Review of: Ezra Chitando (ed.). African Perspectives on Religion and Climate Change

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Ezra Chitando is Professor of History and Phenomenology of Religion at the University of Zimbabwe; Ernst M. Conradie is Senior Professor in the Department of Religion and Theology at the University of the Western Cape; and Susan M. Kilonzo is Associate Professor in the Department of Religion and Philosophy at Maseno University, Kenya.

Discussions on climate change, at both political and academic levels, have often focused on scientific explanations and solutions to climate change. Such discussions have mostly been undertaken by and in Western perspectives, with only few African voices. Africa is the continent least responsible for climate change, yet the most affected by climate change (p. 5, citing Welborn 2018: 3). Despite this fact, African voices on climate change have not been adequately heard, and its resources have not been adequately explored and engaged in mitigating climate change. This book, therefore, contributes a unique and formidable African perspective to the climate change discourse and action.

The contributors to this edited volume are from or represent nine African countries, namely: Zimbabwe, Kenya, Eswatini, Uganda, South Africa, Nigeria, Ghana, Zambia, and Botswana. Four religious communities and traditions in Africa form the scope and context of the book: Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and indigenous faiths. The contributions investigate and describe how these religious traditions in Africa influence the worldviews and actions of their respective adherents regarding climate change and the potential for them to make more meaningful contributions.

Moreover, beyond the descriptive framework that dominates the book, the authors also provide a prescriptive framework to the book to the extent that they also "interrogate how the

moral authority and leadership provided by religion can be used to respond and adapt to the challenges posed by climate change" (Preface). The topics covered in this book include mainly risk reduction and resilience, youth movements, indigenous knowledge systems, environmental degradation, gender perspectives, ecological theories, and climate change financing, respectively.

Noting the fact that responses to global emergencies have predominantly focused more on scientific solutions rather than multi-lateral and comprehensive approaches, the book notes the risk of attempting to address the issue of climate change only from the scientific point of view and ignoring the potential of the humanities and religion to make significant contributions. Generally, two perspectives on religion and climate change exist. The first perspective denies the role of religion in finding solutions to climate change issues, seeing religion as a barrier rather than partner to solving climate change issues. The second perspective, to which the authors situate themselves, views religion as an important partner in solving climate change problems, on the basis that climate change problems are man-made rather than natural. The authors of this book are "convinced that religion can be deployed as a resource to respond to climate change in an effective way" (4).

It is also important to note that the authors deviate from the common "dominant narrative of perpetual victimhood to highlight Africa's creativity and agency in the response to the climate emergency" (6). Exploring indigenous African conceptions and worldviews, the book recognizes Ubuntu (an African concept that emphasizes solidarity) as a powerful resource that can be employed in the climate change response. Even though Ubuntu has been most commonly invoked in discussions about human relations, Chitando argues that "Ubuntu is as much about human relations as it is about humanity's interface with nature" (p. 7, citing Chibvongodze 2016). Within the context of Ubuntu, African Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) and its spirituality, which regards creation as sacred, have been used to preserve nature from time immemorial (7).

In terms of structure and content, the book is discernably structured into three thematic parts. The first part contains chapters addressing African Traditional / Indigenous Religions (AT / IR), African Knowledge Systems (IKS), Gender, and Climate Change. In Chapter 1, Tabona Shoko examines IKS with special reference to Zimbabwe, while in Chapter 2, Sonene Nyawo does the same, but with a focus on Eswatini. In Chapter 3, Loreen Maseno and King'asia Mamati reflect on the nexus between indigenous beliefs on the environment and climate change adaptation among the Sengwer in Embobut Forest, Kenya. Lilian C. Siwila provides an African ecofeminist appraisal of the value of indigenous knowledge systems to curbing environmental degradation and climate change in Chapter 4. Susan M. Kilonzo examines the theme of women, IKS, and climate change in Kenya in Chapter 5. All these chapters underscore the importance of AT / IRs and IKS to Africa's response to the climate emergency. The focus on gender also highlights the critical role of women in religion in addressing climate change in Africa.

The main contribution of AT / IR and IKS to climate change is seen in the way Africans have respect for the environment (since in most African cultures, there is a cosmic integration of humans and their environment, because the environment is part of God's dwelling), respect

for and appreciation of the importance of the land, reverence for and preservation of totems,[1] designation and preservation of sacred sites such as sacred waters, forests, mountains (such as the Gonde Malende among the Tonga people of Zambia), climate conservation-related rituals (such as Incwala in Eswatini), and so on.

