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JURNAL ILMIAH AGAMA DAN SOSIAL BUDAYA

Essay

Eco-theology: Reimagining the image of God in the context of creation and care in Africa

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Abstract: Africa and the rest of the world are at risk due to climate change and ecological crisis. The current severe cold fronts, flooding, and heatwaves sweeping across Africa, particularly Southern Africa, demonstrate that more is to come. The abnormal weather patterns know no seasons. The apparent results include starvation due to poor harvests and loss of homes, property, livestock, and lives due to disruptive rains and heat waves. The impact of climate change is visible in ecological damage. All this calls for a theological discourse that seeks to unpack some ways of caring for creation and the environment to mitigate against the challenges posed by climate change. The critical question is what theological tools the church could use to make meaningful contributions in responding to the challenges of climate change in Africa. Hence, the suggested theological engagements of the image of God about caring for creation. This paper seeks to explore the theology of the image of God, which provides theologians and the church with the basis to respect, protect, and care for the environment. It will discuss how understanding God's image helps the church implement practical ways of environmental care given the current dangers of climate change and ecological crisis in Africa. The paper contributes to the theological discourse of environmental care. This article contributes to eco-theology by reframing the *imago Dei* as a theological foundation for ecological responsibility and creation care.

Keywords: Africa; Climate change; Creation; Eco-theology; Image of God.

Abstract: Afrika dan seluruh dunia berada dalam risiko akibat perubahan iklim dan krisis ekologi. Gelombang dingin yang parah saat ini, banjir, dan gelombang panas yang melanda Afrika, khususnya Afrika Selatan, merupakan bukti bahwa lebih banyak lagi yang akan terjadi di masa depan. Pola cuaca yang tidak normal tidak mengenal musim. Hasil yang jelas terlihat adalah kelaparan akibat panen yang buruk, kehilangan rumah, harta benda, ternak, dan hilangnya nyawa akibat hujan dan gelombang panas yang mengganggu. Dampak dari perubahan iklim juga terlihat dari kerusakan ekologi. Semua ini membutuhkan sebuah wacana teologis yang berusaha untuk membongkar beberapa cara untuk merawat ciptaan dan lingkungan sebagai sebuah cara untuk memitigasi tantangan-tantangan yang ditimbulkan oleh perubahan iklim. Pertanyaan kuncinya adalah alat teologis apa yang dapat digunakan oleh gereja untuk memberikan kontribusi yang berarti dalam merespons tantangan perubahan iklim di Afrika. Oleh karena itu, keterlibatan teologis yang disarankan adalah gambar Allah dalam kaitannya dengan merawat ciptaan. Makalah ini berusaha untuk mengeksplorasi teologi tentang gambar Allah yang memberikan dasar bagi para teolog dan gereja untuk menghormati, melindungi, dan merawat lingkungan. Makalah ini akan membahas bagaimana pemahaman akan gambar Allah dapat membantu gereja untuk mengimplementasikan cara-cara praktis dalam merawat lingkungan mengingat bahaya perubahan iklim dan krisis ekologi yang sedang terjadi di Afrika. Makalah ini memberikan kontribusi pada wacana teologis tentang kepedulian lingkungan. Artikel ini memberikan kontribusi bagi teologi ekologi dengan menafsirkan kembali konsep *imago Dei* sebagai landasan teologis bagi tanggung jawab ekologis dan pemeliharaan ciptaan.

Kata kunci: Afrika; Perubahan iklim; Penciptaan; Ekoteologi; Gambar Allah.

1. Introduction

The current challenges of climate change spell a gloomy future for our region and the continent. Human beings are at the centre of the cause and impact of climate change as "the major inducer and sufferer" (Diara & Christian, 2013). Capitalism, wealth, and money have become the centre of life, influencing human behaviour in relation to the environment. They determine the value system of humanity, especially as Africa faces poverty and economic insecurity that is leading many to leave for other continents. Those who engage in mining and farming will focus on profit without caring for the environment and its rehabilitation. Deforestation, mining activities, gold panning, and burning of fossil fuels result in the concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, causing excessive warming.

