

Christianity and Ecology in Historical and Ethical Contexts

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Abstract: This study examines the historical relationship between Christianity and ecology, highlighting the dynamics between criticism and constructive engagement within Christian traditions regarding environmental issues. The research employs a systematic literature review to identify and analyze relevant studies. The findings reveal that Christianity, while often criticized for its contributions to ecological degradation, also holds significant potential to support ecological sustainability through its teachings and practices. A historical perspective illustrates how Christian doctrines advocate for a symbiotic relationship between humans and nature. This study further explores how Christian ethical principles can contribute to environmental conservation. Through a review of existing literature, the research demonstrates that Christian beliefs can encourage sustainable practices despite challenges in integrating religious values. These findings underscore Christianity's substantial potential to contribute to environmental conservation through a holistic ethical and spiritual approach. The implications of this study highlight the importance of engaging Christian communities in environmental movements through approaches rooted in religious values. By leveraging Christian ethical principles, ecological organizations, and policymakers can bridge the gap between spirituality and sustainable practices. Furthermore, this research creates opportunities for interdisciplinary dialogue between religion and environmental science, emphasizing the need for strategies that integrate religious values into global sustainability initiatives.

Keywords: eco-theology, ecology, sustainability, environmental ethics

INTRODUCTION

The global ecological crisis is characterized by serious challenges, such as water scarcity, climate change, and biodiversity loss, which are further exacerbated by human activities. (Hargrove, 2021). Climate change has presented an existential threat that requires structural changes to reduce emissions (Beck, 2023). Biodiversity loss triggered by human-induced change has also disrupted ecosystems that are essential for life (Irwin et al., 2022; Schmeller et al., 2020; Krause & Tilker, 2022). While technological advances and community-based restoration efforts provide hope (Miller et al., 2017) the urgency of this crisis demands immediate and comprehensive action to address these interconnected issues (Jones et al., 2018).

The worsening global ecological crisis, as described above, is the main background to the study of this topic. Environmental degradation, climate change, and biodiversity loss have prompted the search for holistic solutions that rely not only on scientific and technological approaches but also on ethical and spiritual values. Christianity, as one of the world's major religious traditions, has a long history and significant influence in shaping people's views and behaviors toward nature (Orellano et al., 2020).. Therefore, examining how teachings and practices in Christianity can contribute to ecological sustainability is highly relevant.

Another reason for this research is the criticism of the role of religion, including Christianity, in exacerbating the environmental crisis. Criticisms such as those raised by Lynn White Jr. in 1967 stated that the doctrines of Western Christianity have supported the massive exploitation of nature (Abdi & Pardamean, 2019). However, in recent decades, there have been efforts from within the Christian community to respond to this criticism by developing more environmentally conscious theologies and practices (Sexton & Pincetl, 2022). This research aims to explore and analyze these responses, particularly in a historical and ethical context, to see to what extent Christianity can transform into a positive force for ecological sustainability. Against this background, this article not only seeks to assess the history of the relationship between religion and ecology but also looks for potential ethical and spiritual contributions in the face of current environmental challenges.

The relationship between Christianity and ecology is multifaceted, reflecting the diverse perspectives and contributions of different views of Christian theology. Christianity offers important insights into ecological discourse by advocating love in nurturing ecology. Pope Francis' 2015 encyclical, *Laudato Si'*, emphasizes love as a guiding principle for ecological, spiritual, and anthropological conversion, creating a platform for interreligious dialogue and cooperation in the face of environmental crises (Puglisi & Buitendag, 2020). Similarly, a deep sense of attachment and connectedness to nature is in line with the spiritual themes found in *Song of Songs* (Viviers, 2016).

Despite diverse contributions, the field of eco-theology remains controversial, with a significant communication gap between its proponents and opponents. Some theologians argue for the immediate inclusion of eco-theology in academic and religious discourse, while others reject it as a deviation from traditional doctrine. This suggests the need for renewed dialog and understanding to bridge these differences (Kroesbergen, 2014). The relationship between Christianity and ecology is characterized by both rich potential for cooperation and significant challenges that require ongoing dialogue and integration of diverse perspectives.

