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A Spirit-Filled Environment

Ecological Theology in Pentecostal and Charismatic
Christianity in South Africa

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A Spirit-Filled Environment: Ecological Theology in Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity in South Africa

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Abstract: Ecological theology has been explored from the perspectives of various Christian traditions. Although there have been attempts by a few scholars interested in Pentecostalism to investigate the subject, ecological theology remains under-researched within the ambit of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity in South Africa. In addition, most churches in this tradition have not yet made pronouncements on ecological issues such as the interactions between Pentecostal believers and their environment in South Africa. Hence, a scholarly question arises: do the spirit-filled and tongue-talking care about the environment? This question is approached here through the development of ecological theology from a Pentecostal perspective. However, such a development will have to look at previous studies on Pentecostal ecological theology in order to apply it to a South African context. Only then will churches in the Pentecostal and Charismatic Christian tradition in South Africa be able to pronounce on environmental issues.

Keywords: Pentecostalism, Environment, Ecology, Theology, Spirit-Filled

Introduction

Pentecostalism is part of the broader Christian tradition but distinct from other traditions because of its emphasis on Spirit baptism and the initial evidence of speaking in other tongues. According to Anderson (2005, 66), “At the beginning of the twenty-first century somewhere between 10–40% of South Africa’s population could be called Pentecostal.” The trend is the same in other African countries, especially in the sub-Saharan. In this article, Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity in South Africa refer to the classical Pentecostal denominations founded by missionaries at the beginning of the twentieth century (see Anderson 2002; cf. Frahm-Arp 2010). These include churches such as the Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa (AFM), the Assemblies of God in South Africa, and the Full Gospel in South Africa. Most of these churches have pronounced on several societal issues such as AIDS and the church, alcohol, cremation, surrogacy, unveiling of tombstones, and homosexuality. However, many have not yet articulated their stance on the important subject of the church and the environment; hence the subject of ecological theology in these churches remains under-researched. This article works within an ecological theological framework to develop a Pentecostal ecological theology for Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity in South Africa. This will be done by providing a background to ecological theology in a South African context by means of a literary analysis. The article will go on to analyze Pentecostal ecological theology from previous studies in order to apply it to a South African context. To do this, the gap that exists between Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity and the environment will be explored.

Ecological Theological Framework

An ecological theological framework, or what others simply call eco-theology, is an interdisciplinary framework that deals with the relationship that exists or does not exist between theology and nature, focusing on environmental changes (see Green and Haron 2020; cf.

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Nhemachena and Mawere 2019). Scholars in the Christian tradition in this framework look at the interactions between human faith and nature (Mckibben 1997). The framework enables theologians to study theology with the juxtaposition of ecological issues such as the environment and nature. In addition, the framework is used to address environmental concerns or crises such as global warming, pollution, increase in temperature, decrease in rainfall, landlessness, lack of food, lack of water, and so forth. In this article, an ecological theological framework is used to explore the relationship between Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity and the environment. The framework will assist in answering the main question of this study, that is, do the spirit-filled and the tongue-talking care about the environment? And if the answer is no, the follow-up question is how can a proper eco-theology be developed within Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity in a South African context? The next section explores ecological theology in a South African context by looking at previous studies on the subject.

Ecological Theology in a South African Context

Ecological theology has been explored over the years by various scholars in a South African context, but as highlighted in the introduction, this has been done in traditions other than Pentecostalism. One such scholar is Ernest Conradie who has studied ecological theology from a systematic and ethics perspective. Conradie (2009) defines ecological theology as a theology of place where there is a connection between the social aspects of the people and the space they occupy. Theologians doing research on eco-theology should be concerned about the responsibility of society toward the locations which people occupy. These locations may include, but are not limited to, nature, land, agriculture, housing, homes, human bodies, and population. These locations in Conradie's eco-theology also include the infrastructure in the landscape in the form of industrial buildings and roads in both the rural and urban areas. In addition, according to Conradie (2003), eco-theology should also be involved with environmental hazards such as the following:

- the looming possibility of global warming
- the hazard of ozone depletion
- the problem of acid rain and air pollution
- the disposal of nuclear waste
- the management of highly toxic forms of waste
- the virtual destruction of the rainforests and other ecosystems
- the rapid loss of biodiversity
- the salination of soil
- the virtual collapse of some fishing industries due to persistent over-fishing.