Consequently, global warming is one of the biggest challenges of our time. Extreme weather conditions cause unprecedented damage to infrastructure, loss of property, loss of life and food insecurity in Africa. These climatic changes and damages occur annually in different parts of the continent. All is not lost, though, for the church can respond to and care for creation in a way that solves ecological crises and lessens climate change by studying corrective actions from a theological perspective. The discourse of eco-theology raises questions about the traditional Christian doctrine of the imago Dei ─ the image of God. It addresses how theologians' and Christians' understanding of the Imago Dei can make a difference in the context of climate change and creation care. Theological reflection can translate into practical actions that fulfil the church's mission of promoting the flourishing of human life and all of creation as part of the relational journey between God and His creation. This approach addresses the gap in using the image of God as a central theological tool in responding to the current climate change crisis in Africa.

This article is purely a desktop qualitative study. This article is qualitative research attempting to describe, analyse, and interpret the data collected from secondary sources such as books, journal articles, dissertations, periodic reports on climate and newspaper reports. These are interactively analysed, engaged with and used as evidence of the issues discussed in the article.

2. Context of ecological crisis in Africa

Shifting to a capitalist economy and globalisation has led to socioeconomic and climatic injustices. The focus on agriculture, mining and industrialisation in Africa poses a significant threat to the environment and human life. Although these economic activities provide people with job opportunities and economic growth for the country, they have a negative environmental impact. The consumption culture, which is regarded as the only way to live, perpetuates them (Kim, 2012). The desire for personal wealth has led to the exploitation of people with low incomes and their land as well as creation in Africa. The region remains vulnerable to climate change and ecological crises, exacerbated by extensive open-cast mining activities conducted by Chinese mining companies. Reports indicate that these mining operations have caused significant environmental damage in Africa (Armony & Velásquez, 2015; Wegenast, Strüver, Giesen, & Krauser, 2017). These companies also take over and destroy the local farming land, leaving the locals under threat of food security (Wegenast et al., 2017). These challenges continue to grow unchecked. Ericsson, Löf & Löf (2020) indicate that:

> In 2010, there were producing mines controlled by Chinese interest in four African countries: Ghana, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe. Growth accelerated in five years between 2013 and 2018, and Chinese control was 0.8% of the total value and almost 6% of the total value of African mine production at the end of the period.

These projects are part of a Chinese investment of more than $58 billion into mining and energy in sub-Saharan Africa (Mudronova, 2018). The above studies demonstrate how Chinese companies control African mines and mineral extraction and their impact on the African region. Mining and industrious activities contribute to emissions of numerous gases such as carbon dioxide (CO2), carbon monoxide, nitrous oxide, methane, hydrogen sulphide, sulphur dioxide and combustion of fossil fuels that have a dimming effect on the climate (Diara & Christian, 2013). These activities automatically result

in socioeconomic injustices that render frontline communities vulnerable to disasters caused by climate change (Thinane et al., 2023). "The earth's silence makes it vulnerable" (Kim, 2012).

The African continent remains more susceptible to climate change due to warm climates as it is close to the equator, its dependence on agriculture as the source of food, governance challenges, high population growth and poverty (Dube, Moyo, Ncube, & Nyathi, 2016). About half of the population in Africa lives in arid areas, with nearly 30% of African land falling under desert land. These hot and dry conditions leave Africa more vulnerable than other global regions. The continent's dependence on agriculture for economic growth exacerbates the climate challenge. Agriculture is estimated to contribute about 40% of African countries' gross domestic product and employ nearly 50% of the population (Nkomo, Nyong, & Kulindwa, 2006).

With over 95% of agriculture depending on rain (Kumssa & Jones, 2010) and only 39% of agriculture under irrigation schemes, in some countries, it has suffered slow growth, while in others, it has suffered stagnation since 1980 (Barrios, Ouattara, & Strobl, 2008). This slow growth poses a challenge for food security in the region. The other challenge in Africa is population growth. Africa has a reputation for rapid population growth, which will continue to

