

RELIGION AND A LIVING EARTH: RECONCEPTUALISING THE 2030 AGENDA THROUGH THE LENS OF SPIRITUAL ECOLOGY

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Abstract

With a call by international bodies and organisations for peace and a sustainable planet earth, the UN has advised member nations to achieve 17 SDGs by year 2030. In ensuring the achievement of the 17 SDGs within the stipulated time period, the UN adopted some mechanisms like voluntary national reviews, policy coherence, global accounting profession, fourth industrial revolution roadmaps, and ICT infrastructure towards achieving United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). However, despite the relevance of these mechanisms, there is still misgiving about their efficacy in the actual achievement of the UN SDGs, given the positive association between religion and sustainability of planet earth. This presupposes that the higher the religious activity, the higher the likelihood of environmental protection by humans, and invariably the more likelihood for UN member nations to achieve the UN 2030 Agenda. Therefore, this conceptual paper explored how religious belief in form of environmental stewardship, serves as a mechanism for achieving the UN SDGs. Adopting a descriptive overview approach, a review of extant literature is conducted on religion and sustainable development through the lens of Spiritual Ecology and Eco-Theology theories. Building upon existing empirical evidence, this study established a conceptual framework illustrating that achievement of the UN SDGs is positively influenced by religious beliefs. The findings suggest that religion significantly aligns human behavior with the way humans take care of the earth.

Keywords: Religious belief, sustainable development goals, spiritual ecology theory, eco-theology theory, living earth

Introduction

Manifestation of poverty, disease, environmental crisis amongst others over the last three decades have prompted calls for research by countries under the United Nations (UN) into sustainability development (Caballero, 2016). Presently, the UN has identified 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a blueprint for sustainable prosperity of mankind and the Earth Planet, with a primary objective of ensuring sustainable economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental protection, in all member countries, by year 2030 (United Nations, 2015).

As the year 2030 draws near, UN member countries are under increasing pressure to achieve the 17 SDGs by the UN 2030 deadline. It is therefore not surprising that UN member countries are now demanding more reliable mechanisms for achieving the UN 17 SDGs. As at today, mechanisms like voluntary national reviews, policy coherence, global accounting profession, fourth industrial revolution roadmaps, and ICT infrastructure are among the key mechanisms supporting achievement of UN SDGs (Babbington & Unerman, 2025; Liu et al., 2024; Nicolo et al., 2025; UN DESA, 2024).

However, studies (Arneth, 2011; Dick & Ede, 2023; Mattson, 2011; Min, 2009; Morgan & Nwosimiri, 2022; Okyere-Manu; Skirbekk, et al, 2020) have shown that religious beliefs such as Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism among others can positively influence the extent of achievement of the UN SDGs. Moreover, these religious beliefs play a moderating role

in enhancing achievement of the UN SDGs. Notwithstanding these scholarly contributions, the fundamental influence of religious mechanism and conceptual linkages between religion and achievement of the UN SDGs has yet to be synthesised into a robust framework, that clarifies the mechanics of how religious beliefs shapes achievement of sustainable development with particular emphasis on environmental crisis. The emphasis on environmental crisis is hinged on the fact that environmental issues serve as a neutral entry point for interfaith cooperation towards achievement of the UN SDGs.

Despite the proliferation of literature (Arneth, 2011; Dick & Ede, 2023; Mattson, 2011; Min, 2009; Morgan & Nwosimiri, 2022; Okyere-Manu; Skirbekk, et al, 2020) concerning religion and environmental protection, a significant theoretical void remains regarding the integration of religion with sustainability development - environmental protection as evidenced in mixed results. Earlier scholars (Arneth, 2011; Dick & Ede, 2023; Mattson, 2011; Min, 2009; Morgan & Nwosimiri, 2022; Okyere-Manu; Skirbekk, et al, 2020) claim that man is God's representative on earth and therefore expected to take care of the earth planet's resources. However, this does not sit well with some researchers (Toynbee, 1972; White, 1967; Yeide, 1987) who are of the view that Judeo-Christian ideology does not perceive all natural creatures in the environment as equal and therefore exploited them. This inconsistency is a gap, and points out that previous researches are in disagreement with the earlier view, and a new concept is needed to settle the debate. This study proposes a moderating variable that may explain these discrepancies. By reviewing recent studies and theories, to bridge this gap, this study develops a conceptual model that situates religion as a catalyst for achievement of the UN 2030 Agenda. This schema enables a nuanced appraisal by researchers and policymakers of how religious beliefs can create social synergies by faith-based environmentalism towards achieving of the UN SDGs. Therefore, this paper aims to explore how religious belief in form of environmental stewardship, serves as a mechanism for achieving the UN SDGs.

