



Youth, faith and environmental consciousness in Africa: A Practical Theology research imperative

Jacques W. Beukes
University of Pretoria, South Africa
jacques.beukes@up.ac.za

Abstract

Climate change and environmental degradation are arguably among the most significant concerns for humanity and environmental sustainability on a worldwide scale. Today's youth are at the epicentre of discussions about ecological (in) justice, environmental consciousness, and climate change discourses and practices. This is illustrated by international protests, including the Fridays for the Future and Extinction Rebellion campaigns, to highlight a few. However, both of the aforementioned youth movements are western illustrations of youth who are participating in these discourses. This article first argues that the African youth should be at the forefront of the environmental discourse due to the impact this phenomenon has on Africa. Secondly, this article focuses on why the environmental discourse should be prioritised in the practical theological subject field of youth ministry. Within the practical theology discipline, the tripartite concern with the link between youth, faith, and environmental consciousness has been under-researched.

Keywords

Youth; climate change; environmental consciousness; theological education

1. Introduction

Climate change is a worldwide environmental concern, and Africa will undoubtedly be one of the first regions to feel the effects of climate change. Climate change will, by the end of the century, affect more than 180 million people in Sub-Saharan Africa (Mwambazambi 2011:850). This is one of the justifications for its importance in addressing Africa's environmental issues head-on, both for current and future generations, as well as for the entire globe. Africa must act quickly and decisively to combat land degradation

and deforestation, which exacerbate the challenge of climate change. Furthermore, the effects of pollution created by industrialised countries are a significant danger to Africa, so this, along with deforestation, has had a severe impact on the continent's environmental status. Because of the direct relationship between international capitalism, liberalism, consumerism, and pollution, which all play a devastating role in environmental damage and natural ecosystems, both foreign and domestic forces contribute to environmental disasters in Africa. It is hard to overlook the worldwide ecological crisis's consequences for humans, plant species, and animals in Africa. Water is a vital ingredient for both human and non-human life. Today, numerous variables influence the availability of drinkable water, including inadequate water and preservation technologies (Mwambazambi 2011:850).

Concerning the environment, people all around the globe are debating environmental concerns and developments such as climate change. Weather patterns, such as flooding and drought, are altering and straining the African environment, where subsistence agriculture is the customary way of life. Without a doubt, changes in the natural environment are reshaping civilisation. Natural catastrophe events are forcing many Africans to relocate to cities or densely populated areas near industry in search of socioeconomic security. Africa's inherent wealth in the form of land, minerals, oil, and people produces unnatural migratory developments in the form of international, national, and tribal wars and conflicts, primarily for economic motives (Knoetze 2021:1).

According to Mugambi and Mika (2001:2), the existence of large populations is endangered by the destruction of the environment induced by microeconomic and overall corporate activities. According to them (2001:4), churches, in particular, may conscientise their members through pastoral encouragement to safeguard nature. Theologians and faith leaders who inspire Africans to safeguard their environment as a biblical motivation for stewardship will be a powerful force for good. Most Africans regard God as the creator of humankind and everything else in their surroundings. In essence, God is understood and known, albeit not clearly, through the various things that God has created. Furthermore, Africa has more young people than any other continent on the globe, and they are undoubtedly Africa's most valuable asset. This has provided the continent

with unrivalled energy, vitality, and innovative potential. Regrettably, if not utilised, this unique asset of a primarily youthful population can quickly be eroded (see African Development Bank 2018).

This brief introduction aims to provide context for the remainder of this article, which will investigate why the environmental discourse should be prioritised in the practical theological subject field of youth ministry. This article investigates the connection between youth, religion, and environmental consciousness within the theological disciplines of youth ministry and practical theology.