Despite the challenges of climate change, there are severe concerns about agriculture in Africa due to land degradation, recurring droughts, insufficient rain, and a shortage of water supply (Barrios et al., 2008). These factors make the sector highly vulnerable to climatic changes. The increasing frequency of droughts due to climate change reduce agricultural productivity by up to 50% in Africa by 2020 and beyond (Kumssa & Jones, 2010). The UNDP (2007) projects that drought-affected areas could expand by between 60 and 90 million hectares by 2060 (Dube et al., 2016). In the future, expanding the areas affected by droughts will complicate food security in Southern African countries such as Zimbabwe (Dube et al., 2016). Climate change includes, among others, "heat stress, absence of harmattan, unpredictable rainfall patterns, heavier rains, gully erosion, flooding and landslides"(Diara & Christian, 2013). Thinane et al. (2023) argue that sub-Saharan Africa and Southern Africa, in particular, have experienced more than two tropical cyclones in recent years. These cyclones frequently occur between February and March. The hardest hit in Southern Africa are Madagascar, Malawi, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, and some parts of Zambia and South Africa, further affected by floods. Thinane et al. (2023) assert that:

> Such impacts have been observed worldwide, including in the sub-Saharan region, where within just six weeks of three tropical cyclones and two tropical storms hitting Southeast Africa, the eastern coast of South Africa was also affected.

Cyclone Idai displaced an estimated 4.5 million people and left more than a thousand people dead, while many others went missing due to the floods (Phiri, Simwanda, & Nyirenda, 2021). Furthermore, there was the loss of homes, property and livestock and damage to public infrastructure such as schools, roads and bridges (Phiri et al., 2021). These ecological changes affect farming and grazing land and depress the prices, affecting the livelihood of the farmers and the community at large. Moyo & Dube (2014) posit that the impact of climate change deprives farmers of raising "household income to finance their children's school fees and household members' hospital fees and necessities". Therefore, climate change perpetuates poverty among the African communities.

Climate change comes with a whole range of health challenges, which makes Africa, along with its health systems, more susceptible. Diara and Christian (2013) argue that "the health of communities depends on sufficient food, safe drinking water, comfortable homes, good social conditions, and a suitable environmental and social setting for controlling infectious diseases". Drought, cyclones and floods pose food security and clean water supply challenges threatening human health. In sub-Saharan Africa, the everyday occurrence of drought causes the drying of wetlands and water supply sources due to decreased rainfall and increased evaporation (Moyo & Dube, 2014). These climatic changes increase the chances of malaria, a common challenge in most parts of the region. High temperatures and low precipitation promote the breeding and increase the population of malaria-carrying mosquitoes, perpetuating this disease in Africa (Warsame, Wernsdofer, Huldt, & Bjorkman, 1995). This argument is echoed by Nkomo, Nyong, and Kulindwa (2006), predicting that:

> Over 60% and 90% of the clinical episodes and deaths from falciparum malaria occur in Africa south of the Sahara, where more than a million children, mainly under the age of 5 years, die from malaria each year. In Africa, climate change could be responsible for an additional 21 million – 67 million people at risk of malaria by the 2080s.

Malaria-carrying mosquitos also breed in the same arid areas in Africa, which continue to experience flooding and stagnant waters. In addition, flooding disrupts the supply of clean water in the rural and urban centres, increasing the chances of waterborne diseases such as cholera, typhoid fever and dysentery that are well known for claiming many lives among Africans. Climate change is devastating to human communities in Africa. It is impossible to ignore how challenges and climate change affect human existence and the idea that God created everything. These issues necessitate reflections on the imago Dei, aiming to find ways to care for the environment and mitigate the impact of ecological damage.

3. The intent of eco-theology in the context of ecological crisis

Reflections of and rethinking the imago Dei are done in the context of eco-theology. Eco-theology refers to the theology of ecology, ecological theology, or environmental theology (Hallman, 1994). Christian eco-theology seeks to critique human activities that disrupt the environment and lead to climate change. Like feminist theologians, eco-theologians critique and publicise the devasting effects of imperialism, colonialism, and capitalism that promote consumeristic ideologies (Kim, 2012). The critique aims to find ways to preserve the planet from the devasting effects of climate change and the ecological crisis that continues to haunt us. Conradie (2020) also argues, "Without a Christian critique of ecological destruction, eco-theology loses its ability to offer any distinct contribution to wider debates". The eco-theologian critique does not respond to those who blame Christianity for the ecological crisis but the desire to understand the planet's challenges in each context. It seeks to "explain, on properly theological grounds, why and how ecological sensitivity is essential for believers" (Guridi, 2017). The ultimate purpose of eco-theology in climate change is to understand the relationship between God, nature and humanity to establish an ecologically friendly theology (Guridi, 2017). This approach aids in understanding the relationship between God and all of creation. Guridi (2017) asserts that the aim of eco-theology is "both to connect environmental challenges with Christian doctrine and foster ecological commitment among believers." Achieving these goals requires reimagining and rethinking what it means to be created in God's image, particularly about the planet and nature. Eco-theology, being a theology of relationships, necessitates this reexamination.