Understanding the historical and ethical context of the relationship between religion and ecology is critical. Historically, religious beliefs have influenced human behavior and environmental management practices (Botero et al., 2014). Ethically, religions such as Christianity and Islam offer valuable perspectives on ecological stewardship. In the Catholic context, for example, it is expressed in Pope Francis' 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si'*, which calls for an ecological conversion rooted in love and spiritual communion with nature (Puglisi & Buitendag, 2020). This ethical dimension is also seen in Buddhism, where the ceremonial release of wildlife reflects a deep respect for life (Liu et al., 2013). Finally, broader theological discourses emphasize the interconnectedness between human actions and ecological health, stressing that ethical and theological considerations are crucial in addressing the current

ecological crisis. By integrating historical insights and ethical principles from various religious traditions, we can foster a more holistic and effective approach to ecological conservation and sustainability.

Research on the relationship between religion and ecology has been conducted in a variety of contexts and religious traditions. One well-known study is that of Lynn White Jr. (1967) who criticized Western Christianity as the main trigger of the modern environmental crisis. White argued that the doctrine of human dominance over nature, as enshrined in the book of Genesis, had encouraged massive exploitation of nature. His view became the starting point for many subsequent studies that criticized the role of religion in environmental degradation (Abdi & Pardamean, 2019). While these studies highlighted the negative role of religion in ecology, they often did not provide practical solutions or explore the positive potential of religious teachings. Other studies, such as the one by Hitzhusen and Tucker (2013) emphasize the potential of religion, particularly Christianity, in supporting environmental sustainability through the concept of stewardship. They show how some Christian communities, especially in the United States, have integrated ecological principles into their religious practices. However, such studies tend to focus on specific communities without presenting a broader historical perspective on the evolution of ecological theology in Christianity.

Unlike previous studies, this study takes a more holistic approach by combining historical and ethical analysis of ecological doctrines in Christianity from medieval times to the modern era. It also focuses not only on the critical aspects of the religion but also explores the constructive potential of Christian teachings that call for ecological conversion. In addition, this study fills a *gap* in the literature by reviewing changes in ecological theology in Christianity from a historical and ethical perspective, offering a deeper understanding of the transformation and relevance of Christian teachings in the face of the global ecological crisis. As such, this study not only identifies critiques and challenges but also explores solutions derived from a Christian theological perspective in the context of ecological sustainability.

In this study, the historical boundaries cover the development of ecological theology in Christianity from the Middle Ages to the contemporary era. The focus of this period was chosen for several important reasons. Firstly, the Middle Ages was a time when the Christian worldview began to significantly influence social and environmental policy, as seen in the teachings of the Church and the theological writings of great figures such as St. Francis of Assisi (Johnson, 2011). This period marks the beginning of the exploration of the relationship between humans and nature in the context of Christian theology. Furthermore, this article also examines modern developments from the 20th century to the present. This modern period is important because it shows contemporary efforts to respond to the global environmental crisis through a more explicit and integrative approach to ecological theology (Moore, 2022). The focus on these two historical periods allows for a deeper understanding of how Christian teachings and practices related to ecology have developed and changed over time (Hitzhusen & Tucker, 2013). With historical boundaries covering both periods, this research aims to provide a comprehensive perspective on the historical contributions of Christianity to environmental discourse, as well as how those teachings can be applied in a contemporary context to support ecological sustainability.

This study aims to explore and analyze the relationship between religion, particularly Christianity, and ecology in the context of history and ethics. Unlike previous studies that tend to focus on criticizing the role of religion in ecological degradation - as expressed in the work of Lynn White Jr. who blames Western Christianity for fueling the modern environmental crisis - this study takes a more balanced approach. It not only examines these criticisms but also explores the constructive potential of Christian teachings in supporting ecological sustainability.

METHOD

This research method uses a literature review by synthesizing existing research on the intersection of religion and ecology in the context of history and ethics. The literature review process followed a systematic approach to ensure the reliability, relevance, and efficiency of the study (Leenaars et al., 2021). A systematic literature review was chosen to provide a holistic understanding of the topic under study. A literature search strategy was carefully designed and executed to obtain relevant studies from digital libraries, especially from journals from reputable databases. This systematic literature review also considered interdisciplinary perspectives (Couturier & Dumas-Laverdière, 2015). In addition, this review includes text analysis methodologies, such as sentiment analysis and topic modeling, to examine public opinion and trends related to religion and ecology (Zhuo et al., 2024). This multi-faceted approach ensures a thorough examination of the literature, providing a solid foundation for understanding the complex relationships between religion, ecology, history, and ethics. The findings from this literature review will form the basis for subsequent analysis and discussion and will contribute to a deeper understanding of this topic.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Historical Perspectives on Christianity and Ecology

Historical perspectives on Christianity and ecology reveal a complex and evolving relationship that is both controversial and collaborative. Historically, Christianity has often been accused of contributing to ecological degradation, as seen in the debate sparked by Lynn White Jr.'s 1967 article, which criticized Western Christianity for its role in the modern ecological crisis (Abdi & Pardamean, 2019). However, this view is challenged by the recognition that within the Christian tradition, there are rich resources for ecological thought and practice.

