

Research Article

Eco-Hermeneutics and Scriptural Interpretation: Reimagining Sacred Texts for an Environmental Theology of Care

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Abstract: This study explores the application of eco-hermeneutics, an interdisciplinary approach combining ecological thought and scriptural interpretation, to sacred texts such as the Bible, Quran, and Vedas. Eco-hermeneutics seeks to reinterpret traditional religious teachings to emphasize ecological responsibility, interconnectedness, and the moral obligation of humans to protect the environment. The analysis identifies key ecological themes within sacred scriptures, including creation care, stewardship, and the intrinsic value of nature. Interviews with theologians and environmental ethicists provide practical insights into how eco-hermeneutical interpretations can be applied in contemporary religious contexts, offering a fresh perspective on environmental ethics rooted in religious teachings. This approach challenges anthropocentric views, which have historically positioned humans as dominators of nature, and instead advocates for an ecocentric understanding of the environment. The findings highlight the potential of eco-hermeneutics to inspire faith-based responses to the ecological crises, urging religious communities to adopt these interpretations to foster environmental stewardship. However, challenges and resistance from traditional religious communities are identified, particularly concerning entrenched views on human supremacy over nature. The study also explores the implications of eco-hermeneutics for religious education, suggesting that its integration into religious curricula could promote a theology of care and responsibility toward the environment. The paper concludes by calling for further research on the practical applications of eco-hermeneutics, particularly in how these teachings can be incorporated into religious practices and community actions, contributing to global sustainability efforts.

Keywords: Eco-Hermeneutics; Ecological Responsibility; Sacred Texts; Religious Communities; Environmental Ethics.

Received: November 20, 2024

Revised: December 10, 2024

Accepted: January 18, 2025

Published: January 30, 2025

Curr. Ver.: January 30, 2025



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1. Introduction

The environmental crisis facing the world today has led to an increasing recognition of the need for a theological framework that incorporates ecological ethics (Ayres, 2017). This article explores how traditional hermeneutical methods, which have long been used to interpret sacred texts, can be adapted to address pressing environmental concerns (Tatay, 2024). Hermeneutics, the science of interpretation, has primarily been concerned with understanding religious scriptures. However, by integrating ecological perspectives into theological interpretations, this approach seeks to promote a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness between humanity and nature, ultimately fostering a more responsible and caring attitude towards the environment (Bali, 2021; Copeland, 2021).

The primary objective of this article is to reimagine sacred texts as foundations for an environmental theology of care and responsibility. Through the lens of ecological hermeneutics, sacred texts can be reinterpreted to emphasize the intrinsic value of nature and the moral imperative for humans to protect and sustain the environment. This approach involves identifying ecological themes within sacred texts, such as the anthropogenic and spiritual aspects of the environment found in the New Testament Gospels (Garciau &

Zervas, 2018). Additionally, new interpretative methods like ecomimetic interpretation, which involves identifying with non-human characters in sacred texts, can bridge ecological hermeneutics with other theological inquiries (Copeland, 2021). Moreover, integrating contemporary scientific insights into theological ethics ensures that these ecological readings are both relevant and coherent with current ecological and biological knowledge (Imran, 2024).

The importance of developing such a theological framework cannot be overstated. The current environmental crisis demands a shift in ethical frameworks to include ecological concerns, encouraging virtues such as humility, respect, and responsibility (Ayres, 2017). Traditional religious interpretations have often been anthropocentric, contributing to the degradation of the environment. By reimagining sacred texts through an ecological lens, these anthropocentric views can be challenged, fostering a more harmonious relationship with nature (Tatay, 2024). Additionally, the integration of interfaith and interdisciplinary approaches can offer a more comprehensive and effective solution to ecological issues, enabling collaboration between different religious traditions and scientific disciplines (Chapman, 2019; Kiem, 2024).

In practical terms, the article also aims to highlight how theological insights can be integrated into everyday life, such as through educational approaches that cultivate an "earth-honoring faith" (Bali, 2021). This approach not only addresses the ecological crisis but also promotes a broader ethical framework that guides human interaction with the natural world.