4. Progressive self-understanding of humanity as the image of God

Humanity's understanding of being created in the image of God and their relationship with God and creation will impact their approach to climate care. God is the creator of all creation and humanity, as echoed in the Psalmist's declaration: "The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it" (Psalms 24:1). The emphasis on the Earth, everything, the world and those who dwell in the world is an affirmation that God created everything and all things and humanity. Therefore, both humanity and other creations belong together as they belong to God.

Reimaging the imago Dei helps us understand the relationship between God and humanity and the relationship between humanity and creation. According to Nam (2020), Genesis 1:26-28 repeats The creation of human in God's image with semantically similar phrases:

"according to our likeness" (Gen 1:26)

"So God created humankind in his image" (Gen 1:27)

"in the image of God he created them" (Gen 1:27)

Being created in the image and likeness of God emphasises that God created and endowed humanity with unique gifts, knowledge, and wisdom to relate with God and creation. Since God gave his life by giving breath to humanity, henceforth, humanity carries the image of God (Genesis 2:7). Rabie-Boshoff & Buitendag (2021) aver that "The likeness of God is bound up with the life-giving breath of God, as is the imago Dei". The concept of the imago Dei aims to express human uniqueness from all

creation (Leidenhag, 2017; Rabie-Boshoff & Buitendag, 2021). Human uniqueness includes consciousness, soul, rationality, free will, morality and intrinsic value (Bentley, 2017; Cortez, 2010; Moreland, 2009). Although this distinction may be used negatively by undermining creation, it can still help us to inform human self-understanding and understanding of human relationships with others and creation.

The differentiation of human beings from the rest of creation does remove humanity from being part of creation. "This finding affirms the understanding that God as Creator exists in relationship with God's entire creation, more significantly so with human beings"(Rabie-Boshoff, 2016). Moltmann (1985) perceived differentiation as a unique position of royalty among creation. However, Westermann (1987) argues that human uniqueness as imago Dei aims to establish an interactive relationship between humans and God in their existence. The origin of human creation was from dust and received the life-giving breath from God (Genesis 2:7), taking the likeness of God. The assertion affirms that we remain part of this loving and saving relationship since God gave life to the human being. The theology of imago Dei has caused many debates and is believed to have fuelled the destruction of nature and climate change's negative impact (Bentley, 2017; Rabie-Boshoff & Buitendag, 2021).

5. The image of God and creation and care

Theology of imago Dei presupposes the identity of humanity about God and creation. Due to this intricate relationship, people are compelled to make a difference in how we relate to nature. Firstly, human beings are created in the image and likeness of God, meaning that they are closely associated with God, the source of all life. Pannenberg (1985) argues, "To speak of the image of God in human beings is to speak of their closeness to the divine reality, a closeness that also determines their position in the world of nature." Human beings are not mere creations but part of God, who created them and gave them the spirit of life. They have the spirit of God and God's nature and identity. Being created in the image of God, they have a special heritage from God. Secondly, humanity is the work of God's hand, thought and design. They were thoughtfully created in His own image (Mandla, 2022). God thought and designed them wonderfully and fearfully in his likeness, just as David declared, "I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well" (Psalms 139:14). Such words are recognition that humanity is from God and a special part of God. God breathed into a human's nostrils, and they became alive, implying an original imprint or impartation of God's self into humans. God in us is God of love, care and compassion. God's spirit of life embodies humanity as part of his being to propel them to promote the life of God's creation. God created and endowed creation with Goodness. He saw Goodness and confirmed it was good (Genesis 1:12). Goodness is inherent and maintained by harmony in creation. Therefore, loving and caring for creation preserves its Goodness. "The image of God denotes that humans have been selected as God's instruments to share God's mercy and love with all creation and do God's work in sustaining the order of creation" (Kim, 2012). Being created in the image of God means human beings are loving creatures endowed with the key characteristics and nature of God. In Christ, God loved creation, emptied himself and died for it (Philippians 2: 5-8). However, God's love for the world does not refer exclusively to humanity but includes creation. The expression of the image of God in Christ is in self-giving, merciful, and compassionate ways. "We are a dwelling place of Christ crucified, who lived and died for abundant life for all" (Moe-Lobeda, 2002). He loved his creation, and we ought to love creation so that we also sacrifice for it. Love is an identity and an expression in the form of a caring relationship. God expressed his love through creating and his work of salvation towards his creation. Makgoba (2015) asserts, "Our Creator expects us to respect and care for God's earth and creation. We cannot claim to love God and Jesus while watching the earth be destroyed". We can only demonstrate our love by going out of our way as we seek to love and protect God's creation, not only for our sake but for God's sake. Park (1993) argues, "As we grow in the image of God, we become more caring, cherishing and loving of the whole creation". Therefore, the work of the image of God is to love what God loved and serve what God saved. We should embody the unconditional love of God in the whole world of creation. Those who belong to God and love him have a responsibility to love creation that belongs to their Father and Creator. The

