

Creation in Changing Landscapes

Kuzipa Nalwamba¹

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Personal Location and viewpoint

I was raised in Zambia, Southern Africa, at a time when much of the natural environment bore very little human footprint. At primary school I belonged to the *Chongololo Club*², a national children's programme for nature conservation, which imprinted on my young mind the awareness that animals and other living things, organic and inorganic, deserved their own 'space'. My paternal grandmother's enchanted stories cemented a sense of awe and reverence for creation.

At a more conscious level, later life, the ever-increasing evidence of environmental degradation in my environment is hard to ignore. Rivers and streams that were once pristine are either choked with plastic, mud-choked or dried up because of deforestation and overgrazing. Having lived in the Copperbelt province, the mineral extraction and refining region of Zambia, I have witnessed and experienced the effects of air and water pollution resulting from mining activities. The profit-driven contamination and deforestation by international and local extractive industries is an existential eco-justice issue.

I am an African (Zambian) middle-aged woman, university-educated, raised socially (but not economically) middle class, with a Reformed/Uniting/Evangelical Christian upbringing. My foundational theological education was acquired in Asia (Singapore) and later in South Africa. I live with influences from those social locations and I am part of the diverse interpretive communities, with the contested influences and identities entailed.

1. Introduction

The doctrine of creation is foundational to Christian theology. From the opening chapters of Genesis, the Bible affirms God as the Creator of all things, setting the stage for a relationship between the Creator and creation. However, in an era marked by unprecedented environmental, cultural, and technological shifts, our understanding of creation must also evolve. These "new landscapes," both literal and metaphorical, challenge us to revisit and expand our theological reflections on creation. As the world changes around us, the timeless truths of Scripture must be re-examined and applied to these emerging contexts.

How does the concept of creation interact with these new landscapes such as the physical transformations of our planet, the cultural shifts that redefine human identity and community, and the technological advancements that alter our relationship with the created world? What are the missiological implications of the reflections that ensue, and how can churches engage with, and respond to these changes in mission?

Ultimately, these questions beg for a robust theology of creation that is dynamic and capable of engaging with the complexities of the contemporary world. It must affirm God's ongoing creative activity while calling

¹ Kuzipa Nalwamba currently serves as WCC Programme Director for Unity, Mission and Ecumenical Formation and as adjunct professor at Bossey Ecumenical Institute. She is ordained in the United Church of Zambia.

² *Chongololo* is the name of the millipede in at least three Zambian languages. Millipedes were (are they still?) very commonplace during rainy seasons in Zambia and they tended to be trampled without regard for their role in the ecosystem. The name of our club made us children stop and really look at millipedes and appreciate their role in the rhythm of life.

us to responsibly participate in the shaping of these new landscapes. The doctrine of creation remains a vibrant and vital underpinning for the Christian faith in an ever-changing world.

2. Biblical Understanding of Creation

The biblical narrative of creation, found primarily in the first two chapters of Genesis, provides the foundational framework for understanding the relationship between God, humanity, and the world. In Genesis 1, the creation story unfolds in a structured and orderly manner, with God speaking the universe into existence over six days. Each day represents a phase of creation, beginning with light and culminating in the creation of humanity. Genesis 2 offers a more intimate account, focusing on the creation of Adam and Eve and their placement in the Garden of Eden. Together, these chapters highlight several key theological themes: the orderliness of creation, the inherent goodness of the created world, and the unique role of humanity as bearers of the *Imago Dei*, the image of God (Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 45).

One of the central themes in the Genesis account is the idea of creation as bringing order out of chaos. In the beginning, the earth is described as “formless and void,” but through God’s creative word, chaos is transformed into a cosmos filled with life, beauty, and purpose (Fretheim, *God and World in the Old Testament*, 78). This theme of order is reinforced by the repetitive structure of the creation narrative, where each day of creation follows a pattern of command, execution, and evaluation—“And God said... And it was so... And God saw that it was good” (Fretheim, *God and World in the Old Testament*, 80). The goodness of creation is a recurring affirmation in the text, emphasizing that the world, as created by God, is not just functional but also intrinsically valuable (Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 47).