Theological and ecological perspectives in medieval Christianity were based on the view that nature is God's good creation, and humans have a responsibility to manage and care for it (Carl, 2020). This view reflects an understanding of stewardship as a divine mandate. This theology developed through the teachings of medieval theologians and monastic practices that demonstrated the connection between faith and the environment. In medieval times, Christian theology was heavily influenced by the teaching that nature is a manifestation of God's goodness. Nature was seen as a creation that reflected divine beauty and wisdom. Theologians such as Francis of Assisi, for example, were famous for their view of nature and living creatures as "brothers" and "sisters." In his *Canticle of the Creatures*, Francis sang the praises of nature

as part of an interconnected and equal community of creation (Viviers, 2014). This perspective teaches that the whole of creation has a value that must be respected and preserved as a form of devotion to God.

Medieval theology also emphasized that humans have a responsibility to manage nature wisely by God's mandate (McLaughlin, 2012). Thomas Aquinas, a great theologian and philosopher of the time, taught that humans should use nature for good purposes and by divine will, not for selfish exploitation (Benzoni, 2005). Aquinas argued that humans are *stewards of* creation and have a role to play in maintaining harmony between humans and the environment (Benzoni, 2005). This approach emphasizes that the use of natural resources should be done responsibly and sustainably.

In addition, medieval monastic life saw the application of ecological theology in practice. Monks often lived in self-sufficient communities and implemented sustainable agricultural practices as a form of respect for nature and God. Monastic communities such as the Benedictine monasteries practiced sustainable land management, reflecting the principle of *ora et labora* (pray and work) as a form of service to God through the care of nature (Kellert & Farnham, 2002). These lives and practices demonstrate that Christian spirituality can be applied in concrete actions that support ecological sustainability. St. Francis of Assisi became a central figure in medieval Christian ecological theology. Francis saw nature as a creation to be cared for with love, creating the foundation for an ecological spirituality centered on respect for all living things. He is often regarded as the pioneer of ecological theology in Christianity because of his teachings that emphasized the importance of a harmonious relationship between humans and nature (Viviers, 2014). Francis' perspective has been an inspiration for many ecological traditions in modern Christianity that try to bridge the gap between faith teachings and environmental practices.

In the modern period, in the United States, the crossover between religious worship and *ecological* protection has given birth to *eco-worship*, where faith-based environmentalism gains legal recognition and can influence the interpretation of environmental laws to support religiously motivated ecological initiatives (Hester, 2023). Internal dialog within religions about their role in the ecological crisis suggests that these traditions can offer a holistic worldview that enriches our understanding of the ecological crisis and promotes sustainable practices. Historical perspectives on religion and ecology are characterized by a dynamic play between critique and constructive engagement, which reveals the potential of religious traditions to contribute positively to ecological sustainability.

The Christian tradition shows a wide range of views on ecosystem preservation, reflecting both theological foundations and cultural adaptations. In the Roman Catholic tradition, saints are often seen as role models in environmental stewardship, with some saints being recognized as "ecological saints" whose lives and teachings inspire environmental responsibility (Osgood, 2023). However, there are notable divisions within Christianity regarding eco-theology. Some theologians, such as Celia Deane-Drummond (2008) and Matthew Fox (1991) advocate the integration of eco-theology into religious education and practice and lament the lack of attention to environmental issues in many Christian communities (Kroesbergen, 2014). In contrast, other theologians, such as Robert Jenson (2001), see eco-theology as a deviation from traditional Christian teachings (Kroesbergen, 2014). Despite these tensions, the Christian community is

increasingly recognized for its potential to advance *Earth Stewardship* by harnessing religious virtues that encourage sustainable resource use and fostering alliances between scientists and spiritual leaders in maintaining a sustainable ecology (Hitzhusen & Tucker, 2013). The views of prominent Catholic environmental figures such as Thomas Berry, who revered nature, differ from those of Thomas Aquinas, who supported human dominance over nature but also emphasized the responsibility to care for it as part of God's creation (George, 2019). In the African context, eco-theology is being indigenized to address local ecological crises, such as those caused by the mining industry in Zambia. This involves the integration of Christian teachings with traditional African religious beliefs to foster a sense of responsibility towards the environment (Chibuye & Buitendag, 2020). Although Christian traditions vary in their approach to ecosystem preservation, there is growing recognition of the need to reconcile theological perspectives with environmental ethics to promote sustainable practices.