image of God also marks the neighbourliness of humanity and creation. Human beings belong together with creation because their origin is nature (dusty) (Genesis 3:19). "The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it; for he founded it on the seas and established it on the waters" (Psalms 24:1-2). The scripture affirms that humanity is a creature among other creatures on Earth. They are God's possessions. Bentley (2017) argues that God is not divorced from creation; life, in all its complexity, is mysterious and distinct. The image of God is reflected throughout the progress and processes of creation, encapsulating all its relationships, mutuality and interdependence. Human beings form part of this creation. Neighbourliness is entrenched in family relationships of belongingness and communion. In as much as the human being is a neighbour to fellow human beings, he/she is a neighbour of nature. For that reason, Makgoba (2015) asserts that "All creation is a family of ecologically interconnected beings". Without a peaceful existence with creation, human beings cannot flourish. To live in this kind of neighbourliness, humanity should admit they fall under the same family and community as the rest of creation. Human beings belong to "the universal household" on Earth that should seek the survival and flourishing of family members (Kim, 2012). Bentley (2017) also posits that "Imago Dei (perhaps more of a verb than a noun) is the participation in the interconnectedness of life, past, present and future, celebrating in the here and now that I am a human being". He seeks to emphasise the interconnectedness and interdependence of humanity and all of creation. Consequently, as part of the family, humanity should strive for peaceful coexistence with creation to mitigate the impact of climate change and ecological crisis. Mandla (2022) also asserts that Christianity's values identify with African religio-cultural values, which are living amongst one another in harmony and maintaining peace in society; they also connect to the ethics of Ubuntu, which are based upon contributing to the well-being of others persons and the community at large. The African understanding of community will always include humanity and nature. Therefore, humanity can never live in peace when creation is suffering. Humanity will suffer with the desire to defend nature from destruction. Ogbonnaya (2016) argues, "Solidarity not only explains the basis of humans as created in God's image, but it also underscores human interdependence, equality, respect, dignity and God's expectation of humans to fulfil their obligation to one another as members of the human family". A neighbour is intricately related and cares for others within the family of creation. God's intention for creation is that humanity should mutually and justly relate with his creation; hence, caring for humanity should go hand in hand with caring for all of creation (Carriker, 2015). Theology of the imago Dei does not seek to separate humanity from the family of creation but bind them together as neighbours meant to love, care and serve within God's household ─ the Earth.

The image of God relates to the human responsibility of caring for creation. Humanity was created in the image of God to continue with God's mission and purpose on Earth. God of all creation is still creating through environmental care. The Psalmist asserts this relationship, stating, "When you send your Spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the ground" (Psalms 104:30). Renewal of the Earth connotes the continuous creation activity of God. God of creation is God of salvation. According to Bentley (2017), "Salvation entails being restored into the image of Christ, who himself is the imago Dei, extending God's image to all who respond to God's grace in faith". God's work of creation is a continuous process working through created beings. Here, God's saving work begins by saving humanity so that humanity can save creation from destruction. Migliore (2004) asserts that Being created in the image of God is not a state or condition but a movement with a goal: human beings are restless for a fulfilment of life not yet realised. It includes how humanity uses skills, knowledge, wisdom and talents to fulfil God's will and promises. Creation should remain as good until the final redemption. It is not just expandable but needs preservation as much as we desire to preserve human life. Therefore, God's mission of salvation embraces humanity and all of creation. Human participation in caring for creation demonstrates that he is embracing being God's image. Part of this active participation is guarding against and protecting creation. It is changing behaviour and adopting actions that preserve creation at individual, family and community levels. Therefore, the church and community, in general, have to find ways of understanding this relationship and seek to fulfil God's will for creation.

