

Preface

The present issue of the *Journal of the Council for Research on Religion* (JCREOR) brings together several African scholars and scholars of Africa from different backgrounds to explore the intersections of nature, humanity, and biblical interpretation through the lens of African worldviews and ecological hermeneutics. The volume features a collection of essays, many of which were first presented at the “Colloquium on African Ecological Hermeneutics,” an event co-hosted by the McGill School of Religious Studies and the Presbyterian College, Montreal, on April 17th, 2024. As a scholar working at the intersection of African thought and ecological biblical interpretation, my doctoral supervisor, Professor Gerbern Oegema, and I saw an urgent need for deeper engagement with these themes. Together, we initiated this dialogue in response to the growing relevance of ecological concerns within biblical scholarship. The essays collected in this volume reflect that effort, offering valuable perspectives that advance both African Studies and theological reflection on the environmental crisis.

Sébastien Doane’s “Decolonizing Biblical Studies: Womanist Interpretation of Rachel Weeping (Matt 2:18)” opens the collection by underscoring the importance of cultivating a hermeneutic of listening as a decolonial and ethical method of engaging biblical interpretation. Doane challenges the dominance of “objective” exegesis by foregrounding the subjectivity and situatedness of the reader, a concern particularly resonant in African biblical hermeneutics. Drawing on reader-response criticism, Doane engages in academic dialogue with womanist scholar Mitzi Smith, reading Rachel’s weeping through the lived experiences of African American mothers and children. This approach reopens the text to new layers of meaning and highlights the importance of embodied and contextually grounded readings – particularly

those emerging from African and diasporic communities – for reimagining biblical studies beyond colonial frameworks.

A decolonial approach to biblical hermeneutics, which challenges the marginalization of African worldviews in theological discourse, is further developed in Moïse Adéniran Adékambi's "L'herméneutique biblique africaine entre contextes, théories et théologies de texte." Adékambi explores the role of faith as mediated through African cosmologies, drawing on Yoruba sacred orature and the Septuagint's sapiential reinterpretation of Hebrew texts. He argues that Africa's oral and written wisdom traditions constitute a legitimate canon of God's Word. This significantly broadens the scope of biblical authority and invites the development of an African hermeneutic rooted in proverb-based interpretive techniques. Similarly, Clement Oyelakin's "African Christianity and the Bible" positions the African worldview as foundational for constructing an authentic and transformative biblical interpretation. By placing African experience and thought at the centre of biblical interpretation, Oyelakin underscores the importance of African perspectives for rethinking the relationship between Christianity and Scripture.

Paul Anyidoho's "Literary Forms of African Linguistics for Hermeneutics of the Bible" further explores the theological significance of African oral traditions for biblical interpretation. By examining concepts such as kingship and chiefdom, Anyidoho argues that African literary and rhetorical forms offer significant insight into biblical themes, including the threefold mission of Jesus as prophet, priest, and king. His approach enriches the theological and hermeneutical horizons of Christianity in Africa while underscoring the importance of African perspectives in biblical studies.

Pierre Sorro's "African Indigenous Knowledge and Leadership Regarding Environmental Care" extends these hermeneutical concerns into the field of environmental ethics by addressing the marginalization of African ecological knowledge. Drawing on the traditional ecological practices of the Sénoufo people of West Africa, Sorro argues for the significance of Indigenous leadership structures in sustaining ethical stewardship and environmental responsibility. His contribution demonstrates how African Indigenous knowledge can inform contemporary approaches to environmental care while challenging the marginalization of such knowledge within dominant academic and environmental discourses.

Finally, John Galaty's "The Cultural Foundations of African Religions" examines the sources of belief and ritual within four foundational African ethno-linguistic traditions. Galaty considers how the supernatural permeates everyday life through practices such as blessings, prophecy, magic, oracles, and witchcraft, reflecting what he describes as "power in the mundane." This understanding of power, which is also echoed in biblical texts, is frequently sidelined in modern secular and rationalist discourses. Galaty further observes that these practices remain widespread in African societies, often coexisting with or integrated into Christian and Islamic traditions. Taken together, the contributions in this volume demonstrate the value of African religious, Indigenous, and interpretive traditions for rethinking biblical hermeneutics and contemporary environmental ethics.

African Worldview and Ecology

The Faith for Earth Coalition, a vital component of the United Nations Interagency Task Force on Religion and Sustainable Development, brings together diverse religious traditions to address global challenges by drawing upon their moral and spiritual resources. In a May 9, 2022, report entitled *Climate-Responsible Finance: A Moral Imperative and Responsibility to All Children and the Living World*, the coalition advocates for responsible investment in response to the existential threat of climate change. They argue that urgent, ethically grounded action is needed to care for the Earth and ensure its sustainability for

future generations.¹ As Qohelet wisely observed long ago, “one generation goes and another comes, but the earth remains forever” (Qoh 1:3). The pressing question is not whether the Earth will endure, but what kind of Earth we will bequeath to future generations – how habitable and whole it will be?