The Christian tradition promotes environmental stewardship through various theological, ethical, and practical approaches that emphasize the interconnectedness of all creation and the moral responsibility to care for the environment. Church leaders, such as Saint Marguerite Bourgeoys, serve as role models of ecological responsibility, embodying beliefs and actions that inspire care for the environment (Osgood, 2023). *Evangelical* Christians, particularly through organizations such as *A Rocha International and the Evangelical Environmental Network*, integrate an ethic of environmental stewardship into their theology, advocating for conservation and environmental protection based on scriptural teachings that highlight the value of nature in revealing the Creator (Pritchard, 2011). St. Francis of Assisi reflected a deep sense of connection with nature, promoting a moral attitude towards environmental care informed by religious teachings and scientific knowledge, and encouraging a holistic approach to addressing the ecological crisis (Viviers, 2014).

The Protestant Christian tradition promotes environmental stewardship by emphasizing the biblical mandate for humans to act as stewards of God's creation. This stewardship ethic is rooted in biblical teachings, such as Genesis 1:26-31 and Genesis 2:15, which establish humans as stewards of the biophysical world (C. Le Roux, 2020). The church, as an organization, is called to be a light to the world, by setting an example in environmental conservation through awareness creation, teaching environmental stewardship ethics, and integrating them into church teachings (Abosedo Areo, 2020). Research shows that although there is consensus among church leaders and members regarding the biblical basis of environmental stewardship, its application is still tentative, thus requiring stronger integration into church practices and educational programs (C. S. L. Roux, 2016; C. S. Le Roux, 2017). By developing a holistic spirituality that promotes an ethic of ecological stewardship, churches can make a significant contribution to addressing the environmental crisis (C. S. Le Roux, 2017). Thus, Protestant Christian traditions have the potential to effectively promote environmental stewardship, provided they prioritize and integrate it into their teachings and practices.

Ethical Framework in Christianity and Ecology

Within Christianity, the views of Thomas Aquinas and Thomas Berry highlight different approaches to environmental ethics. Aquinas emphasizes Divine transcendence and human responsibility to care for nature, while Berry views humans as equal members of the earth's

community. This view challenges the concept of human superiority and promotes a more egalitarian environmental ethic (George, 2019).

Christianity, especially through the encyclical *Laudato Si'* by Pope Francis in 2015, calls for ecological, spiritual, and anthropological conversion, with love as the guiding principle for environmental stewardship (Puglisi & Buitendag, 2020). This approach is in line with a broader Christian environmental sensitivity that recognizes the need for moral conversion to respect shared environmental and human values and encourages mutual understanding between Christians and non-Christians.

Religious ethics plays a significant role in contemporary ecological debates by providing diverse perspectives and moral frameworks for addressing environmental crises. Christianity proposes love as a guiding principle for ecological and spiritual conversion and encourages interfaith dialog to collectively confront ecological issues (Puglisi & Buitendag, 2020). The Orthodox and Catholic Churches emphasize the importance of integral ecology and the anthropological basis of the ecological crisis, advocating a future society that respects and protects the environment (Morariu, 2020).

The legacy of Lynn White Jr.'s thesis, which linked ecological crises to religious cosmologies, has been critically reassessed, leading to a pluralist approach that focuses on the contextualized strategies of moral communities as they confront environmental problems (Jenkins, 2009). Collectively, these religious perspectives affirm the need for renewed ethical and spiritual engagement in ecological issues, promote a holistic understanding of human relationships with the natural world, and encourage collaborative efforts across different religious traditions to address the pressing environmental challenges of our time.

The ethical framework in Christianity and ecology shows that ethical principles from Christianity have great potential to contribute to environmental conservation. Through a holistic and respectful approach to nature, religious teachings can inspire concrete actions to confront the environmental crisis. This religious perspective affirms the importance of ethical and spiritual engagement in ecological issues and encourages collaborative efforts across different religious traditions to safeguard the environment.