2. Literature Review

Hermeneutical Theory

Hermeneutics, traditionally the art of interpreting sacred texts, has evolved over centuries, adapting to new cultural, historical, and philosophical contexts. Early hermeneutical approaches focused on understanding biblical texts within religious contexts. Pre-modern hermeneutics, for example, was predominantly implicit, often extending the interpretation of scripture to interpret the world through a biblical lens (Oeming, 2017). This framework was foundational for interpreting both the sacred and the secular, providing a theological understanding of human existence in relation to the divine. Classical hermeneutics later emerged, emphasizing the importance of understanding the historical and cultural context of scriptures, incorporating Jewish midrashic traditions and early Confucian dialogical methods (Liang, 2019).

Philosophical hermeneutics, significantly developed in the German tradition by scholars such as Heidegger, Bultmann, and Gadamer, introduced the notion that interpretations are not singular but are shaped by multiple perspectives and contexts (Oeming, 2017). These thinkers highlighted the role of context in interpreting texts, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of religious scriptures that could adapt to evolving societal contexts. Modern hermeneutical approaches, such as Aurobindonian and Ricoeurian hermeneutics, seek to integrate both traditional and modern methods. Aurobindonian hermeneutics emphasizes interpretive charity and openness to transformative possibilities (Medhananda, 2021), while Ricoeur's work focuses on the referential intention of poetic texts, providing productive reading strategies for biblical interpretation (Oeming, 2017). Contemporary hermeneutics further explores the role of community, narrative, and tradition in shaping interpretations, and calls for dialogue with secular accounts of meaning (Leese, 2019).

Eco-Theology

Eco-theology has developed as an interdisciplinary field, integrating historical, ethical, scientific, and religious perspectives to address the ecological crisis (Leese, 2019). It encompasses a variety of approaches, from ecologically sensitive Christian humanism to radical re-envisioning of human roles within creation (Richie, 2014). Central to eco-theology is the recognition that humanity must redefine its relationship with the environment, as traditional anthropocentric views have contributed to environmental degradation. Eco-theology engages with multiple disciplines, including environmental philosophy, ecofeminism, and liberation theology, to address ecological concerns through a theological lens (Leese, 2019).

Some eco-theological perspectives, such as the Wesleyan-Pentecostal tradition, engage with classic doctrines to offer practical responses to environmental challenges. This activist approach connects faith with action, urging believers to act responsibly in the face of ecological degradation (Richie, 2014). Through these perspectives, eco-theology calls for a theological and ethical commitment to ecological responsibility, stressing the importance of caring for creation.

Environmental Interpretations of Scripture

Over the past several decades, scriptural interpretations have increasingly engaged with ecological concerns. Catholic ecological hermeneutics, particularly within the context of Pope Francis's encyclical *Laudato Si'*, exemplifies a shift towards sustainability in scriptural readings (Tatay, 2024). The Catholic Church, along with Jewish and Muslim traditions, has reinterpreted sacred texts to address ecological issues, adapting interpretations to new cultural and linguistic contexts (Cohen & Berlin, 2016).

Ecological hermeneutics, a more recent development in scriptural studies, challenges anthropocentric readings of sacred texts, offering a more ecocritical interpretation of scripture. This approach promotes readings that prioritize ecological relationships and care for creation, rather than human dominance over nature. Scholars also revisit problematic texts, such as the story of Noah in Genesis, through an ecological lens to provide spiritual resources for addressing the climate crisis (Ibita, 2020). This interdisciplinary approach, combining ecocriticism with religious ecology, has emerged as a vital tool for interpreting sacred texts in a way that informs contemporary ecological consciousness (Leese, 2019; Woolf, 2019).

Philosophical Frameworks for Ecological Ethics

Philosophical frameworks for ecological ethics provide the theoretical foundations for addressing environmental challenges and guiding human interaction with nature. These frameworks emphasize the intrinsic value of nature, the responsibility of humans as caretakers of the Earth, and the principles of sustainability necessary for ensuring long-term ecological health.

