

Book Review

Reviewer

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<https://doi.org/10.58863/20.500.12424/4306831>. ISBN 978-2-88931-548-2 (online version); ISBN 978-2-88931-549-9 (paperback).

Introduction

Climate change and environmental degradation are current realities worldwide. This book is a result of two interdisciplinary groups in the field, *A capacity-building Webinar for Religious Communities and Ecological Sustainability in Southern Africa* held on September 1, 2020 (Öhlmann and Stork, 2024, p. 13) and *A Conference on Churches in Southern Africa as Civil Society Actors for Ecological Sustainability* held at the University of Pretoria in Pretoria, South Africa, from October 28-31, 2019 (Öhlmann and Stork, 2024, p. 14). The book is a result of global engagements such as the *International Conference on Religion and Environment* held in India during 2024 and the *Interdisciplinary Conference on Sustainability and Climate in Religion* held in Norway during 2020, therefore presenting a contribution to ongoing debates by bringing a voice from an African religious space. The editors of the volume, who are renowned scholars in the field, make an important observation that '[r]eligion shapes social imaginaries and people's values' (Öhlmann and Stork, 2024, p. 9). As a need to explore the role that religious communities play in ecological sustainability is critical, this book is timely. At the back of our minds we understand that most religions have a strong anthropocentric orientation and Christianity has been accused of such (Mylius, 2018; Setume and Phili, 2020), which has unfortunately contributed to the degradation of the environment. This book raises an important question: What are religious communities doing to attain ecological sustainability in Southern Africa? Given the extent to which the relationship between human beings and the environment has deteriorated over decades, a book that explores the role that religious communities are playing or could play better is very important. Global warming and its effects serve as good indicators of this broken relationship.

The purpose of the book is 'to elucidate the role of religious communities for ecological sustainability in Southern Africa, with respect to their theologies, lived experiences and activities' (Öhlmann and Stork, 2024, p. 9). Second, the editors clearly define the purpose of the book as

a resource book for both academics and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), as well as faith-based organizations (FBOs) as they engage in ecological sustainability debates (Öhlmann and Stork, 2024, p. 10). Though other scholars like Bomberg and Hague (2018) as well as Koehrsen, Blanc and Huber (2023) have addressed the environmental issue from a religious perspective, this book makes a special contribution as it focuses on Southern Africa.

The book is well structured for academic and religious communities as it pays attention to both the scholarly rigor and the simplicity for implementation by religious communities, as the cited case studies are relatable to churches, NGOs, and FBOs. It is divided into two sections, namely the *Ecological Theologies in Religious Communities in Southern Africa and Beyond* and *Ecological Best Practice Examples in Southern Africa and Beyond*, with ten and nine chapters respectively. The structure gives the reader a good mental map.

Ecological Theologies in Religious Communities in Southern Africa and Beyond

This section focuses on different religions that are found and practiced in Southern Africa, with clear lessons of what can be learnt from each religion that contributes towards ecological sustainability in Southern Africa. Most of these chapters are derived from primary data, therefore built on sound academic research. The following chapters contain detailed discussions: Chapter 4 on Christian communities; chapter 9 on African Indigenous Religions; chapter 19 on the Baha'i faith; and chapter 11 on Islam.

Ecological Best Practice Examples in Southern Africa and Beyond

This section takes the conversation further by providing concrete examples of religious practices that help to attain ecological sustainability in Southern Africa.

Kate Davies (chapter 17) gives a practical guide for communities to ensure that transformations that can lead to behavioral change are possible. She makes an important observation that will enable a transformation: '[P]eople understanding the human behaviours that are fueling the ecological crisis, possessing knowledge and being aware, doesn't guarantee action and that drawing on the underpinning value systems of our deep-seated faith convictions could be key to radical and permanent behaviour change' (Öhlmann and Stork, 2024, p. 267). Davies further advocates for a need to challenge the Abrahamic faiths' creation myths because they promote an anthropocentric theology (Öhlmann and Stork, 2024, p. 276). Chapters 12, 16, and 18 contain further empirical research on the subject.

Discussions and Conclusions

The concluding chapter provides well informed recommendations for different sectors such as governments, religious communities, and academia. Pages 318-325 provide a detailed list of recommendations with the aim of creating healthy ecological systems. The recommendation that captured my attention the most is one that is directed at researchers. The editors urge academic researchers to 'conduct in-depth studies on local religious knowledge about and action on the environment and evaluating the effectiveness of religious advocacy initiatives' (Öhlmann and Stork, 2024, p. 324). I found this particularly significant because much research ends at universities on library shelves or as online publications, earning little or no relevance in the communities where it was executed. This implies no credit for scholars and very little impact on the communities where the research was carried out. These recommendations are timely as most governments need empirical evidence to make informed decisions; it makes ethical sense for researchers to give back to the communities by sharing their research findings. These findings need to have impact on the communities that are being researched as they can lead to the formulation of relevant policies.

The editors are proposing that researchers should 'evaluate the effectiveness of religious advocacy initiatives' (Öhlmann and Stork, 2024, p. 11) after which feedback can lead to informed decision-making towards the creation and attainment of ecological sustainability in Southern Africa.

Though the book speaks to religious communities, in the section of cases studies throughout the book there is a bias towards Christian denominations over against other religions that are found and practiced in Southern Africa and beyond.

Finally, I find this book relevant and timely.

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