2. African youth and environmental consciousness

Africa has the world's fastest-growing population. Its current populace of 1.2 billion people is expected to increase to 1.7 billion by 2030 and more than quadrupled to 2.5 billion by 2050 (Corrigan 2017: n.p.). This is also the world's youngest populace, fuelling an increasing youth population. The United Nations (UN) Population Division estimates the continent's youths (those aged 15 to 24) at slightly under 231 million people or 19% of the nation. If population growth continues, the youth population might reach 335 million by 2030 and 461 million by 2050. By African Union (AU) standards, these figures are an underestimate, because the African Youth Charter classifies youths as those aged 15 to 35, placing 420 million individuals – one-third of Africa's population – in the youth category. If Africa and Africans as a people can influence or perhaps reshape the world (Knoetze 2021:1), how much more can the youth, who account for 33% of the African population, do so? The role that African youth can play is huge, and it has been vastly undervalued.

According to Awojobi and Tetteh (2017:39), Africa is expected to be among the places severely damaged by climate change, being the most susceptible continent in this respect (Awojobi & Tetteh 2017:39). This is because all predictions point to the fact that Africa's impoverished population will be 'the most vulnerable' as pertaining to climate change as widespread poverty limits a country's ability to adapt to adverse conditions. Certain factors worsen this situation (Conradie 2008:7). These include recurrent droughts and floods, scarcity of fresh water, higher dependence on natural resources and a poor health care system. Children and young people will therefore be

the most affected (Cattell 2021; Chersich, Scorgie, Wright, Mullick, Mathee, Hess, Richter & Rees 2019; Han & Ahn 2020; Nkrumah 2021). Although we live on a continent where young people are expected to be seen rather than heard (Nel 2016:1), young people across Africa are progressively making their voices heard and campaigning for climate change action and environmental challenges (Kosciulek 2020:2). These young climate activists add a critical lens to the global conversation. Youths play an important role in gaining these insights since they are the population most affected by climate change and thus the most likely to manage a climate-changed future. Youth typically begin their climate campaigning at the local level, concentrating on topics that are most essential to their circumstances and experiences. Furthermore, their engagement tends to concentrate on social justice issues – the surge of youth-led fighting climate change in Africa includes social justice issues ranging from universal access to electricity, water management, bridging the digital divide, employment, and livelihood opportunities, to women and girls’ empowerment and food security (Kosciulek 2020:2).

According to Kosciulek (2020:2-3), Africa’s young people are demonstrating that they are informed, enthusiastic, and engaged. Similarly, Beukes, a proponent for youth involvement in the environmental discourse also discussed why youth could be seen as key role players and participants in the battle against the environmental crisis debate owing to their diverse abilities and talents (Beukes 2021). Some of the reasons Beukes (2021:5-6) put forward are that the youth see themselves as change agents capable of altering the *status quo* in a variety of ways; they have a history of contributing to change; they are comfortable being disruptive; the youth are technologically inclined; etc. However, effective engagement and inclusion in climate-related policymaking spaces and processes remain a significant barrier. This is due to a variety of circumstances. First, while an understanding of climate change is rising, there is still a need for more comprehensive climate change education and capacity development that incorporates local knowledge while contextualising global change and how its implications are and will be felt at the local level. Much of the discourse seems to be at a high level, and much more needs to happen to link it to the lived experiences of innocent young people and their communities. Second, decision-making spaces remain mainly unavailable to youths since they are

mainly adapted to satisfy older working people. Such spaces may not often take into consideration the barriers to participation that young people encounter, including a lack of transportation, the scheduling of activities, educational demands, or simply mere accessibility of basic information. Where spaces are available, they are frequently confined to tokenistic, platitudinous, patronising, or surface-level encounters that do not foster deeper, ongoing youth involvement, rather than seeing youth participation as a tick-box activity. Third, distinctions in experiences and needs between “younger” (15–24) and “older” (25–35) youths are not usually recognised or accommodated in consultations or public participation procedures. Youths are sometimes grouped into a youth cohort without fully recognising the wide variety of lived experiences that exist inside this demographic. Addressing such obstacles is critical for increasing engagement by the youth demographic, and in doing so, it contributes to more comprehensive and aspirational climate programmes, policies, and implementation (Kosciulek 2020:3).