One prominent philosophical movement in ecological ethics is Deep Ecology, which emphasizes the inherent value of all living beings and the interconnectedness of life. This perspective calls for a profound shift in human consciousness to recognize nature's worth beyond its utilitarian value to humans (Krohling & Silva, 2019). Deep Ecology advocates for the development of sustainability models that prioritize ecological balance over economic growth, promoting a worldview of "interbeing" in which the well-being of all life forms is interconnected (Olausson, 2024). The movement emphasizes the need for a transformative understanding of human roles within ecosystems, seeking to align human practices with the natural world's rhythms.

Another key ethical framework is Stewardship, which is rooted in both religious and ethical traditions. Stewardship asserts that humans have a responsibility to manage and care for the environment, viewing this responsibility as a moral duty to protect and sustain natural resources for future generations (Sarkar, 2014). In practice, stewardship frameworks are applied to managing fragile ecosystems, such as alpine grasslands, integrating resilience and adaptive management strategies to address environmental challenges (Zhou, 2024). This ethical approach has particular influence in Christian and religious contexts, where caring for creation is seen as a vital human responsibility.

Finally, the concept of Sustainability focuses on meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It encompasses economic, social, and environmental dimensions, aiming to achieve a balance that ensures long-term ecological health and human well-being (Bol et al., 2023). Philosophical discussions on sustainability often involve balancing natural values with cultural and economic considerations, and this framework calls for an ethical approach that integrates environmental care with socio-economic systems to promote sustainable, holistic development (Lenart, 2020).

Key Authors, Works in Eco-Hermeneutics and Eco-Theology

Several key thinkers have significantly contributed to eco-hermeneutics and eco-theology, enriching the discourse on how religious and philosophical interpretations of scripture and nature can inform ecological ethics. Arne Naess, the founder of the Deep

Ecology movement, emphasized the intrinsic value of nature and the need for a profound ecological consciousness. His work has been instrumental in promoting the philosophical shift that recognizes the interconnectedness of all life forms (Krohling & Silva, 2019). Hans Jonas, known for his "principle of responsibility," argued for an ethics of the future that considers the long-term impacts of human actions on the environment. Jonas's work in ecological ethics urges humanity to consider the consequences of its actions for future generations, particularly in relation to environmental degradation (Sarkar, 2014).

Ulrich Beck's theory of ecological risk highlights the global and interconnected nature of environmental hazards, advocating for precautionary and preventive measures to address environmental risks that transcend national borders and affect all living beings (Barbosa-Fohrmann et al., 2016). Norman Habel, the founder of the Earth Bible Project, focuses on reinterpreting biblical texts to promote environmental ethics and awareness. His work in ecological hermeneutics emphasizes the need to reinterpret scripture in ways that foster environmental stewardship and responsibility (Basart, 2021).

Lynn White Jr.'s seminal 1967 article critiqued Western Christianity for contributing to the environmental crisis, sparking significant discourse in eco-theology. His critique continues to influence discussions on the theological foundations of environmental degradation (Birkler, 2023). Sallie McFague, a prominent eco-theologian, advocates for viewing the world as God's body, promoting a relational and caring approach to the environment. Her work emphasizes the need for a theology that nurtures a deeper connection between humans and nature (Bol et al., 2023). Marcella Althaus-Reid's "indecent theology" challenges traditional theological frameworks, offering a practice-oriented, action-based response to the climate crisis. Her approach emphasizes practical and immediate ecological actions informed by theological reflection (Birkler, 2023).

3. Materials and Method

This study adopts a theoretical and textual-critical approach to scripture, analyzing selected passages from the Bible, Quran, and Vedas through an eco-hermeneutical lens. The research aims to reinterpret these texts to highlight themes of ecological responsibility, interconnectedness, and stewardship. It integrates eco-hermeneutical methods to challenge traditional, anthropocentric readings, promoting a more ecologically conscious theological framework. Additionally, interviews with theologians and environmental ethicists will evaluate the practical applications of these reinterpretations in modern religious contexts. The study will focus on key passages from each text, exploring how they can inform contemporary environmental ethics and contribute to an environmental theology of care.