All these locations and environmental hazards involve Christian believers because they also occupy the same spaces; moreover, most of the locations have been created by God whom Christians and other believers serve and pray to in their daily lives. Therefore, Christian believers cannot excuse themselves from both the good and the bad things that happen within the space they occupy; they are part of that life. Hence, the call by Conradie for the Christian church in South Africa to take the initiative in addressing all the environmental hazards and not leaving these to ordinary citizens and the government. According to Conradie (2003, 131):

The church in South Africa has an organised space at the grassroots level to promote mass environmental awareness, it has the necessary leadership for moral transformation, and a holistic, ecological vision has deep roots in the Christian tradition. The church also has important resources in terms of staff, institutions, agencies, networks, buildings, infrastructure, etc. to address environmental challenges effectively.

The most important factor for the Christian tradition to consider when it comes to eco-theology, according to Conradie, is the involvement of God himself in creation. Even the concept of incarnation itself has something to do with God being in love with creation, hence he sent his son to the world. Even if God cannot be seen by all, the fact of the matter is that he is ever present in the same earth that human beings occupy. Therefore, there is no discussion of God's plan to save humanity without touching on the issue of the love of God for creation (Conradie 2010).

In a South African context, eco-theology must be contextual in order to address the challenges of space and environment in the local context. Thus, according to Conradie, eco-theology is a contextual theology. In South Africa, it is therefore important to speak about the issues of land and space given the long history of racial segregation. Eco-theology cannot exclude the many black people who were displaced and dislocated during the time of racial segregation. Consequently, eco-theology in South Africa will also have to touch on issues of justice because those who lost their land need to receive it back. Therefore, according to Conradie (2009, 15), a theology of ecology in the "current South African context would clearly have to address issues of access to land, housing, urban planning and sustainability."

In addition, it is equally important in a South African context to address environmental issues as they relate to the health and well-being of the people of South Africa. This well-being also has to do with safety, given the high rate of crime in the country. Lastly, Conradie speaks of how people access the transport services in South Africa as part of eco-theology because this influences the environment. The congestion in both road and air transport results in carbon dioxide emissions which are not good for the environment.

What is important for this article is the reflection on how Pentecostals have been engaging with the issues raised by Conradie as they relate to eco-theology. In other words, it is important to know the relationship between Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity and, for example, the important issue of land disposition in South Africa. The issue of land has affected other Christian traditions in South Africa as well as the Pentecostals in the country. Although most Pentecostals believe in divine healing, it is still important to address the issue of health services and the well-being of the people in the tradition. This should be done with reflections on the health provision policies in the country. Pentecostals are not excused from the debates on the National Health Insurance (NHI) and other policies. Pentecostals are not excluded from the subject of citizens' safety, as crime can happen to anyone regardless of their religious affiliation. Equally, Pentecostals are not excluded from issues related to the transport services as they need to travel to and from work. Therefore, the contextual eco-theological issues, as raised by Conradie, affect Pentecostals as much as they affect all South African citizens. But how have Pentecostals addressed these issues in the recent past? In the next section, I discuss the relationship between Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity and ecology.

Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity and Ecology

The main contextual eco-theological issues raised by Conradie (2009), as highlighted above, are land, health, safety, and transport. The land question in South Africa is a thorny issue that has been a part of public debates ever since the dawn of democracy in South Africa. Twenty-seven years later, people still live in unhealthy conditions due to a lack of proper housing, unable to meet their basic needs such as water, sanitation, and electricity. The most disappointing factor in the South African democracy is that people are still crowded into townships and other urban areas, struggling to access their land. This is disturbing because land is necessary for the upkeep and well-being of South Africans, particularly the black population (Watt and Saayman 2003). Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity in South Africa have been silent on this and related issues, as if they were not part of the society or people who are struggling with these issues. Although churches like the AFM have come out in support of the expropriation of land in South Africa, they have been silent for many years under racial segregation (AFM 2018).

Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity in South Africa teach divine healing as part of their core beliefs. Most Pentecostals in Africa and elsewhere in the world believe that when a person is ill, he or she can receive healing through the common practice of the laying on of hands. Moreover, as part of this belief, some of them have been discouraging people from consulting medical doctors and taking medication, stating that they should only believe in God for divine healing, while scholars such as Richie (2020) have suggested a balance between the use of medication and faith healing. According to Adeboye (2020, 121), “[i]n many of these churches, concern for the health of members is shown in the healing ministry of the lead pastors.” However, health goes beyond healing as it also considers issues of food security and a healthy diet. There is no need to keep on praying for people who do not take care of their own bodies because they will always be sick as they do not consider health hazards. The health ministry should also include healthcare and health therapy for people to do well in their body, soul, and spirit (Ajibade 2020). Akindolie (2020, 170) adds, “health in its broader sense [is] a state of complete physical, medical and social well-being and not merely the absence of infirmity.” Therefore, we should talk about holistic healing among Pentecostals and not just the removal of sickness and disease.

As highlighted above, the issues of safety and security are important in an eco-theological context in South Africa given the country’s crime rates. Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity in South Africa cannot carry on talking only about the baptism of the Holy Spirit and the evidence of speaking in other tongues and neglect the issue of safety for their congregants. The AFM and fellow classical Pentecostal denominations such as the Assemblies of God and the Full Gospel do sometimes issue statements revealing their increasing concerns about the issue of crime in the country. However, this has not translated into official pronouncements on these issues by these churches. These important matters that affect not only the members in these churches, but other citizens of the country as well, need proper explication and at times should be part of the churches’ constitutions or policies in local congregations. In addition, the churches that work with the police service in communities in order to protect the well-being of individuals living in these communities should also be highlighted. This will ensure that the church buildings become safe and secure environments. It is unfortunate that the people of God are sometimes attacked by criminals on their way to or from church.

The last issue, transport services, is also related to environmental aspects which affects the creatures that live in the sea and at times the water used by human beings in communities. Other than issues of transport, according to Golo (2014, 198), the crisis in the environment is typified by “the plethora of climate change markers, such as erratic rainfall patterns, other unpredictable patterns of weather and season, deforestation and de-vegetation.” However, I still maintain that the transport industry is a major contributor to the environmental crisis that we see today. Thus, it would be important for Pentecostal and Charismatic churches to make official pronouncements on this issue by encouraging their followers to use public transport instead of private cars in order to reduce carbon emissions on South African roads. But this will only be possible when or if the churches in Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity are interested in issues related to the environment.

However, as noted in the discussion above, churches in Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity have not been vocal on the issues of the environment as much as they have been on being spirit-filled and talking in tongues. They have not used their theology of pneumatology to engage with the issues that concern their members and the environment. They have not used their theology of experience to address the most pertinent issues that are not only concerns in their churches but are also issues of national interest. This non-engagement with environmental issues in these churches is also illustrated by their lack of official pronouncements on these issues. It is therefore important to develop a Pentecostal ecological theology that will be relevant to the South African context. However, before doing so, there is a need to look at previous studies on Pentecostal ecological theology in order to apply it to the South African context.

Pentecostal Ecological Theology

Scholars interested in Pentecostalism have been engaging in Pentecostal ecological theology. One such scholar is Walter Hollenweger (1984 in Swoboda 2010), who highlighted the role of the Spirit in the creation, which is important for Pentecostals with the Spirit-inclined tradition to engage with the environment. This is pivotal for Pentecostal ecological theology as the Holy Spirit has been acknowledged as being central to the foundations of Pentecostalism. The call therefore by Hollenweger is that as much as Pentecostals around the world connect with the Holy Spirit, they should be able to connect with creation through the same Spirit. The reason for this call is that the Spirit has always been involved with creation since Genesis, as it is recorded that the Spirit moved upon the face of the waters even when the earth was still formless and void. Genesis 1:2 states, “The earth was without form, and void; and darkness *was* on the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.” From this biblical text it can be deduced that the Spirit had contact with the environment before even having contact with human beings. Therefore, it is surprising that even with this knowledge, Pentecostals who believe in the Spirit are still making a separation between the Holy Spirit and creation; hence, the call for Pentecostal pneumatological theology—the theology of the Spirit—to be juxtaposed with Pentecostal ecological theology—the theology of the environment, with the Spirit as the unifier between the two.

