

**Between Cosmology and Community: International Conference on Religion and Sustainable Development**

**Ecology**

**By Duduzile Voigts.**

**Torsten Meireis: *Avatar. Ethics, Religion and the Culture of Sustainability***

The keynote speaker Torsten Meireis successfully uses the blockbuster movie “Avatar” as a paradigm of hybrid cultural articulation to talk about the role of culture and religion in the sustainability discourse.

The 1987 Brundtland Report defines sustainable development as such development that “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” Sustainability may include efficiency lifestyle, intergenerational justice and a certain understanding of environment. Furthermore, the report states that sustainable development requires meeting the basic needs of all and extending the opportunity to all to fulfil their aspiration to a better life.

According to Meireis, the Christian reformed articulation of sustainability should display the notion of Service in Christianity and the perspective of Justice as being intergenerational and defining the environment as God’s creation allowing nature to have an intrinsic value aside from human interest. Nevertheless it should be noted that this definition varies across different churches.

However, Meireis states in the introduction that the sustainability discourse includes many problems; it is very vague and moral implications are not clearly discussed and assumed to be evident, thus the actual quantifiable outcome of the sustainability discourse is very limited.

Unfortunately, ecology and sustainability are no common topics in theology nor are they evident in the discourses and activities of Christian communities.

“Avatar” as a cultural phenomenon was the most successful movie worldwide with regard to ticket sales. Its central theme is sustainability and the narrative depicts the exploitation of natural resources by humans. The concept of eco-spirituality is applied in “Avatar” as well.

This example of culture supports Meireis’ three theses on the interrelationship of culture and sustainability:

1. “‘Sustainability’ is a cultural entity, a notion consisting of concepts, symbols and images.

2. Culture is never just an instrument or a set category but also a pool or horizon of concepts and images as well as an agonal arena. This is also true in the context of sustainable development.
3. Cultural and religious articulation cannot replace political and technical efforts to achieve sustainable development, but it has to go along with those”.

Religion is always part of culture and a source of social imagery, thus, also religion is never just an instrument but at the same time a pool of concepts and images as well as a descriptive marker for differences within society. Knowledge of symbols and of somebody’s own culture is usually not conscious and only becomes evident through study and comparative experience. Thus, culture as a domain for sustainable development is not simple and straightforward and will surely create social clashes and counter cultures. Meireis gave the example of the Rolling Coal trucks in the U.S., whereby diesel engines are modified to increase the amount of fuel entering the engine in order to emit large amounts of black exhaust fumes into the air. Meireis therefore concludes that culture used as a tool for sustainability will create counter cultures.

Conclusions are:

We need to take culture and religion serious as agonal arenas whereby public theology needs to actively engage in sustainability discourses and promote a culture of eco-theology.

“Avatar” is a hybrid cultural articulation and refers to the horizon of sustainability discourses globally, as it draws on western and indigenous notions of nature and sustainability, whilst still reproducing common stereotypes along gender, race and class.

The significance of religious symbols in culture has changed over the decades and is significant to the dominant culture. Thus, sustainability discourses within religion have changed over time related to the dominant political system.

Sustainability discourses need to include perspectives from different spiritual traditions and cosmologies from the bottom up in order to take religious understanding(s) of sustainable development serious.

**Emmanuel Kwesi Anim: *The Gods are Dead and Now We are in Charge! The Hermeneutical Crisis in Africa’s New Christianity and Its Effect on the Environment and Sustainable Development***

The keynote speaker Emmanuel Anim highlights some points to evaluate the current state of religion and sustainable development in Ghana.

The underlying theology of Pentecostal churches in Ghana is prosperity which is defined by four pillars: material wealth or conscious consumption, good health, longevity and procreativity or fertility.

Prior to Christian missionaries, African indigenous societies followed traditional belief systems that held belief in God and divine creation. Within African traditional religions (ATR), the land and environment were treated with respect and were conserved, as they were understood as a vital entity.

Anim notes that the idea of prosperity was also inherent within ATR and wealth was considered a domain that is shared by the community. Showing your affluence was not desirable as the community would consider you taking more than you need. Therefore goods were assembled with restraint, which maintained sustainability.

In contrast, the Christian Pentecostal idea of dominion and prosperity encourages the believer to take dominion over the environment, which can result in destructive behaviour and exploitation of the environment.

This highlights a possible clash of the Pentecostal theology of prosperity and ATR mentality of conservation within the discourse on sustainable development in Ghana and on the African continent at large.

The Pentecostal understanding of being a true Christian includes a break with the past and the heritage of ATR through methods as fasting and prayer. The values and ethics no longer make references to ancestors and the spiritual realm is privatised so that everyone must take care of his- or herself.

This phenomena of God and spirituality as a private domain may contribute directly to the environmental problems such as pollution of water, deforestation, disregard of sustainable development, disregard of the effects of climate change and its consequences.