As a result, while researching African youth, faith, and ecological awareness, it is critical to focus on faith formation among African youth. Although Africa has various faiths, including African Traditional Religion (ATR), Islam, and Hinduism, this article will primarily discuss faith development from a Christian faith stance (Knoetze 2021:2). For African adolescents, identity and spiritual formation are inextricably linked (Weber 2015:3). Most youth desire a social connection or a sense of belonging and are eager to join youth groups that are associated with moral and possibly even political principles to which they adhere or strive towards. Choosing a god is a crucial component of faith formation and identity, yet young people learn that not any god will do. Many of their lives as ‘liberated people’ are controlled by power, prestige, and money in a globally competitive society. As a result, they enjoy youth events that may spark certain youth subcultures, whether good or harmful. Consistent and genuine interactions with friends, family, and mentors are essential for the development of African young identities in a globalised society (Knoetze 2021:2). Whether correct or incorrect, today’s activities will have major consequences for future generations (Mwambazambi 2011:853). Recognizing that the country’s resources must be shared with future generations who will live in

the future is vital and necessary and should advocate for a new way of life (Mwambazambi 2011:853).

Environmental education programmes, according to Kosciulek (2020:5), provide a crucial foundation for many young people, but there is an ever-increasing need for education and capacity development programmes to go beyond merely delivering environmental or climate-related knowledge. Curriculum transformation from elementary to tertiary education is required to include environmental issues in educational practices and thereby create environmentally conscious people. Recognising the intersectionality of climate change, the climate issue must be incorporated across courses and at all levels of learning. Educators must also be prepared to manage changes to the educational curriculum. They require capacity-building, refresher courses and staff development to strengthen their abilities to educate up-to-date climate change content and incorporate it into all aspects of education. Physical and natural science educators should not be the only ones discussing climate change issues. However, more should be done to include educators from the social sciences, mathematics, technology, and arts and culture in providing social, economic, and cultural understandings of the climate crisis, as well as to develop possible solutions or approaches in attempting to deal with this global phenomenon (Kosciulek 2020:5).

Having discussed the significance of environmental educational programmes, Ayres (2021:77) claims that approaches to environmental education based on objectivist and rationalist epistemologies fail to resolve the relational and emotional aspects of developing ecological character and identity properly. Environmental encounter, as a pedagogical and spiritual practice, establishes an integrated and complete method of understanding, loving, and caring for a dynamic and enigmatic environment, and the role of human existence within it is critical (Ayres 2021:77). As a result, I argue for a theological emphasis on creation, environmental challenges, and eco-theology within practical theology as a tertiary education programme. What could be more important for practical theology right now? I will now turn my focus to a brief discussion on environmental concerns within theological training in Africa.

3. Why environmental issues matters within theological education in Africa

According to Agbiji (2015:1), within Sub-Saharan Africa, faith communities are increasingly becoming more conscious of the consequences of environmental injustices and their relationship to socioeconomic injustice. But even so, he argues that little progress has been made in creating a strong Christian ideological ecological orientation and activity among African people. According to him, such a mindset has the potential to mitigate humankind's disastrous influence on the environment (Agbiji 2015:1).

According to the Scripture, God is the creator of all creation, as per the description in Genesis (1:1, 31), and all creatures are in him. Before entrusting people with the care of his creation, God determined that it was all good. Regrettably, humans chose to defy him and ruin the earth (Mwambazambi 2011:853). According to Fihavango (2001:93), the fall generated a mismatch in the creation's equilibrium. The issue was shifted from a damaged connection with God to nature. The fact that people sinned against God ruined God's plan for humanity. The dominion mandate in Genesis 1:26–28 suggests human responsibility. The *dominion* order from Genesis empowers individuals to labour on the earth, yet it still belongs to God. This is qualified in Genesis 2:15, where humans are to tend and maintain the "garden", in this case, God's creation. However, humans are placed at the end of the creation sequence in the first creation story, signifying that the Creator had to prepare for their existence, not implying any dominion at all, but rather the responsibility of stewardship.