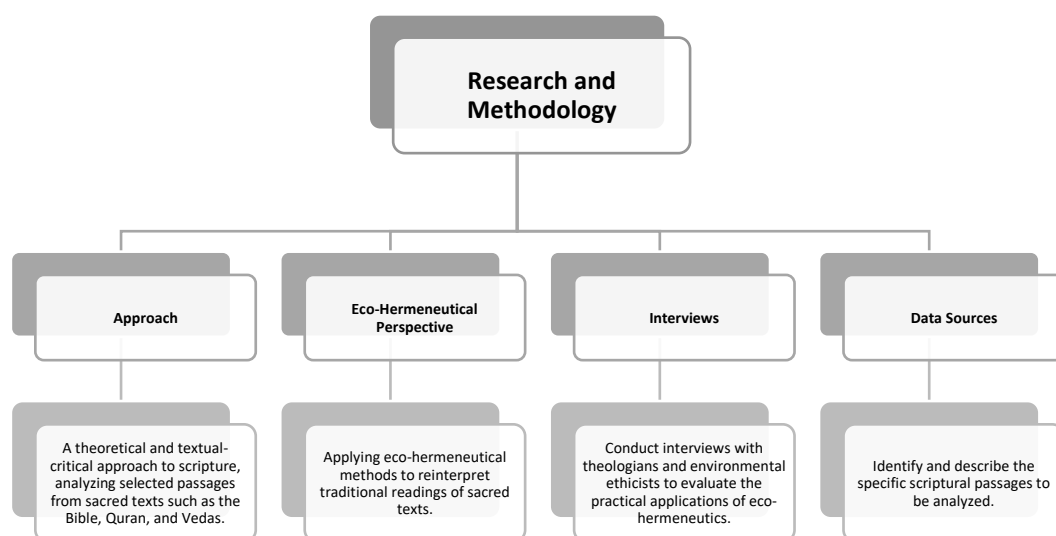


Table 1. The structure of the Research Methodology flowchart.

Approach

This study employs a theoretical and textual-critical approach to scripture, analyzing selected passages from sacred texts such as the Bible, Quran, and Vedas. The goal is to explore how these sacred texts can be reinterpreted through an eco-hermeneutical lens, offering new insights into the relationship between humanity and the environment. A theoretical approach allows for an in-depth exploration of the theological underpinnings of eco-hermeneutics, while a textual-critical approach ensures that the historical and cultural context of the scriptures is considered. By analyzing specific passages, the study will examine how religious texts can inform contemporary ecological concerns and contribute to the development of an environmental theology of care.

Eco-Hermeneutical Perspective

The research integrates eco-hermeneutical methods to reinterpret traditional readings of sacred texts. Eco-hermeneutics, an interdisciplinary approach that combines ecological thought with scriptural interpretation, challenges anthropocentric readings of scripture and promotes ecocritical interpretations that prioritize ecological balance and interconnectedness. By applying this perspective, the study will explore how themes such as stewardship, environmental responsibility, and the intrinsic value of nature are present in sacred texts and how these teachings can inform modern environmental ethics. This approach aligns with contemporary ecological hermeneutics, which emphasizes the need for rethinking traditional religious narratives to address the ecological crisis.

Interviews

In addition to the textual analysis, the study includes interviews with theologians and environmental ethicists to evaluate the practical applications of eco-hermeneutics. These interviews will provide insight into how eco-hermeneutical interpretations of sacred texts can be applied in contemporary theological education, religious practice, and environmental activism. The perspectives of theologians and ethicists will be crucial in assessing the feasibility and impact of eco-hermeneutical approaches in real-world contexts. Interviews will be semi-structured, allowing for flexibility in responses while ensuring that key themes related to eco-hermeneutics are addressed.

Data Sources

The study will focus on selected passages from the Bible, Quran, and Vedas, which are foundational texts for the religious traditions under consideration. Specific passages that address themes of creation, stewardship, and human responsibility toward nature will be identified for analysis. For instance, passages from the Bible's Genesis account of creation, the Quran's descriptions of the natural world, and the Vedic teachings on the interconnectedness of all life will be analyzed. These texts provide a rich source of material for examining how sacred traditions have historically addressed ecological concerns and how they can be reinterpreted to foster a deeper ecological consciousness. The selection of texts will be based on their relevance to eco-hermeneutical themes and their significance within each religious tradition.