The involvement of religious actors in discussions of sustainability and climate change is not a recent phenomenon. Religious communities were, for example, instrumental in shaping the 1987 Brundtland Report, which laid the groundwork for the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro and its Biodiversity Declaration, and, in turn, ultimately led to the formation of the Commission on Sustainable Development. This legacy continues in the current global framework: the transition from the Millennium Development Goals to the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for 2030 reflects a growing recognition of the need for integrated approaches that balance social, cultural, economic, and ecological sustainability.² These initiatives demonstrate that religious engagement is not merely moralistic or symbolic but embedded in practical efforts to envision a just and sustainable future.

While such institutional and policy-level religious efforts are crucial, some scholars argue that the ecological crisis is rooted in deeper metaphysical disruptions. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, in his seminal 1968 work *Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man*, frames the environmental crisis not simply as a technological or economic issue, but as a spiritual and ontological rupture. Tracing this rupture to the rise of modernity in Western Europe, he links ecological imbalance to the triumph of scientism – a worldview that reduces nature to mere empirical facts and dismisses traditional metaphysical knowledge as obsolete.³ He writes,

This lack of the transparency of things, of intimacy with nature as a cosmos that conveys to man a meaning that concerns him is of course due to the loss of the contemplative and symbolist spirit which sees symbols rather than facts. The near disappearance of gnosis, as understood in its true sense as a unitive and illuminative knowledge, and its replacement by sentimental mysticism and the gradual neglect of apophatic and metaphysical theology in favour of a rational theology, are all effects of the same event that has taken place with the souls of men. The symbolic view of things is for the most part forgotten in the West and survives only among peoples of faraway regions, while the majority of modern men live in a de-sacralised world of phenomena whose only meaning is either their quantitative relationships expressed in mathematical formulae that satisfy the scientific mind, or their material usefulness for man considered as a two-legged animal with no destiny beyond his earthly existence.⁴

Nasr’s reflection challenges both secular and religious communities to confront the spiritual impoverishment at the heart of ecological degradation. Without recovering a sacred vision of the cosmos – one that sees the world as imbued with meaning, beyond mere material use – efforts toward sustainability may address symptoms while leaving the deeper crisis untouched. In addition to critiquing the assumptions present in modern science, Nasr examines how certain developments within Christian theology contributed to the widening schism between humanity, nature, and the divine. He argues that in its efforts to guard

1. United Nations Environmental Programme, *Climate-Responsible Finance: A Moral Imperative towards Children*, May 9, 2022, <https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/statements/climate-responsible-finance-moral-imperative-towards-children>.

2. United Nations Environmental Programme, *Faith for Earth Initiative: Faith for Earth Coalition*, August 24, 2020, <https://faithfornature.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Brochure-Faith-for-Earth-24-August-2020.pdf>, 2025; United Nations, “The 17 Goals,” accessed April 30, 2025, <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>.

3. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man* 2nd ed., (London: Unwin Publishers, [first edition, 1968], 1976), 36–37.

4. Nasr, *Man and Nature*, 37.

orthodoxy, Christianity gradually distanced itself from the sacred character of the cosmos that had been prominent in earlier traditions. He explains;

To preserve a correct theology Christianity became opposed to the ‘cosmic religion’ of the Greeks, and some theologians called nature *massa perditionis*. In the dialogue between the Christian and the Greek, in which both sides were expressing an aspect of the truth but each a half truth, the Christian emphasized nature of God, the human soul and salvation, while the Greek emphasised the ‘divine’ quality of the cosmos and the supernatural status of intelligence which enables man to know the universe. Against this cosmology Christianity opposed its theology...in the process an alienation took place towards nature which left its mark upon the subsequent history of Christianity.⁵

This theological reorientation deepened between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries, when Western Christian scholarship began incorporating Latin translations (often mistranslated) of key Arabic philosophical texts, particularly those of Averroes (Ibn Rushd).⁶ The encounter with Aristotelian frameworks encouraged a more systematized and rationalized theology that increasingly secularized the cosmos. The resulting theological paradigm diverged from earlier Christian sapiential traditions, which emphasized a contemplative and sacramental understanding of nature. Instead, nature came to be viewed through a dualistic lens – as fallen, material, and inferior as opposed to “divine” and “spiritual.” This shift culminated in the rise of nominalism in the late Middle Ages, which questioned the human capacity to perceive metaphysical truths and increasingly regarded nature as a domain of mere empirical observation. The cumulative effect of these developments, Nasr observes, laid the intellectual groundwork for the materialist, positivist, and mechanistic worldviews that dominate the modern West – worldviews that stand in stark contrast to the integrative and symbolic cosmologies of earlier Christian thought.