Humanity holds a special place within this creation. Made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27), humans are given dominion over the earth, tasked with cultivating and caring for it. This role reflects both privilege and responsibility, suggesting that to be human is to participate in God’s creative work. This stewardship is not an exploitative dominion but a caring and nurturing one, as demonstrated in Genesis 2:15, where Adam is placed in the Garden “to till it and keep it” (Fretheim, *God and World in the Old Testament*, 95).

The biblical understanding of creation also extends beyond the initial act of creation. Throughout Scripture, creation is depicted as an ongoing process, with God continually sustaining and renewing the world. Psalm 104, for instance, celebrates God’s providential care for all creatures, while John 1:1-3 speaks of Christ as the eternal Word through whom all things were made (Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 109). These passages suggest that creation is not merely a past event but a present reality, with God continually involved in the unfolding of the cosmos.

The biblical narrative therefore provides a rich and multifaceted understanding of creation, emphasizing order, goodness, and humanity’s role. These themes guide our reflections on changing physical and cultural landscapes while grounding the church’s mission in a theology that is rooted in Scripture and remains responsive to the complexities of our world.

3. Creation and Changing Physical Landscapes

The natural world is undergoing profound changes, many of which are unprecedented in human history. Climate change, deforestation, biodiversity loss, and pollution are reshaping the physical landscapes of our planet. These environmental crises are not just scientific or political issues; they are deeply theological concerns that challenge us to reconsider our understanding of creation and our role within it (Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, 19).

The environmental challenges of our time can be seen as new physical landscapes, calling for a renewed theological engagement with the doctrine of creation. In the face of these changes, many theologians and Christian communities have turned to eco-theology, a field that integrates ecological awareness with theological reflection. Eco-theology emphasizes the interconnectedness of all life and the sacredness of the natural world. It challenges the anthropocentric view that humanity is the center of creation, instead

promoting a vision of the earth as a community of creation, where all living beings have intrinsic value (Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, 35).

One of the most significant theological contributions to the discussion of creation and the environment is Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si'*. In this document, Pope Francis calls for an "ecological conversion," urging humanity to recognize the earth as our common home and to take action against environmental degradation. He argues that the current ecological crisis is rooted in a distorted understanding of human dominion over nature, which has led to exploitation and destruction. Instead, Pope Francis advocates for a model of stewardship based on care, respect, and solidarity with all of creation (Francis, *Laudato Si'*, 12).

From a biblical perspective, the command to "till and keep" the garden (Genesis 2:15) implies a responsibility to care for the earth, preserving its integrity and ensuring its flourishing. This stewardship is not just a practical duty but a spiritual one, reflecting our relationship with the Creator. When we fail to care for creation, we not only harm the environment but also disrupt our relationship with God and with one another (Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, 47).

The concept of humanity as co-creators with God is particularly relevant in addressing these new physical landscapes. Co-creation emphasizes that while God is the ultimate Creator, humans have been given the ability and responsibility to participate in the ongoing work of creation. This participation involves not only using the earth's resources wisely but also restoring and healing the damage that has been done (Hinga, *African, Christian, Feminist*, 103). In this sense, creation is a dynamic and relational process, involving both divine and human action.

Moreover, the environmental crisis highlights the importance of viewing creation eschatologically, that is, in light of God's ultimate purposes for the world. Christian eschatology teaches that creation is moving towards a future where all things will be renewed and restored in Christ (Revelation 21:1-5). This vision of a new heaven and a new earth provides hope and direction for our efforts to care for creation. It reminds us that our actions in the present have eternal significance and that the work of environmental stewardship is part of God's redemptive plan (Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 146).

In conclusion, the new physical landscapes of environmental change call for a deepening of our theological understanding of creation. As we face the challenges of climate change, biodiversity loss, and environmental degradation, we are invited to rediscover the biblical themes of stewardship, co-creation, and eschatological hope. By doing so, we can respond faithfully to the pressing ecological issues of our time, honoring the Creator by caring for the creation entrusted to us.