4. Results and Discussion

The study highlights the potential of eco-hermeneutics to reinterpret sacred texts, such as the Bible, Quran, and Vedas, by emphasizing themes of ecological responsibility, creation care, and the interconnectedness of all life. This approach challenges traditional anthropocentric views, fostering a vision of humanity as stewards of the Earth. While there may be resistance from conservative religious communities, who view eco-hermeneutics as a radical departure from established teachings, the study suggests that integrating ecological ethics into religious education can help bridge this gap. By equipping religious leaders with eco-hermeneutical interpretations, faith communities can be inspired to adopt more sustainable practices and contribute to global environmental efforts.

Results

The textual analysis of sacred texts such as the Bible, Quran, and Vedas reveals that eco-hermeneutical readings can uncover key ecological themes embedded in these scriptures. For example, the Genesis account in the Bible and the Quran's descriptions of nature emphasize creation care and humanity's role as caretakers of the Earth. Through this approach, sacred texts are reinterpreted to stress the interconnectedness of all life forms, highlighting the moral responsibility of humans to protect the environment. The eco-hermeneutical framework developed in this study integrates ecological principles with theological teachings, offering a fresh perspective on the relationship between humanity and nature.

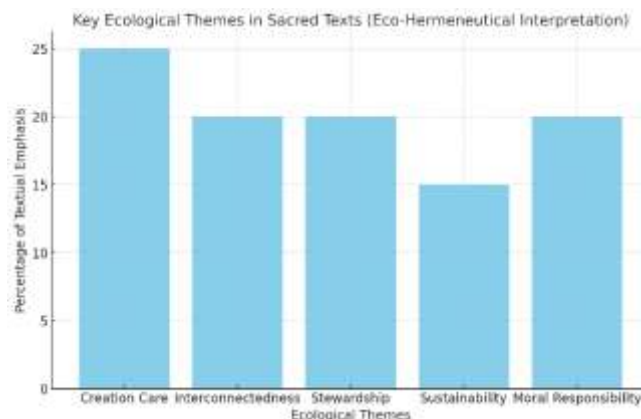


Figure 2. Key Ecological Themes in Sacred Texts (Eco-Hermeneutical Interpretation).

Draw a bar chart diagram representing the main ecological themes found in sacred texts through eco-hermeneutic interpretation. The chart highlights the emphasis on various ecological themes such as Creation Care, Connectedness, Management, Sustainability, and Moral Responsibility, which are central to the study's findings. These themes are identified and analyzed as part of an eco-hermeneutic framework, offering a comprehensive understanding of how sacred texts address environmental issues.

Additionally, interviews with theologians and environmental ethicists provide practical insights into how eco-hermeneutics can be applied in religious contexts. These discussions highlight how religious communities can integrate ecological ethics into their teachings and practices. The findings suggest that eco-hermeneutical interpretations not only offer a theological foundation for environmental responsibility but also encourage a shift in how religious followers engage with their surrounding ecosystems. This framework can guide faith communities in adopting a more sustainable and ethical approach to environmental issues, rooted in spiritual teachings.

Discussion

One of the most significant contributions of this study is the identification of ecological responsibility as a central theme within sacred texts. By reading the Bible, Quran, and Vedas through an eco-hermeneutical lens, these texts are reframed to emphasize the importance of creation care, sustainability, and the inherent value of nature. This reimagining challenges traditional anthropocentric views, which often position humans as dominators of the Earth, and instead fosters a vision of humanity as stewards of the natural world. These findings align with contemporary ecological ethics, which advocate for a more respectful and responsible interaction with the environment.

However, there are significant challenges in integrating eco-hermeneutical interpretations into mainstream religious teachings. Conservative and traditional religious communities may resist such interpretations, particularly those that challenge deeply held beliefs about humanity's role in creation. Many religious traditions have long emphasized human superiority over nature, and eco-hermeneutics, which advocates for interconnectedness and equality among all life forms, may be seen as a radical departure from these views. Overcoming this resistance will require dialogue and education to demonstrate how ecological teachings can align with core religious values and contribute to the well-being of both humanity and the planet.