Challenges and Limitations

The study of historical perspectives on Christianity and ecology faces significant challenges and limitations. One of the main challenges is the controversial debate over the role of religion in ecological degradation. Lynn White Jr.'s 1967 view criticizing Western Christianity for its contribution to the modern ecological crisis shows how religion can be seen as a negative factor in environmental problems (Abdi & Pardamean, 2019). However, this critique also sparked recognition of the potential of religious traditions to provide ethical guidance and sustainable ecological practices. This challenge underscores the complexity of the relationship between religion and ecology, which often involves conflicting views and is difficult to reconcile.

In addition, there are limitations in the application of ecological principles derived from religious traditions. Although there are positive examples such as churches that emphasize holistic living and ecological practices (Abdi & Pardamean, 2019) Many church traditions have

yet to fully integrate ecological values into their teachings and practices. This can be due to differences in interpretation of doctrine, resistance to change, and lack of knowledge or understanding of environmental issues. For example, divisions within Christianity over eco-theology show a tension between traditional and more progressive views on environmental protection (Kroesbergen, 2014).

In addition, the application of religious ethical frameworks in environmental conservation often faces obstacles in the form of conflicting perceptions and a lack of institutional support. For example, while religion can provide a strong moral framework for conservation, there is also a risk that certain interpretations of sacred texts can be used to justify the exploitation of natural resources, especially among less informed or less educated communities (Woodrum & Hoban, 1994). This suggests the need for a more balanced and inclusive approach in combining religious teachings with ecological principles.

The challenges of globalization and modernization are also limiting efforts to integrate religious values with ecological economic practices. Local traditions with sustainable environmental management practices are often threatened by rapid social and economic change. Therefore, efforts to promote sustainability through religion must consider broader social and economic dynamics. The above challenges and limitations suggest that while religion has the potential to contribute positively to ecological sustainability, there are still many obstacles that need to be overcome. A more inclusive, critical, and contextual approach is needed to maximize the role of religion in addressing the global ecological crisis.

Future Research Directions

To broaden the understanding of the relationship between religion and ecology, and address the challenges and limitations that have been identified, future research could be directed towards the following key areas. A more in-depth interdisciplinary approach is essential. Integrating knowledge from different disciplines such as theology, ecology, anthropology, and sociology can create a more holistic understanding of the role of religion in ecological sustainability. This interdisciplinary research can help reveal the complex relationship between religious doctrines, religious practices, and their impact on the environment.

There is also a need for interfaith comparative studies, which aim to identify patterns and differences in approaches to environmental issues between different religious traditions. By understanding how religious values and practices can be adapted and applied in different contexts, we can achieve greater ecological sustainability. In addition, the development of a more inclusive and adaptive eco-theology should be encouraged. This eco-theology should take into account the various perspectives and experiences of religious communities around the world. An inclusive eco-theology will be able to respond to the challenges of globalization and modernization and support local sustainable practices. Empirical research on the implementation of faith-based ecological practices is also urgently needed. Case studies in various communities can provide insights into the effectiveness of ecological practices based on religious teachings in real contexts. This research can identify factors that support or hinder the implementation of ecological values from a religious perspective.

The role of religious leaders and institutions in promoting environmental awareness and action also needs to be explored. This research could highlight effective strategies used by religious leaders to move their communities towards more sustainable practices. Collaboration with secular environmental movements is another area that needs to be studied. Synergies between religious values and secular ecological principles could result in a more robust and comprehensive approach to environmental challenges. This collaboration could lead to more effective conservation efforts.

Finally, it is also important to analyze how public policies can support or hinder faith-based conservation efforts. This research can provide policy recommendations that integrate religious values with ecological sustainability goals. By exploring these research directions, a deeper and more applicable understanding of the role of religion in ecological sustainability is expected. This collaborative and innovative effort can help address the global environmental crisis and create a more sustainable future.

CONCLUSION

This research finds that while Christianity is often criticized for its contribution to environmental degradation, there is great potential in its teachings to support ecological sustainability. Using a historical and ethical approach, this research shows that doctrines and practices within Christianity offer a strong ethical foundation for environmental conservation. The tradition advocates a symbiotic relationship between humans and nature and emphasizes the responsibility of humans as responsible *stewards*.

The suggestion from this research is to encourage interfaith dialogue and interdisciplinary collaboration to integrate ecological ethical principles rooted in religious teachings into modern environmental policies and practices. This is important to create a holistic and effective approach to addressing the global environmental crisis. In addition, further research is recommended to focus on empirical case studies and interdisciplinary approaches to explore how religious ecological ethical principles can be effectively applied across different cultural and social contexts.

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