Lynn White Jr., a contemporary of Nasr, has similarly argued that the ecological crisis has its roots in the anthropocentric worldview of Western Christianity. He claims that this religious framework, which prioritizes human dominion over nature, has been used to justify environmental exploitation, and in his view, technological progress alone cannot resolve the crisis. He warns that “more science and more technology, are not going to get us out of the present ecologic crisis until we find a new religion or rethink our old one.”⁷ For Nasr, the path forward lies not in abandoning religion, but in recovering a sacred understanding of nature that integrates modern science with a metaphysical vision grounded in divine revelation. Drawing on various spiritual traditions – including Islam, Taoism, Neo-Confucianism, Shintoism, and Hinduism – Nasr emphasizes that these systems regard nature, not as an autonomous entity to be worshipped, but as a reflection of the divine order. He thus proposes a sacred science, one that respects empirical findings while integrating them into a symbolic and metaphysical worldview. Such an approach would restore the intrinsic spiritual value of the natural world, offering a genuinely objective and scientifically coherent foundation for reverence toward nature. In this vision, the natural world is not seen merely as material substance, but as manifesting the sacred – calling for care, wonder, and respect.

5. Nasr, *Man and Nature*, 55–56.

6. Oludamini Ogunnaike, “Survival, Sustainability, and the Sacred: Spiritual Perspectives on the Environmental Crisis” Pp 1-14 in *Africa Religion, Environment and Sustainable Development in Africa* (ed., D.O. Ogungbile & O. Olademo, Ibadan: African Association for the Study of Religions, Nigerian Publications Bureau, 2020), 8.

7. Lynn White Jr, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis.” *Science* 155 (1967): 1203– 1207, 1206. According to P. Tyson, Progressive Dominion Theology (PDT)—which prioritizes domination, instrumental reason, and views nature as a resource, is a key driver of climate change. He contends that this mindset influences both religious and secular worldviews across political lines, shaping dominant modern (Western) attitudes toward the environment. For more see, Paul Tyson, *Theology and Climate Change* (London: Routledge, 2021), 71&124.

Moreover, the current ecological crisis is closely linked to rapid technological advancement, particularly in the aggressive exploitation of natural resources such as fossil fuels. These fuels are the leading contributors to global climate change, responsible for over seventy-five percent of greenhouse gas emissions and nearly ninety percent of carbon dioxide emissions worldwide.⁸ This raises a critical question: must we turn to deeper philosophical and metaphysical frameworks that prioritize sustainability, or can we rely purely on technological development to cure this crisis since it created it? Put differently, if secular science has brought us into this mess, might it also hold the tools for guiding us out? According to Oludamini Ogunnaike, addressing the crisis requires more than promoting environmental responsibility or adopting new technologies. He argues that the challenge lies in the modern understanding of human progress which traces its historical roots to the transformation of religious and philosophical thought during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. This redefinition, he suggests, fundamentally shaped the modern worldview, prioritizing growth and progress over being. The modern ideal of progress, shaped by this legacy, stands in opposition to the principles of sustainability, which are essential for addressing the environmental crisis. As Ogunnaike explains,

[T]he religious and philosophical upheavals of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance also gave rise to the modern conception of progress, envisioned in temporal material terms. The ‘kingdom of Heaven’ was no longer primarily ‘within’ or a spiritual ideal as St. Augustine’s city of God [...] but rather a material reality located in the not-too-distant future. This cult of progress and the resultant privileging of philosophies of becoming over those of being has come to characterise nearly every aspect of modern life [...]. This material quantitative notion of progress is in direct conflict with the idea of sustainability, which must ground any approach to the environmental crisis.⁹

Building on Ogunnaike’s critique, it becomes clear that the modern ideal of progress – defined by material accumulation and technological domination – has fueled, not only ecological degradation, but also the rise of consumerism. This consumer culture, shaped by the same historical transformation of thought, promotes the relentless pursuit and valuation of material goods, often at the expense of the environment.¹⁰ Technological advancement has served this consumer economy by facilitating the extraction and commodification of natural resources to meet the ever-growing demands. In this sense, the modern person finds themselves propelled along a path of so-called progress, one that promises satisfaction through material excess, yet ultimately delivers discontentment, alienation, and environmental irresponsibility. The illusion of fulfillment through consumption soon unravels, revealing a deeper crisis: the resources sustaining this lifestyle are finite, and their depletion threatens the very systems that support life. Addressing the ecological crisis, therefore, requires more than technological fixes. It demands a fundamental rethinking of the modern vision of material progress. A sustainable future, therefore, must begin with the dismantling of the consumerist paradigm and recovering a worldview that prioritizes being over having, depth over accumulation, and responsibility over domination.