This study is underpinned by Spiritual Ecology theory (Gottlieb, 2004; Sponsel, 2012) and the Eco-Theology theory (Moltmann, 2013) which argues that environmental crisis is not just a failure of technology or policy, but a crisis of the human spirit/religion. That is, environmental issues are underpinned by a spiritual substrate. This presupposes that the current mechanisms for achievement of the UN SDGs are currently hollow or purely technical, and they require a spiritual 'core' (the Living Earth Concept) to actually motivate human behaviour change. Subsequent sections of this paper are organised as follows: Section 2 provides a critical synthesis of extant literature on religion and sustainable development; Section 3 details the components of the proposed model; Section 4 evaluates the dual contributions of the study to theory and practice; and Section 5 concludes this study and highlights prospects for future empirical investigation.

Literature Review

Religion and Sustainable development

Community development is necessary for sustainable development. This is explained in research on Islamic perspective carried out by Bsoul, et al. (2022). They argued that failure on the part of mankind to take care of the environment is a breach of spiritual contract between man and God, which invariably affects sustainable development of the earth negatively. Puglisi & Buitendag (2022) also researched on "A faith-based environmental approach for people and the planet: some inter-religious perspectives on our earth-embeddedness," they submitted that humans are self-centred and need to move towards life-centredness for sustainable development of the ecosystem. In the same vein, Mufid et al. (2023) in their study on religious discourse on water and environmental conservation issues, found out that even though all religious groups sees water as very important to our ecosystem, they fail to uphold this ideal because they lack spiritual direction

in this regard, thereby failing to align with the expectation of the United Nations with respect to sustainable development.

Boaheng (2023), in a study on 'theological principles for ecological sustainability and human flourishing' found out that human activities on earth is not geared towards sustainable development. Therefore, for us to ensure environmental wellbeing, human activities, which he termed 'human flourishing' should be directed to sustainable development of the environment. However, Ai-Jayyousi (2012) in his study on 'Islam and sustainable development' posits that Islam supports sustainable development. His research findings revealed that several Islamic concepts such as tawheed (God is the creator of all and they are all interconnected), Khalifa (Humans are trustees of the Earth and not owners), Mizan (the universe is delicate and development must respect this natural limits), Adl (sustainability requires social and economic justice), Ihsan (a call to act with kindness toward all living beings) serve as pillars for sustainable development. This presupposes that Islam supports sustainable development. This finding is in tandem with a study (Gottlieb, 2008) on religion and sustainability, where he found out that fulfilment of religious groups spiritual mandate is positively and significantly associated with environmental sustainability. This suggests that religious groups should check issues of greed and abuse of the environment.

A study by Billah (2021), on Islamic wealth and achievement of the SDGs, revealed that Islam is favourably disposed to the UN SDGs. For example, billions of dollars are generated through *Zakat* funds and *Waqf* (charitable endowments), which can be channeled towards achievement of some of the SDGs like poverty amelioration. In agreement, Dariah, et al. (2016) submits that Islam model of sustainability which integrates material, social, and spiritual dimensions through the instrumentality of *Zakat* (obligatory charity), *Sadaqah* (voluntary charity), and *Waqf* (endowments) are vital tools for sustainable development. Therefore, the development of "human character" and spiritual well-being is the true driver of sustainable development. Chile et al. (2004), in a study on 'spirituality and community development: exploring the link between the individual and the collective' found out that there is a significant and positive relationship between strong spiritual beliefs of individuals and sustainable development of the community. In same vein, Kholis & Aulassyahied (2022) in their study on 'understanding ecological hadiths with interconnective approaches in responding to ecological problems' found that Islamic teachings can serve as a spiritual and ethical foundation for achievement of the United Nations SDGs. This is in tandem with a study (Kinsley, 1995) on ecological spirituality, where it was revealed that there is a significant and positive relationship between human ecological spirituality and treatment of the earth planet as sacred for sustainable development. In addition, Lai (2011) in his study on 'interreligious dialogue and environmental ethics' found out that interreligious dialogue is positively and significantly associated with environmental protection. This is in tandem with his study in 2013 on 'God of life and ecological theology' where he argues that salvation should also encompass provision of a spiritual foundation for sustainable development.