The second creation narrative's stewardship obligation, coupled with the dominion command given to humans in the first creation story, should be the beginning point for human zeal in eliminating behaviours and activities that breach ethical conduct in God's creation's interdependent relationship. The concept of exploitative anthropocentrism must be abandoned (Chibuye & Buitendag 2020:5). As a result, Bujo (1998:214) believes that through Christ, the entire creation aspires to a new life in plenty and enjoys an intimate relationship with God. On the other hand, Kyomo (2001:58) believes that it is everyone's responsibility to protect this life, which includes both living and non-living things. Environmental protection exemplifies this safeguarding. When discussing environmental

concerns, there is a need to include and engage faith and spiritual leaders (Neville 2010:21), as well as collaborate with any organisations and institutions that are working to make the world a more peaceful and just place for those who are part of salvation... because they are finding life-giving counterarguments to the current system (Wright 2011:184; see Wesley 2012:83). Furthermore, environmental stewardship is part of earth stewardship, and with careful communication, this may be an area for meaningful interaction (Neville 2010:21). According to Aziz (2021:5), churches and faith leaders have a significant role to play in communities because they can inspire individuals to act because of the trust that exists between faith leaders and the community (cf. Burger et al. 2010:68; see Nieman 2010:42). While it is important to recognise personal faith and piety, the church should assist in a process that allows for a shift from private sanctification to one in which the person's faith is realised within the community and the lived reality of others. Admittedly, an embodied faith, or a life of public worship, is communal and something that young people are not hesitant to participate in, as proven by the numerous public movements in contemporary society. Moreover, allowing for embodied faith enables the transfer of power away from religious leaders and toward individuals who exercise their faith in everyday settings (Aziz 2021:5).

The majesty and splendour of God are also portrayed in the universe through rivers, trees, forests, rocks, mountains, animals, and so on, which is why every Christian in Africa should demonstrate the necessity of conserving nature to everybody else. Everything God created communicates a divine language that reveals God's dread and adoration. Only through the reconciliation of the entire cosmos with God can abundant existence be experienced. The solution supplied by this reconciliation also implies the community of the living and the dead (Mwambazambi 2011:861). According to the Bible, God imbues all of his creations with his presence. This is why it is so important to preserve nature, just as God safeguards his people and works for the wellbeing of everyone. As a result, according to Bujo (1998:219), the ultimate responsibility is for all Christians to cooperate to rescue the environment from devastation.

If Africans want their continent to thrive and flourish in harmony, they must reject anything that destroys unity. The African elite and faith leaders are an important component of the vanguard in the campaign

for integrity and environmental preservation. Certainly, every Christian should be a role model for others and participate actively in their community (Mwambazambi 2011:852). As part of its purpose, the church should prioritise the conservation of the environment in which people live. The safeguarding of the ecosystem in which people live should be addressed properly as part of the effort to restore God's creation. As a result, the entire church must speak out on this issue with one voice (Mwambazambi 2011:862). The fact of environmental destruction has also prompted theologians to reconsider Christian missions and traditions with open minds and a humble mindset (Foster & Shreeve 2008:2). The ecological crisis is a religious issue. According to Sallie (2008:31), it is a dilemma arising from our conceptions of God and ourselves that promotes or enables our harmful, unjust behaviour. Humans and nature have a theological underpinning in the sense that God is the Creator of the world and humankind is at the centre of everything. After creating humans in his image, God gave them the ability to rule over his creation (Kgatla & Kamukwamba 2019:7). God's rule and the preservation of his creation include all the elements of human existence, including the environment. A core discipline is the interconnectedness of all beings beneath the sun. As a result, Kyomo (2001:63) asserts that "life is worthy of life when this discipline becomes the currency for each human being". This interconnectedness between humans and nature is highly valued in African design because African people consider nature as a necessary component of their lives according to God's purpose.

Ecological recovery is only attainable if Christians evaluate their relationship with the environment thoroughly. Every Christian should therefore fulfil an educative role for everybody else to preserve Africa from all sorts of environmental degradation and ecological crises because by safeguarding the environment, they are protecting themselves. Faith leaders should fulfil this task through the Christian mission since only the Christian mission can address the causes of environmental degradation. Africans must take accountability for their behaviour, as well as for the problem of rapid population growth (Mwambazambi 2011:861). Theology's purpose is to educate Africans and remind them of their obligation to God and the God-created world. Scripturally, the environmental tragedy must be seen as a major pastoral dilemma in Africa (Kyomo 2001:57).