6. Embracing the image of God by responding to ecological crisis

Among the ways of engaging in ecological knowledge sharing is the way of being and doing church in terms of church liturgy, Christian education and engagement with other stakeholders. Church liturgy is key in Christian worship; hence, it is an essential platform for reflecting on human self-understanding and the issue of eco-theology. Eco-theologians have the task of critically reflecting on church liturgies as they mark church and pastoral praxis (Conradie, 2020). Such reflections will bring awareness of the church's role in addressing ecological and climatic issues. Conradie (2020) admits that Christians experience church liturgy with all that happens around them as personal and community challenges and burdens. "A liturgy driven by ecological concern is called ecological liturgy" (Diara & Christian, 2013). Through such liturgies, Christians should be made aware of biblical resources that deal with them as the image of God and their relationship with God and creation. Through liturgy, worshippers can celebrate God the Creator and confess their sins and failures, including participation in ecological damage and causing climatic changes that affect Africa and the world. They are conscious of their role in caring for one another and the extended community, including nature. They are also made aware that all creation "witnesses," "ministers," and convey God's message (Psalms 104:4) and praise God (Psalms 148) (Moe-Lobeda, 2016). Consequently, creation is equally important and takes part in worshipping and giving glory to God. Destroying nature is causing harm to God, who created and dearly loved it. Any harm committed against nature should be part of Christian confession during the Christian liturgy.

Within the Church liturgy, Christians participate in the Eucharist, a great symbol of the connection between God, humanity and creation. Firstly, the elements of the Eucharist — bread and wine — are from the processed elements extracted from God's creation. It means humanity depends on creation for life and communication of salvation. These are elements or means of grace that reconciles humanity with God. During the fellowship, Christ's body and blood point humanity towards God (Cann, 2021). The liturgical process brings the mystery of the connectedness of God, humanity and creation working salvation. In the Eucharist, God is present and gives himself in his flesh (bread) and blood (wine) as means of grace. "That incarnate presence is power for embodying Christic love" (Moe-Lobeda, 2016). This kind of ecological liturgy "promotes the dignity of creation by using products of creation in worship" (Chibuko, 2011). The Eucharistic liturgy transforms how we relate to God and understand the "cosmos and our place in it differently so that we might live reoriented toward the healing of the world" (Moe-Lobeda, 2016). Therefore, Christian liturgy is the place of renewal of Christian faith and perspective on God and creation care. Cann (2021) expounds that:

> In the Eucharistic Prayer, the church proclaims and realises precisely this priestly function of humanity. In the Eucharist, elements from the natural world, the bread and the wine, which represent the created material world, are taken up into human hands, the hands of Christ, the consummate human being and the priest of creation, to refer them to God.

Christians' Eucharistic liturgy instils the understanding of the imago Dei as the source of relationship that empowers Christians to be sensitive towards creation care. People who participate in the body and blood of Christ embrace divine love that binds them together with creation as a family. Christian understanding, awareness and appreciation of creation are cultivated by bringing to the fore the ecological needs and crisis in the church liturgy (B. Diara, Achunike, Okoli, & Nche, 2017). Ecological liturgy helps them engage in their priestly role of praying for love and peace in the world and seeking to preserve peace and harmony, even with creation. Furthermore, Christian liturgies should entail sermons that embrace ecological concerns since they are part of the world where the community of faith members live. Such sermons project God's all-embracing and all-inclusive love towards all his creation.