Religion and environmental protection

Arneth (2011) is of the view that man as God's representative, is opposed to "wasteful" or "excessive" consumption, and supports a "stewardship" model where humans are expected to take care of the earth planet's resources. It was therefore not surprising when Skirbekk, et al (2020) in their study on 'how religion influences our relationship with the environment' found out that there is a significant and positive relationship between religion and the Earth. This presupposes that the higher the religious activity, the higher the likelihood of environmental protection by humans. In addition, Dick & Ede (2023) argues that religion influences how human beings takes care of their environment. This conclusion is reaffirmed by Mattson (2011), who examined the Islamic view on consumption and material development in the light of environmental pollution. He posits that

while Islam encourages economic development, it discourages extravagance that can harm the environment.

However, Hargrove (1986), in a study on 'religion and environmental crisis' was of the view that humans intrinsically value nature without any religious influence. Therefore, the duty of man to protect nature is a consequence of the extent to which we appreciate its beauty and not necessarily religious belief. In tandem with the findings of Hargrove (1986), Jacobsen (1996), pointed out that there is often a sharp disconnect between a religion's "official" ecological teachings and the actual environmental behavior of its followers. However, Gottlieb (2004), in his study on 'this sacred earth: religion, nature, environment' found out that there is a significant and positive relationship between human religious belief system and environmental sustainability. Therefore, achievement of the UN SDGs is tied to sacredness of nature, which is not in tandem with Hargrove's findings. Hope & Jones (2014) tend to agree with the findings of Hargrove (1986) when in their study on 'the impact of religious faith on attitudes to environmental issues and carbon capture and storage technologies' found out that humans who are religious are slower than humans who are secular in responding to environmental issues. This is because humans who are religious do not see this earth as their own and therefore has tendency to care less about it.

Min (2009), Examined how inter-religious dialogue can help address environmental challenges. He found that the stewardship (Abrahamic traditions) and Eastern (empathy/interconnectedness) models of religion are complimentary and therefore can be jointly used to address the global environmental crisis. Okyere-Manu, Morgan, & Nwosimiri, (2022), in their study on how culture and religious background impacts man's preservation of the environment, found that all religious beliefs share a common ethical call for environmental protection. Mieth (2011), analysed how the concept of God gives man the mentality that he is a co-creator. He found that this concept of co-creator with God imbibed in man, compels him to be responsible to the environment. Also, Ozdemir (2003), submits that man is not the most important entity in the earth planet where all living things and the ecosystem itself are equally significant on Earth. Therefore, the Earth is a trust bestowed on man, consequently protection of the environment is a religious mandate and spiritual responsibility. In a major twist, Capra (2025), in his study on 'Laudato Si': The Pope's Ecological Challenge to Climate Change' found that there is only one socio-environmental crisis impeding the sustainability of the environment. The study concludes that for sustainable development of the earth planet, humans need to start seeing themselves not only as masters of the earth planet but being members of the Earth community and be responsible to it. Santmire (2000), posits that the Holy Bible contains two recurring ideas (earth affirming ecological idea and an earth-denying spiritual idea) and found that Christ's teachings view the Earth as the primary locus of meaning and should therefore be taken care of by man.

White (1967), argued that ever since Judeo-Christian ideology abhors spiritual democracy where all creatures are perceived as equal, man has persistently viewed natural objects as creatures in the environment not having guardian spirits that should be exploited. Therefore, the only solution to environmental crisis is spiritual democracy. The findings of Toynbee (1972), in his study on the religious background of the present environmental crisis, is in tandem with that of White (1967) when he opined that the move away from pantheism (that is God and nature are identical) to Judeo-Christianity gave man the impression that he is created to dominate the earth and therefore has the preserve to exploit it. Therefore, the solution to environmental crisis is not technology alone but a return to the belief that God is in all things rather than a separate entity different from the Earth that can be exploited. Yeide (1987), in his book review of religion and environmental ethics, while acknowledging White (1967) and Toynbee (1972) theses which

hinged environmental crisis on Judeo-Christian tradition, he cautioned against a superficial treatment of religion because religion is a double-edged sword, which moved away from pantheism, but still possesses pro-nature quotes in its scriptures like 'stewardship' - a divine mandate to manage and protect the earth.