The idea that wealth defines success and is an evidence of God's favour bears hermeneutical challenges as development is understood as being linear and personalized, which may lead to a lack of moral and ethics.

Anim argues that the traditional cosmology reflects the fundamental cognitive, existential and normative orientation of a particular group of people, here being in the context of Africa and its peoples. Anim therefore argues that there is a wealth of knowledge in ATR that can be tapped into and be utilised for future sustainability strategies.

The Pentecostal approach to preaching the gospel needs to be revised and to adapt Jesus' gospel in a relevant way in Africa's cultural contexts. Pentecostal practices might lead to anti-sustainable development practices and a degradation of ATR. According to Anim, the theology of prosperity of Pentecostal churches cannot be substantiated by the hermeneutics of biblical scriptures and need to be revised.

However, the keynote speaker concludes by underlining the importance of the role of Pentecostal Churches and religion in general in order to change the fundamental attitudes towards environmental sustainability in Africa and points out that churches need to work out a theology of ecological integrity.

### **Session 3a) Ecology: Emmanuel Awudi: *Reading Scripture with African Pentecostal Eyes; Implications for Eco-Care and Eco-Mission***

Ecological challenges in Africa include severe expansion of desert and barren land, inappropriate or illegal waste disposal and deforestation. They are worsened by high rates of population growth followed by high rates of consumption. In addition, climate justice is not practiced as the global North emissions affect the global South and industrial waste is dumped all over Africa.

Awudi argues that Enlightenment thinking influenced and reshaped African worldviews and contributed to the current ecological crisis, as it introduced the idea that nature is not divine and human beings are fundamentally different from the rest of the creation.

However, the critical re-examination of biblical scriptures reveals a number of ecological approaches, but these have been ignored by Pentecostal churches so far.

Research studies in Ghana show that African Pentecostals are less involved in eco-care and Awudi points out that this may be due to inadequate hermeneutical understanding.

The speaker's research study of 30 seminarians intended to assess their hermeneutic understanding of ecology. His research findings showed that 93 % of the participants had never heard ecological subjects in sermons. All respondents agreed that eco-care is important, but did not support eco-mission to become part of the Christian faith and responsibility of the church.

Thus, there is inadequate knowledge on ecology as Pentecostal Christianity is mainly occupied with spiritual aspects as deliverance, eternity and prosperity theology. There is a clear knowledge gap and false interpretation of scriptures whereby the understanding of dominion implies an anthropocentric view and man's control over nature. In addition, redemption and the eschatological view of the Pentecostals encourage the church members to pay less attention to environmental care, as the church's focus lays on the afterlife.

In conclusion, Awudi made a case for retracting traditional African knowledge on environmental conservation through the prism of the gospel and called to read the scriptures with 'green eyes'. He emphasized the need for rethinking the Christian faith through redefining biblical texts and transforming Christian cosmology in the quest to develop an African eco-theology.

### **Session 3a) Ecology: Akinwumi Akindolie: *“Holy water”: The Ritual Praxis of African Independent Churches and Socio-Economic Development in Nigeria***

Water is a vital natural element for every living organism. In African religion water is important for healing and washing, therefore African Independent Churches also use water as one of the natural resources to facilitate completion of different rituals. Akindolie argues that socio-economic importance of the usage of “holy water” has been neglected in research so far.

In his research and presentation on African Independent Churches, Akindolie focuses on Aladura churches in South West Nigeria. Aladura churches are part of the second movement among AICs in Nigeria and include considerable elements of traditional Yoruba culture and belief within their practices.

According to Yoruba traditional beliefs as expressed in a proverb, “we use water to bath and to drink, nobody can do without the use of water”. This feeds into the phenomenon of ritual and therapeutic usage of “holy water” in Aladura churches. One example of the use of water in Aladura churches is a practice, whereby water is prayed over by prophets and ministers so that it becomes “holy water” and is believed to have a potent force to remove all impurities and diseases.

Water has a symbolic, therapeutic and cultic use and results in direct socio-economic benefits for the community and the church. Water is sold at the churches by the people as “pure” or “holy water” at special occasions. The prices vary and increase the economic value for the stakeholders. In Akindolie’s research study the vendors of “holy water” have stated that the economic value has improved greatly within this business.

According to Akindolie, the practice of using “holy water” has contributed to socio-economic development of Aladura churches and their followers. It has also promoted African traditional heritage and contributed to the indigenization of Christianity in Africa. Its therapeutic aspect is seen as a contribution to healing sickness and disease in Africa, where western medicine may have failed to do so.

### **Conclusion**

All research papers presented on the topic of ecology pointed to a lack of awareness with regard to issues of ecological and sustainable development in the respective church communities.

Especially the example of “holy water” highlights the importance to move beyond the socio-economic benefits to address the issue of sustainable development in Africa and underlines the need for African Independent and African Pentecostal churches to have an

interdisciplinary pastoral, ecological and developmental discourse in order to work out guidelines for sustainable ecology strategies and an African eco-theology.