4. Creation in Cultural and Technological Landscapes

As the world evolves, so too do the cultural and technological landscapes that shape human life. These shifts present new challenges and opportunities for understanding creation and for the church's mission. From the rise of secularism to the advent of artificial intelligence, these developments require us to rethink traditional theological concepts and consider how they apply to a rapidly changing world. A missiological reflection on these cultural landscapes involves considering how the theology of creation informs the church's engagement with these contexts (Escobar, *The New Global Mission*, 85).

4.1 Contextualization: Incarnating the Gospel in Diverse Cultures

Contextualization is central to mission, and the doctrine of creation provides a robust theological foundation for this practice. Recognizing that all cultures are part of God's creation challenges us to approach each cultural landscape with respect and humility. Since God is the Creator of all people, every culture reflects aspects of God's creativity and image, even in its brokenness (Gutiérrez, *The Power of the Poor in History*, 42).

This means that the gospel must be communicated in ways that resonate with the specific cultural contexts we encounter. Effective mission work requires an appreciation of the unique values, symbols, and narratives of each culture, discerning where they align with or diverge from the biblical narrative of creation, fall,

redemption, and restoration. The doctrine of creation supports the idea that cultural diversity is not a problem to be solved but a gift to be embraced as it reflects the manifold wisdom of God (Ephesians 3:10).

Kwame Bediako's reflections on the African experience of the Gospel highlight how cultural contexts shape a distinctive understanding of Christ and mission. Bediako emphasizes that African cultural identities, rather than being obstacles, can deepen the church's understanding of the Gospel (Bediako, "Jesus and the Gospel in Africa," 48).

In practice, this approach encourages listening deeply to the cultures missional activities engage, learning to see how God is already at work within them. By doing so, the church faithfully embodies the gospel in ways that are both faithful to Scripture and meaningful to the local context, avoiding cultural imperialism while fostering authentic discipleship.

4.2 Stewardship of Cultural Diversity: Nurturing God's Creative Work

Just as the physical environment requires careful stewardship, so too does cultural diversity. Every culture carries within it a distinct expression of God's creative intent, contributing to the rich tapestry of humanity. From a missiological perspective, this diversity is something to be celebrated and nurtured, rather than homogenized or dismissed (Miguez Bonino, "Mission and Context," 100).

In mission, this translates into valuing and preserving cultural identities within the global church. The doctrine of creation affirms that cultural differences are part of God's good creation, intended to enrich the human experience. Thus, the church's mission involves not just the proclamation of the gospel but also the protection and promotion of cultural diversity as a reflection of God's creativity (Padilla DeBorst, "Integral Mission and Creation Care," 330).

Ruth Padilla DeBorst emphasizes that integral mission and creation care are inseparable, particularly in Latin America, where cultural diversity is a vital aspect of community life. She argues that the church must engage in mission that honors and preserves the cultural distinctiveness of each community, reflecting the richness of God's creation (Padilla DeBorst, "Integral Mission and Creation Care," 332). This perspective encourages churches and mission organizations to engage in cultural preservation, particularly in contexts where globalization threatens to erode local traditions and languages. It also calls for the development of indigenous expressions of Christian faith that honor and integrate cultural elements, fostering a truly global and diverse body of Christ.

4.3 Prophetic Witness: Challenging Idolatry and Injustice in Cultural Landscapes

The doctrine of creation also empowers the church to offer a prophetic witness within cultural landscapes, particularly in confronting idolatry and injustice. In every culture, there are elements that reflect the goodness of creation and others that distort it. Missiologically, the church is called to discern these elements, affirming what aligns with God's kingdom and challenging what does not (Nalwamba, "Ubuntu and Earthkeeping," 3).

In contemporary cultural landscapes, this might involve addressing the idolization of technology, consumerism, nationalism, or any other ideology that elevates creation above the Creator. The church's mission includes calling cultures back to their intended purpose as part of God's creation, resisting the dehumanizing forces that arise when creation is divorced from its Creator. For example, in a culture that prioritizes material wealth over human dignity, the church must prophetically advocate for justice and the inherent worth of every individual (Nalwamba and Conradie, "An African Earthkeeping Ethic," 171).