Secondly, Pentecostal ecological theology is possible when Pentecostals move from individualized salvation toward a holistic and cosmological salvation that can look at other aspects of life (Swoboda 2010). In this way, Pentecostals begin to understand the real meaning of the “full gospel” which includes the salvation of all of God’s creation, not just human beings. Therefore, Pentecostals around the world cannot continue to escape the realities of life in the name of their own personal salvation and their focus on attaining heaven (Swoboda 2010). Pentecostals should move away from this notion of being separated from the rest of the world as part of the preparation for the second coming of the Lord (Swoboda 2010; cf. Hunter 2000). They are still in the world and should therefore take part in what is going on with God’s creation which includes taking care of the environment. Swoboda (2010, 242) suggests “a return again to a relationally focused spirituality that offers a robust perspective for a soteriology that seeks the salvation of the whole world.” Swoboda (2010, 243) goes on to say:

Our challenge is to re-imagine the salvation of the world not simply in human-centred modes, but rather to capture the larger cosmic vision of Christ in the recapitulation of all creation to its unified state of inter-relation with humanity and God.

Third, Swoboda (2019, 102), in his excellent book, *Tongues and Trees: Towards a Pentecostal Ecological Theology*, writes about “charismatic social justice,” calling on Pentecostals to take part in the social ills facing their contexts. However, elsewhere, Swoboda (2010) has highlighted the social aspect of ecology as a challenge to Pentecostals, as they do not see the two running together. Most classical Pentecostals around the world do not want to involve themselves in the sociopolitical concerns within their contexts. This has caused many of them to be less concerned with the day-to-day challenges that communities face in their lives. But in order to succeed, Pentecostal ecological theology should go beyond the salvation of souls to include social responsibility. In order to complement their ministry, Pentecostals need to be involved in social justice by reaching out to the people in communities. In this way, Pentecostal ecological theology will be a relevant one that brings together preaching and practice. The gospel should not only save souls but should also be able to bring about social transformation in the communities where it is preached. Salvation should not only be about the liberation of souls but should include the restoration of the things that have been lost in the past, hence the discussion on restorative justice.

Fourth, Pentecostal ecological theology is informed by Pentecostals' ability to relate to praxis as opposed to theory. Pentecostal theology on its own is highly experiential, drawing from the power and works of the Holy Spirit. Even when interpreting biblical texts, Pentecostals do not rely on theoretical framings but on their experiences through the work of the Holy Spirit. Pentecostal ecological theology cannot be different from this reality; it is also informed by the experiences that Pentecostals draw from their relationship with God through the Holy Spirit. A praxis-centered ecological theology, according to Swoboda (2019, 8), can equip "Christian communities to care for the very earth God created and intends to restore and reconcile to himself." Thus, Pentecostal experiences should not only end with the believer receiving the Holy Spirit and speaking in tongues but should also activate a zeal or passion to care for the environment. This praxis-centered ecological theology is in a way part of a contextual theology, as discussed in the section "Ecological Theology in a South African Context" of this article. In other words, this is not a theology that is designed from the ivory tower by leading theologians in the Pentecostal tradition but a theology of the ordinary people on the ground.

Lastly, Pentecostal ecological theology is about environmental stewardship. This is basically to do with the ability of Pentecostals around the world to take care of the environment they live in. In other words, Pentecostals should not only be concerned about their eschatological expectation of the second coming of Jesus at the expense of the environment. Even the mission of God started in the Garden of Eden with God's command to Adam and Eve to take care of the environment they live in (Kgatle 2021). The congregants on the ground need to understand what is it that they need to do in carrying out responsibilities within the environment they occupy. This means that environmental stewardship is possible from a congregational setting where pastors need to teach their congregants about ecology (Dermawan 2003). In a continent like Africa where there is an environmental crisis, there is a need for the same Spirit that inspires Pentecostals to speak in other tongues to also inspire them to be concerned about the environment (Sakupapa 2012). Therefore, Pentecostals should not separate the work of the Holy Spirit from their ecological responsibilities