With specific reference to the Karanga people of Zimbabwe but applicable to other chapters of the book that situate themselves within specific people groups, Tabono Shoko makes a passing comment (in just about 1 page, see 30–31) about the negative effects of traditional religion on climate change, mainly blaming those negative effects on Westernization and Christianity.

The second part of the book contains chapters that discuss the role of various "missionary religions" in Africa in responding to climate change. In Chapter 6, Beatrice Okyere-Manu and Stephen Nkansah Morgan draw attention to the difficulties faced by Ghanaian churches in offering effective responses to climate change. The contributions of mainline churches in Uganda to climate action is the focus of Chapter 7 by David Andrew Omona. George C. Nche reviews the African Catholic reaction to Pope Francis' encyclical, *Laudato Si*, in Chapter 8. Chapter 9 by Damon Mkandawire analyzes the potential of the United Church of Zambia (UCZ) to mobilize young people for climate action. In Chapter 10, Elizabeth P. Motswapong reflects on the less-studied theme of Hinduism and climate change in Africa. In Chapter 11, Hassan J. Ndzovu reports on the contribution of the Islamic Relief Worldwide (IRW) to the climate change response in northeastern Kenya. Together, these chapters indicate the positive role of religion as well as the challenges religious actors face in addressing climate change issues in Africa.

In discussing the perspective of Christianity in Africa on climate change, the authors approach the topic through analyses of context-specific African churches and countries' contributions to climate change in Africa. An example is that of Ghana, where the authors lament how most churches would say, in theory, that Christians are stewards of the environment, but in action, they have not adequately harnessed their potentials and popularity to mobilize their people for climate action, except for the Evangelical Presbyterian Church in Ghana. Similar efforts towards combating the negative effects of climate change in consonance with SDG 13 are reported among the mainline churches (Western missionary founded churches such as Anglican, Catholics, Methodists) in Uganda. George Nche provides a helpful overview of how Catholics in Africa have responded to Pope Francis' 2015 *Laudato Si'* encyclical, noting the commendable efforts of Catholics in Africa to that regard but also the need to do more. The contributions of the United Church of Zambia (UCZ) to climate action through a massive and strategic mobilization of young people is also noted, knowing that young people under the age of 25 form an estimated 60% of Africa's population (p. 11, citing Asiamah, Sambou and Bhoojedhur 2021: 1). The UCZ mobilizes youths for climate action in several ways, among which are: tree planting campaign in their many secondary schools across the country, establishing environmental clubs in schools and organizing environmental summer camps, an

[1] "The totems are an object (such as an animal or a bird) serving as the emblem of a family or clan and often as a reminder of its ancestry" (26), such as lion, elephant, crocodile, python, etc.

establishment of a College of Agriculture, where many youths train in agricultural skills that are ecofriendly and disseminate same knowledge and skills in their local communities.

Even though not so popular except among the Africans of Indian descend mostly in Southern and Eastern Africa, the contributions of Hinduism to climate action are notable. Elizabeth P. Motswapong reports how Hinduism in Africa has and continues to make contributions to climate action through its emphasis on the practical salvation of humans and the Mother Earth. Hassan J. Ndzovu reports that the Islamic Relief Worldwide (IRW), an NGO, has contributed towards climate action in northeastern Kenya by organizing climate awareness campaigns, engaging in dialogue and conflict resolution for restoration of peace in the conflict-ridden area, and so on.

The third and final part of the book contains chapters that focus on emerging themes in the study of religion and climate change in Africa. Joram Tarusarira and Damaris S. Parsitau explore the religio-spiritual and sacred dimensions of conflicts associated with climate change in Africa in Chapter 12. In Chapter 13, Veronica N. Gundu-Jakarasi offers perspectives on religious leaders and climate change financing in Africa. The concluding chapter (Chapter 14), by Ernst Conradie, reopens the discourse on religion and climate change by showing the complexity of the subject matter, thereby inviting further reflections and perspective sharing towards mitigating the negative effects of climate change.