Based on the discussion thus far, it is clear that the environmental discourse is extremely important in the African setting. Despite this, there has been little success in developing a strong Christian doctrinal ecological orientation and activism among Africans (Agbiji 2015:1). As a result, this study emphasises the significance of religious leaders, African youth, and theology (practical theology) in addressing this concern. The importance of practical theology in this discourse can be partly attributed to the educational value it has for environmental consciousness. During a South African youth protest on 15 March 2019, and again on 14 June 2019, in Pretoria and Cape Town, respectively, the South African youth demanded a revision in the education curriculum so that climate change becomes a mandatory aspect of it (Postman & Hendricks 2019: np). This should also be the case for theological education. I believe the value of practical theology is overlooked as various studies (see Lang 2011; Marquart-Pyatt 2012; Fung & Adams 2017) have revealed that subject majors at schools or higher educational institutions also influence environmental attitudes and behaviours (Fung & Adams 2017:3). Therefore, school, college, and university subjects contribute to the motivational factors for becoming environmentally conscious and environmental activists.

To conclude the discussion hitherto, I do want to acknowledge that theological disciplines such as systematic theology, dogmatics (doctrine of creation), and environmental ethics in theological education have made amends regarding the ecological discourse (see Conradie 2020). Similarly, according to McCarroll (2020:32), concerns about the Anthropocene's effects have been a catalyst for the development of eco-theology movements and the "emerging field of religion and ecology over the last several decades in the fields of systematic, constructive, and philosophical theology, religious studies, and ethics". How is it then that the discipline of practical theology is almost entirely missing from this discussion? With this as a backdrop, I will now shift my attention to the sections on practical theology, youth ministry, and environmental consciousness.

4. Practical theology, youth ministry and environmental consciousness

McCarroll (2020:31) asserts and then inquires, “while creation is groaning, burdened by the consuming habits of the richest among us, the poorest of the world suffer the extremes of the environmental crisis”. Given the extremity of the crisis, why is it that practical theologians are not talking about it? “Practical theologians should engage in critical analysis and reflective practice of ecclesial praxis such as liturgy, preaching, eco-congregations, pastoral care, diaconia, church ministries, and so forth. In terms of ministries, I want to emphasise youth ministries explicitly because of their enormous potential, skills, resources, and traits to make a significant contribution to the battle against environmental injustice” (see Beukes 2021).

According to Klaasen (2014:2), practical theology’s task includes ministry to the church and the world. For this reason, because this paper argues for youth and youth ministry to participate actively in addressing environmental concerns, I will now shift my focus to practical theology, because youth ministry is rooted in practical theology. Could this big silence within practical theology and especially youth ministry, be because of Magezi’s (2019:130) belief that academic practical theology in Africa appears to use clerical and ecclesiastical paradigms instead of lived religion, based on the varied theological methodologies applied in different African countries? Klaasen (2014:2) also highlighted a similar concern as he stated that according to Schleiermacher, the task and role of theology at a university are to train people for the professional ministry of the church. To some extent, this means the training of potential clerics, but to a more damning extent, it means the training programme of theology as science, for the ministry of the church and not the world. Even if this is so, that the role of theology is only concerned with the ministry of the church and not the world, Werner (2020:63) is of the opinion that:

Ecological transformation starts with changes in attitudes, awareness, and daily practises in local places. The churches have the advantage that they have thousands of local congregations that assemble regularly. Each of them usually has a place which is relevant to a larger group and therefore has an educational function

as well. Church courts, church-related cemeteries, and church buildings are ecological learning centres. In several countries, “green church” networks have emerged that bring local churches together that have similar standards to commit themselves to learning about environmentally sound and transparent ways of living.