This prophetic role also involves challenging systems of injustice that exploit and harm both people and the environment. By grounding its mission in the doctrine of creation, the church can offer a compelling vision of human flourishing that opposes the destructive forces of sin, whether they manifest in environmental degradation, economic exploitation, or social oppression. In doing so, the church reflects the redemptive purpose of God's creation, pointing toward the ultimate renewal of all things in Christ.

4.4 Technology and Creation: Navigating New Frontiers

Technological advancements, particularly in the fields of artificial intelligence, biotechnology, and digital media, also present new landscapes for theological reflection. These technologies are reshaping what it means to be human and challenging traditional notions of creation. For example, the development of AI raises questions about the nature of consciousness, the uniqueness of human beings, and the ethical implications of creating machines that can learn and make decisions. Similarly, advances in biotechnology, such as genetic engineering, force us to consider the boundaries of human creativity and the moral limits of manipulating life (Escobar, *The New Global Mission*, 101).

In these new technological landscapes, the theological concept of *Imago Dei*—the belief that humans are made in the image of God—takes on renewed significance. The *Imago Dei* affirms the inherent dignity and worth of every person, regardless of technological augmentation or genetic modification. It also underscores the responsibility that comes with being created in God's image, particularly in the realm of technology. As co-creators with God, we are called to use our technological abilities in ways that honor the Creator and promote the flourishing of all creation (Nalwamba, "Ubuntu and Earthkeeping," 5).

Moreover, the rise of digital culture, with its emphasis on virtual reality and social media, challenges traditional understandings of community and embodiment. In a digital age, relationships are increasingly mediated through screens, and the line between the virtual and the real is becoming blurred. This raises important theological questions about the nature of presence, the significance of the body, and the role of community in God's creation. Theologically, this landscape invites us to explore how the doctrine of creation can inform our understanding of digital culture and how we can embody Christian virtues in online spaces (Miguez Bonino, "Mission and Context," 102).

In conclusion, the cultural and technological landscapes of the 21st century offer both challenges and opportunities for theological reflection on creation and for the church's mission. By integrating the themes of contextualization, stewardship of cultural diversity, and prophetic witness, the church can engage these landscapes with a theology of creation that is both grounded in Scripture and responsive to contemporary issues. In doing so, the church bears witness to the enduring truth of God's creative work and participates in God's mission to redeem and renew all creation.

5. Creation in a Postmodern World

Postmodernism, characterized by its skepticism of grand narratives and emphasis on relativism, presents unique challenges to the doctrine of creation. In a postmodern context, the idea of a singular, overarching narrative of creation is often questioned or rejected in favor of multiple, competing narratives. This fragmentation can lead to a sense of disorientation and uncertainty, making it difficult to sustain a coherent theological vision of creation (Tanner, "Creation, Environmental Crisis, and Ecological Activism," 174).

One of the key challenges of postmodernism is its rejection of objective truth claims. In a postmodern framework, truth is seen as subjective, contingent, and culturally constructed. This perspective can undermine the traditional Christian claim that God is the Creator of all things and that creation has a divinely ordained purpose. Without a shared foundation of truth, the theological narrative of creation risks being reduced to just one story among many, with no special authority or significance (Bauckham, "Ecological Hope in Crisis," 81).

However, postmodernism also provides an opportunity to rethink and reconstruct the doctrine of creation in ways that resonate with contemporary sensibilities. One approach is to embrace the postmodern emphasis on diversity and plurality by highlighting the richness and variety of the biblical creation accounts. For instance, the two creation narratives in Genesis offer different but complementary perspectives on God's creative work, reminding us that creation is a multifaceted and mysterious reality that cannot be fully captured by a single narrative (Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 52).

Another way to engage with postmodernism is to emphasize the relational and communal aspects of creation. In a fragmented world, the doctrine of creation offers a vision of unity and interconnectedness, grounded in the belief that all things are created by God and held together in Christ (Colossians 1:16-17). This vision challenges the isolation and individualism of postmodern culture, calling us to live in harmony with one another and with the earth (Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 160).