Ecological Theology in Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity in South Africa

In a South African context, an ecological theology within Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity cannot overlook the role of the Spirit in engaging with the environment. Pentecostals in South Africa are already people of the Spirit, with most of them baptized in the Holy Spirit and speaking in tongues. However, this pneumatological aspect should be connected with ecology. The same passion of the Holy Spirit should lead to fruitful engagement with what is going on with the environment in a South African context. Pentecostals in South Africa like to be led and directed by the Holy Spirit and this should not change when it comes to the environmental crisis. In other words, the same Spirit should lead them to solve the challenges of land, health, safety, and transport in South Africa. In addition, classical Pentecostal denominations should join independent Pentecostal churches in South Africa in preaching a holistic salvation. This is a salvation that will look at the individual not only as the spirit but also as the body and soul. In addition, holistic salvation is able to look not only at the salvation of human beings but also at the creation as a whole. This is a kind of salvation that is not in a hurry to go to heaven but is keen to address the current challenges.

Pentecostal ecological theology in South Africa should also include social justice, as it relates to people who have lost their land during racial segregation. In other words, there is no need to restore humanity to their God but fail to restore them to their land. Classical Pentecostal denominations in South Africa have done well to preach the salvation of souls and have won many people to Christ, but this should be complemented with the important aspect of social justice in relation to the environment. In South Africa, we cannot solve the environmental crisis without giving people houses and ensuring that they have homes. People cannot currently

continue to live in squatter camps and wait for a good house in heaven. Hence, a Pentecostal ecological theology has to be relevant, practical, and contextual. This work will again here draw a comparison between classical Pentecostal denominations and independent Pentecostal churches where the former can learn from the latter. In other words, classical Pentecostal denominations can learn to become more contextual and practical when it comes to environmental issues. This means that a Pentecostal ecological theology in these denominations needs to be informed by what is taking place in communities and not by what theologians themselves are busy writing in their ivory towers.

Lastly, it is pivotal in South Africa to encourage Pentecostals, in the same way as God spoke to Adam and Eve, to continue to take care of their environment. This, which scholars call “environmental stewardship,” would then not only become part of a Pentecostal ecological theology but also ensure that the environment is conducive for the preaching of the gospel. When walking around the cities in South Africa today, specifically the townships, there is a lot of loitering, which could be solved through this kind of stewardship where people would become responsible for their surroundings. The work is not suggesting here that Pentecostal ecological theology in South Africa will solve all the environmental crises that exist in the country today, but it will demonstrate that the Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity are engaged with the issues related to ecology and integrate it into their Pentecostal pneumatological theology.

Conclusion

In conclusion, other Christian traditions have been making pronouncements on ecological issues, with a focus on environmental concerns. However, this work has not encountered pronouncements by the Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity in South Africa on the environment and faith. In addition, they have not yet developed a theology that helps Pentecostal believers to know how they should relate to nature. This leaves us with the following question: Do the spirit-filled and the tongue-talking Christians care about the environment in the South African context? In answering this question, this article looked at how other Pentecostal theologians elsewhere in the world have pronounced on the subject. The suggestion here is that Pentecostal ecological theology should be able to bring a balance between the pneumatological expressions in Pentecostalism and a love for the environment. It should be a theology that is also founded on a holistic salvation, whereby Pentecostals not only concentrate on their personal salvation, but on the salvation of creation as well. Pentecostals are not only called to spread the gospel to the ends of the world in order to save humanity from eternal damnation, but they also have an ecological calling that comes with the responsibility of taking care of the environment. Lastly, Pentecostal ecological theology in South Africa should be able to address contextual issues such as land redistribution through land reform. This should be a relevant, practical, and contextual theology.

Although this article looked at the lack of proper engagement with the environmental crisis by the Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity through literary analysis, it might help in the future to conduct empirical studies with church members and leaders to ascertain this non-engagement and also to find solutions to the crisis. Thus, future studies could look at Pentecostals’ relationship with the environment from a congregational perspective in South Africa.

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