This means that the role of theology, especially practical theology, goes beyond the church. Therefore, Klaasen (2014:2) posits, in accepting Browning’s view on the role of theology, which differs from that of Schleiermacher, that:

Unlike the restriction of professionalism on clericalism and the church as put forward by Schleiermacher, a theology of care, according to Browning, would mean care by the professional for those in the church and, in correlation with, for example, care of the larger society that goes beyond the confines of the church: “Both the inner-ecclesial and public foci of these activities would be a part of the concerns of practical theology.” (Klaasen 2014:2)¹

Thus, according to Magezi (2019:130), the fundamental manifestations of practical theology include ministerial preparation and training, influencing church practices, and teaching pastoral care, preaching, discipleship, and missions. Poverty, unemployment, corruption, poor governance, and violence, for instance, are all well-known societal concerns, yet they are not necessarily intensely reflected upon theologically. Practical theology’s public function, moral formation, ethics of public office bearers, and servant and selfless leadership are evident topics that theology should address, but conceptual clarity and related theological methodologies require further development (Magezi 2019:130).

In Africa, practical theology occupies a key socio-theological position. Practical theology should be aware of the challenges that the discipline and work face in carrying out an effective practical theology task within the African people’s living spaces. Practical theology in Africa faces the problem of building a complete practical theological framework that covers, among other things, practical spirituality, social, physical, political, economic, and ecological challenges (Magezi 2019:133). African

1 The quote in the citation is from Browning.

theologians concur on two essential basic features that must be respected at all times: the importance of the Almighty Creator God in their lives and a focus on practical life challenges (Nwachuku 2014:517).

Practical theology is concerned with “lived religion”, or the reality of people’s lived experiences at the grassroots, rather than the abstract (see Mukaria 2013:1258). Practical theology is dealing with “global, local, and specific issues to deal with the current reality and difficulties affecting society” (Hendriks 2010:284). By concentrating on global and local concerns such as environmental concerns and poverty (for example), practical theology drives the process of change responsibly from both theological and social scientific viewpoints (Heitink 1999:113). Hence, Agbiji (2015:2) posits that in such a context, practical theological environmental involvement should also be concerned with ecological injustice and how it affects poverty and underdevelopment issues, and vice versa, all of which have serious consequences for all African countries and the world.

After decades of dispute and defending the position of youth ministry, it is now nearly universal practise to refer to youth ministry as “practical theology” (Nel 2018:4). However, Nel (2018:5) cautions that just because many people believe that youth ministry is a component of practical theology or that it is practical theology, does not mean that all practical theologians are in total agreement on every aspect of methods and methodology within the discipline. In the existing paradigm, however, there is reasonable consensus (Nel 2018:5-6). He goes on to say that youth ministry is about complete, purposeful, and differentiated communication actions in service of the Kingdom’s message. The modes of God’s coming to and through people to the world are purposely combined and diversified in youth ministry (Nel 2018:13-14).

If youth ministry is regarded as practical theology within Africa, as in Nel’s explanation discussed above, then Africa, with her greatest asset being the youth, should utilise this asset by engaging purposefully with the environmental discourse in theological institutions in Africa. Hence, Weber and Weber (2021:10) are also of the opinion that the youth ministry curriculum should be expanded to enhance a focus on environmental matters. According to them (2021:10), youth ministry may provide chances for young people to investigate themes like cosmology, environment,

aesthetics, and ecology as they relate to their understanding of God and theology, which might lead to a fresh sense of wonder about who God is and the mystery of pursuing a connection with Him. Environmental policy, its influence on local communities, and the role faith communities may play in addressing these policies should all be taught in a youth ministry curriculum and to youth. Furthermore, educational interventions should incorporate leadership and skill development that concentrate on preparing youth to participate successfully in various processes. Young people must be prepared for current and future circumstances. The young should not only be mere onlookers in climate change programmes, but should be active role players, organisers, researchers, authors, managers, coordinators, facilitators, and faith leaders wherever feasible (see Kosciulek 2020:5).

5. Conclusion

In this article, I argued that the tripartite concern with the connection between youth, faith, and environmental consciousness has received insufficient attention in the domains of practical theology. Furthermore, the potential of youth, faith, and the significance of practical theology is underappreciated. This article claims that environmental education for Africans and African youth is critical in the fight against environmental concerns. However, the importance of practical theology and youth ministry is underestimated in this dialogue. As a result, the role of youth ministry in the environmental discourse should be promoted. The global ecological catastrophe has prompted a call for everyone to participate in caring for the natural environment, which makes the African youth a needed role-player. This article calls practical theology to action, particularly youth ministry in Africa.

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