The imago Dei implies action that leads to the transformation of society in the context of the ecological crisis. Eco-theology has practical implications for responding to ecological crises and climate changes. It inspires the church and theologians to be proactive rather than just responding to the impact like firefighters. However, we may not discuss eco-sustainability without remembering the victims of climate change and ecological crises, especially those affected by drought, famine, cyclones, and floods

(Diara et al., 2017). The extreme weather phenomena have caused immeasurable suffering and losses, including the displacement of poor people in Africa. Therefore, through Christian education, we must reflect and act theologically with those affected in mind. The Christian response to the ecological crisis should demonstrate the selfless love of God in Christ that defeated sin and death on the cross (Makgoba, 2015). Notably, Conradie (2020) regards these practical tasks towards earth-keeping as the "royal task of believers". It is part of being the image of God and fulfilling our mandate of love. It also shows communal care among creation as God intended it to be. Mandla (2022) echoes by saying, "For what it is worth, God made humans in an equal manner and that they should live together with other creatures in peace".

In the local context and at a micro level, the church needs broad-based Christian education that addresses ecological damage and climate change issues. Beyond preaching, praying, and providing Eucharistic services, the church should organise intentional forms of Christian education. By involving itself in public education programs and advocacy, the church can empower the faith community and the broader community to mitigate the impact of the ecological crisis and climate change. The Zion Christian Church of Bishop Lekganyane teaches the sacredness of viewing human beings and animals as bearing God's image (Stork & Du Toit, 2022). They regard any form of littering of the road and the environment as harmful to the image of God (Stork & Du Toit, 2022). This form of Christian education is connected to the African understanding of earthkeeping, where land and creation are revered as sacred. Expanding this form of Christian education can be achieved through special Bible studies, seminars, and workshops on environmental care and climate change (Diara et al., 2017). These approaches create awareness among Christians and stimulate a sense of environmental care within their congregations.

The church cannot be a lone ranger on ecological crisis and climate change matters. Since these issues affect humanity and all creation, a broad-based partnership should be part of the church's response. Thinane et. al (2023) argue, "The Church and theological engagement must influence and advocate for government, NGO's FBO's and all other stakeholders to engage in conversations, dialogues and debates that raise awareness about climate change and its impending dangers". Inclusive engagement includes the church's dialogue with people of other faiths, the government, and the private sector, such as the business community, so that they can shape a shared vision and goal for matters of ecological crisis (Conradie, 2020). Dialogues and engagements should bring to the fore all matters of promoting eco-friendly human behaviour, reducing carbon emissions, using renewable energy sources and adopting eco-friendly technologies, especially in transport systems and industrial machinery (Thinane et al., 2023). Diara et al. (2017) further suggest that:

> Through a partnership with the government, the church should also assist in ensuring that rural community dwellers access government-sponsored agriculture extension services, such as the provision of fertilisers, new varieties of crops and other farming tools, as these would help build the adaptive capacity of these rural communities.

These strategies empower humanity because of the information and resources provided by the church and partners such as the government and other institutions. One of the cases of successful partnership of the church and other stakeholders is that of the Roman Catholic church in Chishawasha, Zimbabwe. The church, the government agriculture extension officers and local farmers come together to discuss climate change issues and sustainable farming ways they should follow in the area (Tanyanyiwa, 2021). The church and the local farmers have adopted pfumvudza (the current conservation agriculture initiative) (Tanyanyiwa, 2021). Through these partnerships, people can improve agricultural and mining activities and act locally by promoting land reclamation programmes, tree planting, and recycling used materials and products to encourage earth-keeping. We cannot act alone. Otherwise, it will be futile. We should seek to take all people on board because the church is a small community in a broader community of many other institutions contributing to ecological crisis and climate change. Leaving out the community and other institutions cannot yield better results because these people are affected, and their behaviour change will positively impact their response to environmental damage.

7. Conclusion

Reimagining the image of God holds significant potential for eco-theology. The core thesis of this paper is that the image of God emphasises the relationship between God, humanity, and creation. While God is distinct from His creation, He chose to be embodied by humanity to continue creating and caring for all of His creation. Given the magnitude of the ecological crisis and climate change, theologians and the church can utilise the theological concept of the imago Dei to engage in community and environmental care. This approach can help the church in its efforts to care for creation both within its four walls and throughout the entire community. Reimagining the imago Dei aids in understanding why and how the church should carry out its task in the context of ecological damage and care for creation. Eco-theology should lead to diverse practical approaches for mitigating the effects of the ecological crisis and climate change, promoting peaceful coexistence between humanity and creation. This article uniquely contributes by presenting the theology of the image of God as a tool the church may use to advance the mitigation of environmental challenges in Africa. It may serve as a springboard for the church to develop practical approaches to respond to climate change.

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