The Christian Religious Belief and the UN SDGs

The intersection of Christian religious belief and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) forms an essential subfield within the broader framework of Spiritual Ecology and Eco-Theology. While secular development frameworks historically relied on purely technical, financial, or political mechanisms to enforce the 2030 Agenda, contemporary literature increasingly recognizes that the Christian faith possesses unique institutional infrastructures and a moral substrate capable of driving deep human behavioral change toward a "Living Earth." Scholars argue that authentic Christian stewardship introduces two dimensions to attainment of a living Earth, which are responsibility (managing resources to God's glory) and accountability (the moral necessity to preserve options for future generations). This directly mirrors the secular definition of sustainable development established by the Brundtland Commission (Yakubu, 2024). The release of Pope Francis's landmark encyclical, *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home* (2015), marked a structural shift in how Christian belief integrates with international sustainability targets. Capra (2025) and Du Toit (2024) highlight how *Laudato Si'* bridges the gap between secular targets and religious mandates by introducing the concept of integral ecology. This framework links the "cry of the earth" to the "cry of the poor," establishing a spiritual foundation that directly underpins SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), and SDG 13 (Climate Action).

Despite the effort in aligning the Christian religion to achievement of a living Earth through the UN SDGs, a gap still exists in that most local congregations, in Christian churches sometimes lack explicit spiritual direction regarding technical environmental conservation, occasionally prioritising human-centered charity over holistic ecosystem defense. Conclusively, the literature review reveals that man is God's representative on earth and therefore expected to take care of the earth planet's resources, even though Judeo-Christian ideology does not perceive all natural creatures in the environment as equal and therefore exploited it. It also found that religion supports environmental sustainability. This suggests that religious groups check issues of greed and abuse of the environment. However, the earlier view that religion supports environmental sustainability argued with the view that humans intrinsically value nature without any religious influence. Therefore, the duty of man to protect nature is a consequence of the extent to which we appreciate its beauty and not necessarily religious belief. This submission was also contrasted when it was found out that achievement of environmental protection is tied to sacredness of nature. This mixed results in literature provided the theoretical scaffolding for a framework that addresses the existing fragmentation in literature.

Methodology

This study adopts a descriptive-analytical methodology to discern how religion moderates the achievement of the UN SDGs by 2030. A narrative review is suitable for conceptual papers aiming to develop theoretical insights and propose new frameworks by synthesising findings from diverse sources (Snyder, 2019). This approach enables the identification of significant patterns, gaps, and themes across existing studies without the rigid constraints of systematic reviews. The first step in the narrative review entailed a precise delineation of the research objective and scope, aimed at exploring how religious beliefs influences achievement of the UN SDGs. Subsequently, the Scopus database was used for data collection given its rigorous indexing of elite, peer-reviewed journals and conference papers within the domain of sustainable development.

Formulating a Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this research is underpinned by Spiritual Ecology and Eco-Theology theories, providing a rigorous conceptual foundation for assessing the impact of religion on sustainable development. Spiritual ecology theory (Gottlieb, 2004) posits that the ecological crisis is not just a failure of technology or policy, but a crisis of the human spirit. The key idea of this theory is that there is a spiritual facet to all conservation and environmental issues. This theory supports the argument that the UN SDGs are currently hollow or purely technical, and they require a spiritual ‘core’(the Living Earth Concept) to actually motivate human behaviour change. Eco-Theology theory complements this by suggesting that the earth is a sacred creation, and humans are ‘stewards’ or ‘trustees’ rather than owners (Moltmann, 1985). In application, this provides the moral justification for SDG13 (Climate Action) and SDG 15 (Life on Land). It shifts motivation from saving resources for humans’ to honouring sacred system. This paper, Spiritual Ecology provides the lens for reconceptualising the 2030 Agenda, Eco-theology offers the specific moral framework for integrating these values into the individual targets of the SDGs.

In the conceptual framework developed, religion is conceptualised through the core philosophy: Spiritual Ecology principle of ‘cry of the earth/cry of the poor’ (SDG 1: No poverty, SDG 10: Reduced inequalities) (Gonzalez, 2015; Gottlieb, 2008) and Eco-Theology principle of stewardship and creation care. These attributes support more reliable, the achievement of the 2030 Agenda on environmental protection. This demonstrates how their combined insights provide a powerful mechanism for viewing the UN’s goals through a new lens. The resulting, final state is a conceptual framework, as shown below, that moves beyond sustainability targets and instead strives for a holistic condition of ‘Planetary Flourishing’ and the recognition of a ‘Living Earth Mandate’ by recognising religion as a moderating variable in this regard.