In contrast to this materialist vision, African worldviews offer a compelling alternative grounded in a sacred understanding of nature and the cosmos. The human-nature relationship in many African communities is grounded in a cosmology where no sharp divide exists between the sacred and the mundane. The natural world is perceived as inherently spiritual, and every element of creation – whether living or

8. United Nations, “Climate Action: Causes and Effects of Climate Change,” April 30, 2025, <https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/science/causes-effects-climate-change>.

9. Ogunnaike, “Survival, Sustainability, and the Sacred,” 11.

10. See Tyson, *Theology*.

inanimate – carries symbolic, ritual, and moral significance. Animals are revered not only for their symbolic wisdom, but also for their role in ritual practices, particularly as sacrificial offerings. Similarly, specific plants and herbs are regarded as sacred, and their medicinal and spiritual value is safeguarded within the knowledge systems of priests, healers, and diviners.¹¹ This holistic vision challenges the reduction of nature to a resource and offers instead a paradigm of reverence, balance, and reciprocal care.

Moreover, African cosmological and mythological narratives, though mainly anthropocentric, demonstrate a notion of humanity that transcends individualism, extending to the Earth (i.e., animals, plants and the land).¹² In this worldview, a human is understood as a “being with” the other, where the ‘other’ includes the Earth itself. The Kalenjin people of Kenya capture this perspective in the idiomatic phrase *tilya ngw’ony* (lit. ‘The Earth is our kin’), highlighting their kinship not only with one another but also with the Earth. This expression reflects a shared identity rooted in what Nigerian philosopher Charles Nweke describes as “communalistic ontology.”¹³ Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* reflects this communalistic worldview by portraying the Igbo understanding of the land as a *Whole*, composed of human and animal inhabitants, the gods and ancestral spirits they worship, the village compounds, and the forests surrounding the community.¹⁴ This interconnected perspective highlights the reciprocal relationships that sustain life and identity within Igbo cosmology. Environmentalist Wangari Maathai echoes this view, underscoring the deep connection of African identity with the natural world. She writes: “who we are (as Africans) [...] is bound up in the rivers and streams, the trees, and the valleys. It is bound up in our languages, rich aphorisms from the natural world, and our fragile and almost forgotten past.”¹⁵ For many African communities, therefore, nature is not a distant, pristine entity “out there”; rather, it is an intimate part of not only who they are but *how* they are. In contrast to the alienation of the consumerist model, which views nature as a ‘thing’ devoid of sacred value, African worldviews offer a vision of life in which human well-being is inseparable from ecological integrity.

This volume brings together a diverse range of perspectives that highlight the importance of African worldviews in both biblical interpretation and environmental ethics. Through engaging with the essays presented here, readers will encounter a decolonial approach to biblical hermeneutics, African ecological knowledge, and the sacred relationship between humanity and nature. From examining the foundational forms of African religious thought to exploring the impact of colonial-era translations on Indigenous cosmologies, the contributions in this journal provide invaluable insights into how African traditions can offer transformative frameworks for both interpreting scripture and addressing contemporary ecological challenges. We invite you to explore these thought-provoking essays, which not only deepen our understanding of African perspectives but also offer critical resources for reimagining our approach to sustainability and spirituality in the modern world.

– Mathew K. Birgen & Dr. Gerbern S. Oegema,

11. Jacob K. Olupona, *African Religions: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 4–5.

12. See, John S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 2nd rev. ed. (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1991); Stephen Belcher, ed., *African Myths of Origin*, (New York: Penguin Publishing Group, 2005).

13. Charles C. Nweke, “African Identity: The Nature-Culture Perspective,” *Φιλοσοφία* 19, no. 1 (2018): 66–75, 70.

14. Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (New York: Anchor Books, 1959). See also, Chengyi Coral Wu, “Towards an Ecocriticism in Africa: Literary Aesthetics in African Environmental Literature,” in *Natures of Africa: Ecocriticism and Animal Studies in Contemporary Cultural Forms*, ed. F. Fiona Moolla (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2016), 140–142; Anthony Chukwuebuka Egbo, “African Concept of Happiness in the Light of Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*: A Hermeneutical Approach.” *Volume 5, Issue 2* (2024): 127–143.

15. Wangari Maathai, *The Challenge for Africa*, (New York: Pantheon books, 2009), 287–288.