Having given an insight into the structure, content and main thesis of the book above, it is helpful at this point to make some critical remarks, as follows:

This book is timely, relevant, and true to its word in the way that it is not African just because it is written by African scholars, but it is African because it adequately explores, reflects on and engages indigenous and non-indigenous African traditions, religions, cultures, resources, and conceptions in both descriptive and prescriptive ways. The book finds its relevance and urgency in the fact that, Africa, according to Inter-Governmental Panel on Climate Change's (IPCC) Fourth Assessment Report (AR4), is the continent not only most vulnerable to, but most affected by climate change: "Although it is the continent least responsible for climate change, Africa is home to some of the world's harshest climates and most vulnerable populations" (p. 5, citing Welborn 2018: 3). This is why it is praiseworthy that the authors do not approach the discourse from a neutral ideological position, but from an active and participatory position. Moreover, it is also commendable that almost all the authors specifically indicate their attempts to contribute to achieving the SDG 13 (Climate Action), thereby giving clarity of purpose as well as unity to the book. Furthermore, one important feature of the book is that it does not only deal with written literature, but includes chapters that employ empirical methods that collected data directly from the people through interviews and focused group discussions, thereby giving concrete local perspectives to climate change.

Despite the positive qualities of the book as described above, it is not without some weaknesses, which can be stated as follows: First, in my opinion, blaming the negative effects of climate change in Africa on Westernization and Christianity, as noted above, plays into the "activist mode" of a significantly large portion of African scholarship, especially the ones that seek to promote AT / IR. Such endeavors seem to uncritically eulogize AT / IR to a near-perfect religious and cultural lifestyle without giving due attention to the ills therein. The

temptation to project a perfect AT / IR is understandable, given the history of colonialism and dominance of foreign religions on the African continent (Christianity and Islam) at the expense of AT / IR. However, any attempt to recover or promote AT / IR or indigenous culture that ignores its own inherent shortcomings and tendency to hamper human flourishing or eco-flourishing is deficient and counter-productive. Credit, however, must be given to Suzan M. Kilonzo who clearly identifies the patriarchal and other subjugating practices (such as exclusion from land ownership among the Maasai people of Kenya) against women in African indigenous cultures (87f.).

Second, while preservation of sacred sites helps in climate preservation, the problem with considering the promotion of sacred sites as climate action, in my emic perspective, is the limiting and counter-productive effects of such an enterprise. A typical AT / IR normally has only few designated locations as sacred sites, and only few designated animals as sacred animals. However, what is needed to combat climate change is a designation of the entire nature or cosmos as sacred site, which, however, would contradict the African conception of a sacred site and make it meaningless. If every place in a village, for example, is a sacred site, then no place is a sacred site. Hence, the "sacred site" argument as a climate action in Africa is limiting and has the potential to be counter-productive to the extent that only the few sites are to be preserved as sacred while majority of natural sites are not to be preserved. There needs to be an IKS that does not understand preservation of sacred sites to mean the freedom to desecrate other "non-sacred" sites, as is commonly seen, for example, in bush-burning and indiscriminate hunting and similar activities that are harmful to the ecosystem.

Third, even though the authors have correctly noted that they could not cover the perspectives of African Pentecostals, African Indigenous Churches, Rastafari and members of younger religions on the continent to climate change (6), it is necessary to point out that this omission is a major weakness of the book. With Pentecostalism being currently the most popular Christian tradition in Africa, a discourse on religious perspectives to climate change in Africa that does not pay particular attention to the perspectives of Pentecostalism misses out on the most popular perspective. This is a costly omission.

Fourth, another noticeable weakness of this book is its inadequate representation or an underestimation of the presence and influence of Islam on the African continent, such that only one paper is dedicated to Islam. Most of the chapters of the book ooze out the impression that the dominant religious influence on the continent is Christianity. While this might be true, it cannot be said arbitrarily without coherent research that suggests so. The authors' background, mostly from Southern and Eastern Africa where Christianity is evidently more domination than Islam or AT / IRs, makes them to underestimate the influence of Islam on the continent. For example, Chitando says "While the dominance of Christian formulations is likely to continue in the near future due to the influence of Christianity on African theology and religious studies…, there is a need to embrace a broader perspective" (12). Similarly, due to his Eastern African context where Islam is not so dominant, Chitando accuses only Christian leaders of marginalizing AT / IRs from climate change processes (p. 9, citing Taringa 2014: 11 as an example). However, viewed from a Northern Nigerian perspective or from an African context where Islam is more dominant than Christianity, this accusation can be re-

versed. A more robust engagement with various Islamic sects from an Islam-dominated African country would have strengthened the book.

An important caveat to note is that the IKS and AT / IR practices (e.g. sacred places, taboos, evil forests, etc.) that are proposed as helpful for climate action in Africa are no longer practiced in many parts of Africa due to the presence and impact of missionary religions, colonialism, and Westernization. So, the question to ask is, are the authors being simply nostalgic in this regard or proposing a return to AT / IR?