Furthermore, the eschatological dimension of creation offers a powerful counter-narrative to postmodern pessimism. While postmodernism often leads to a sense of nihilism or despair, the Christian doctrine of creation points to a future of hope and renewal. The promise of a new creation, where all things will be made new (Revelation 21:5), is a foundation for hope in the midst of uncertainty and fragmentation (Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, 60).

In conclusion, while postmodernism challenges traditional views of creation, it also opens up new possibilities for theological reflection. By engaging with postmodern ideas in a thoughtful and creative way, we can develop a doctrine of creation that speaks to the complexities of the contemporary world, offering a vision of unity, purpose, and hope in a fragmented age.

The witness and wisdom of traditional cultures that live with a sense of the cosmic community of which humans are a part, is instructive in this regard.

6. Case Studies from the Global South

In Latin America, the *eco-theology* movement has emerged as a significant force in the church's response to environmental issues. Rooted in liberation theology, eco-theology emphasizes the interconnectedness of social justice and environmental care. One example is the work of the Catholic Church in Brazil, which has been at the forefront of advocating for the rights of indigenous peoples and the preservation of the Amazon rainforest. This movement draws on both biblical teachings and indigenous spiritualities, offering a model of mission that is both contextually relevant and ecologically conscious.

In Africa, the concept of *Earth-keeping* has gained prominence, particularly in Southern Africa. Earth-keeping theology emphasizes the role of the church in promoting sustainable practices and advocating for environmental justice. This approach is rooted in both African traditional religions and Christian teachings, reflecting deep reverence for, and interconnectedness of God's creation. The South African Council of Churches, for example, has been active in promoting environmental awareness and sustainable development, linking these efforts to the broader mission of the church, with a strong interfaith dimension, in the work of Southern African Faith Communities' Environment Institute (SAFCEI). SAFCEI is active in a number of Southern African countries and brings together African Traditional Healers, Baha'i, Buddhist, Indigenous faiths, Hindu, Muslim, Jewish, Rastafarian, Quaker, various Christian denominations and others.³

Daneel highlights how African Independent Churches (AICs) have integrated environmental stewardship into their religious practices, emphasizing a holistic approach to mission that includes the care of creation as a vital component" (Daneel, *African Earthkeepers*, 45).

The changing landscapes of creation present both challenges and opportunities for missiology. By drawing on the rich theological and cultural traditions of the Global South, missiologists can develop a holistic approach to mission that addresses the spiritual, social, and environmental dimensions of life. This essay has explored how creation, in its broadest sense, is understood and engaged with in the context of changing landscapes, highlighting the vital contributions of Global South theologians and missiologists. As the global church continues to grapple with the realities of environmental change, these insights will be crucial for developing a mission that is faithful to the gospel and responsive to the needs of the world.

³ For more information see: <https://safcei.org/faiths> (accessed 18 August 2024).

7. Conclusion

The doctrine of creation is not just a relic of the past but a living and dynamic aspect of Christian theology that continues to speak to the present and future. The concept of creation must be re-examined and rearticulated in light of the new landscapes we face —whether they be environmental, cultural, technological, or philosophical. These new landscapes challenge us to expand our understanding of creation and to engage with contemporary issues in ways that are faithful to the biblical witness while responsive to the realities of our time.

In a world marked by rapid change and uncertainty, the doctrine of creation offers a stable foundation and a source of hope. It reminds us that the world is not a product of chance or chaos but a gift from a loving Creator who continues to sustain and renew all things. At the same time, it calls us to take seriously our role as stewards of creation, co-creators with God, and participants in the unfolding drama of redemption.

Andrew Walls articulates the tension between the 'indigenizing principle,' which allows the gospel to take root in diverse cultures (read: changing landscapes), and the 'pilgrim principle,' which reminds Christians of their ultimate allegiance to Christ above any cultural identity (Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, 7).

As we move forward, we must embrace a theology of creation that is both grounded and adaptive, capable of addressing the challenges of new physical, cultural, and technological landscapes. By doing so, we can bear witness to the enduring truth of God's creative work and our place within it, offering a vision of hope and purpose in an ever-changing world. In this way, the doctrine of creation remains a vital and relevant part of Christian faith, guiding us as we navigate the complexities of the 21st century and beyond.

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