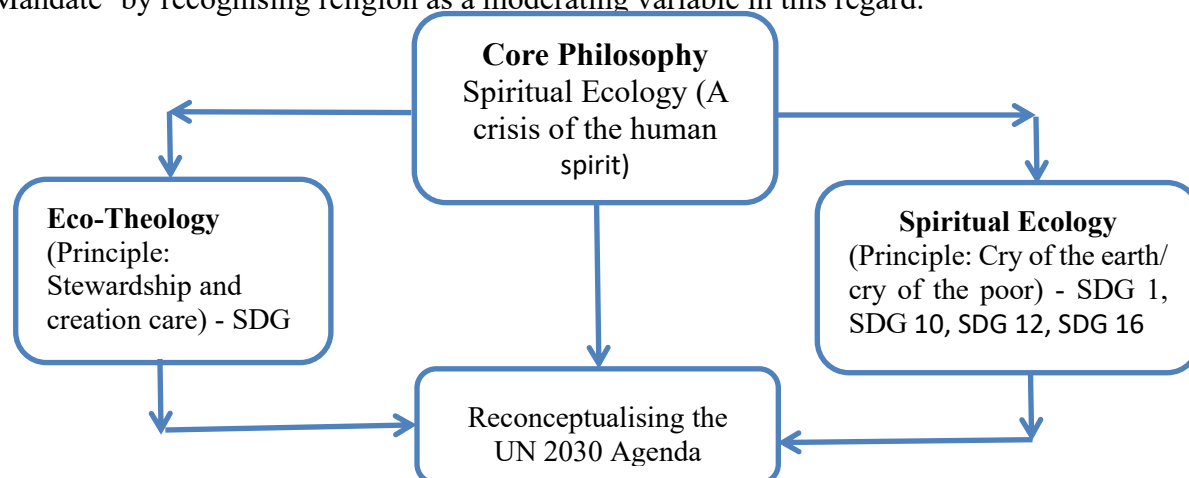


Figure 1: Conceptual framework

In summary, the resulting framework posits that religion plays an important role in achievement of the UN 2030 Agenda. From the theories underpinning this study, the intersectional religious principle, the corresponding SDGs, and the Spiritual Ecology theory with the belief that the Earth is religiously decreed to provide for all, making waste and inequality a violation of divine intent, corresponds with SDGs 1, 10, 12 and 16 (no poverty, reduced inequality, responsible consumption, peace, justice and strong institutions) respectively. The Eco-Theology theory (stewardship) with the belief that keeping the Earth necessitates the protection of life below water and on land, corresponds with SDGs 13, and 15 (climate action and life on land) respectively.

Organisations can address environmental crisis and improve on the achievement of the UN 2030 Agenda by incorporating religious belief such as Christianity in their mandate.

Through the lens of Spiritual Ecology and Eco-Theology theories, religion is conceptualised not as a regulatory tool, but as a catalyst for achievement of the UN 2030 Agenda. This conceptual grounding serves as a prerequisite for empirical scrutiny and the further conceptualisation of religious belief and sustainable development. Guided by the structural logic of this framework, the study postulate that religious beliefs positively influence the achievement of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

Conclusion

As the 2030 deadline for the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals approaches, it is increasingly evident that purely technical, economic, and regulatory mechanisms are insufficient to resolve the global ecological crisis. The narrative review of literature and the reconceptualisation of the 2030 Agenda in this paper, highlights that environmental degradation is fundamentally a crisis of the human spirit, requiring a spiritual "core" to drive genuine behavioral change. By synthesising Spiritual Ecology and Eco-Theology theories, this study bridges historical contradictions in literature and offers a unified framework where religious belief functions as a powerful catalyst for sustainability.

The conceptual framework advanced here establishes the theoretical scaffolding for understanding that, transitioning from a model of resource exploitation to one of planetary flourishing requires human society to embrace a "Living Earth Mandate," viewing environmental stewardship not merely as a policy requirement, but as a sacred obligation.

Future research direction

As efforts by countries, under the UN, to achieve the UN 2030 Agenda continues to evolve, subsequent research should seek to operationalise and empirically examine the relationships delineated in the conceptual framework using a quantitative method within varying national and institutional contexts. A time-series study would reveal the dynamic evolution of religious beliefs and its impact on sustainable development.

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