These actions are done as acts of faith.

## **5.0 Conclusion**

This study has explored the ecological crisis in Africa using Jurgen Moltmann's eschatology in the light of Paul Tillich's correlation theory. It puts forward the eschatological hope of renewal of creation, reconciliation of creation to God, and the consummation of God's kingdom in Moltmann's eschatology as a vision looking forward to ecological healing and restoration (Moltmann 1967:72). It has used Paul Tillich's correlation creativity theory as the methodological framework to correlate ecological crisis and eschatological hope by Jurgen Moltmann to create an African Eco-theology of creation care as a solution to Africa's ecological crisis (Tillich 1951:196).

Paul Tillich's correlation theory and eschatology in the view of Jurgen Moltmann has helped this study to gain insight on how human potential of creativity can be used to create an African Eco-theology of care of creation as panacea. The researcher recommends to Africans a life of active stewardship of creation embedded in God's promise of new heaven and new earth, to heal and restore our environment. The researcher also recommends reclaiming of the African Christians' prophetic voice through our churches to advocate for environmental justice and enhancing the understanding of creation mandate to subdue the earth. Finally the researcher recommends that Kenya being 80% Christians if we respond to creation care as our African eco-theology, this change can enhance quality in Africa.

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