The implications for religious education are profound. By incorporating eco-hermeneutics into theological training and religious curricula, future generations of religious leaders can be equipped to guide their communities in addressing environmental crises. This integration of ecological ethics into religious education will not only help reinterpret sacred texts but also encourage faith communities to take practical steps toward environmental sustainability. Such an approach could play a crucial role in fostering an eco-theology that motivates ethical action and inspires religious communities to actively participate in the global movement for ecological justice.

5. Comparison

Traditional interpretations of sacred texts often place humans at the center of creation, emphasizing dominion over nature. In the Bible, for example, the Genesis narrative has historically been interpreted as a mandate for human dominion over the Earth, positioning humanity as rulers of nature. Similarly, the Quran's descriptions of nature are often understood in a context that focuses on human benefit and stewardship for divine approval. In contrast, eco-hermeneutical readings reinterpret these same texts to emphasize interconnectedness and mutual responsibility. Instead of viewing humans as separate from or superior to nature, eco-hermeneutics suggests that humans are part of a larger, interconnected ecological system, where every element of creation has intrinsic value. Eco-hermeneutical readings encourage believers to adopt a more respectful and sustainable approach to nature, emphasizing stewardship rather than dominion.

The environmental implications of traditional readings often support an anthropocentric worldview, which has contributed to environmental degradation over time. The notion of human dominance over nature has historically justified exploitative practices, leading to unsustainable resource extraction and ecological harm. In contrast, eco-hermeneutical reinterpretations promote an ecocentric approach, where the environment is valued not just for its utility to humans but for its intrinsic worth. These readings advocate for ecological responsibility, urging individuals and communities to live in harmony with nature and to care for the Earth as a shared responsibility. The shift in environmental ethics from anthropocentrism to ecocentrism through eco-hermeneutics has profound implications for how religious communities address climate change, resource conservation, and ecological justice.

Eco-hermeneutics is not a universal approach, and its interpretation can vary significantly across different religious traditions and cultural contexts. In Christianity, eco-hermeneutics has gained traction through movements such as the Earth Bible Project and the Catholic Church's encyclical *Laudato Si'*, which have reinterpreted biblical texts in light of contemporary ecological concerns. In Islam, eco-hermeneutics aligns with the Quran's teachings on the preservation of nature and its view of the environment as a trust to be maintained by humans. In Hinduism, the Vedic perspective offers a holistic view of creation, emphasizing the interconnectedness of all life forms, which resonates well with eco-hermeneutical interpretations. However, the degree to which eco-hermeneutics is accepted varies across different cultures and religious denominations. Some conservative religious communities may resist eco-hermeneutics due to their entrenched views on human superiority over nature, which are often seen as divinely sanctioned. As a result, the adoption of eco-hermeneutics may be more readily embraced in regions where environmental awareness and theological innovation are prioritized, while it may face significant resistance in areas with more traditional theological frameworks.

6. Conclusion

This study reaffirms that eco-hermeneutics provides a valuable framework for reinterpreting sacred texts, promoting ecological care, and fostering a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness between humanity and the natural world. The analysis of sacred texts such as the Bible, Quran, and Vedas through an eco-hermeneutical lens highlights the presence of ecological themes, such as stewardship and creation care, which have the potential to guide contemporary faith communities in their approach to environmental issues. The insights gained from both textual analysis and interviews emphasize the importance of integrating ecological ethics into religious teachings to address the growing ecological crises.

The potential of eco-hermeneutics in strengthening faith-based responses to ecological crises is significant. By reinterpreting traditional sacred texts to emphasize ecological responsibility, eco-hermeneutics challenges anthropocentric views and encourages a more ecocentric approach to creation. This theological shift is crucial in cultivating a spiritual understanding of environmental stewardship, motivating religious communities to engage in practical actions aimed at protecting and preserving the environment. The eco-hermeneutical framework offers a pathway for faith communities to embrace ecological justice as a moral imperative, grounded in their sacred traditions.

Religious communities and theologians are encouraged to adopt eco-hermeneutical readings to foster environmental stewardship. As climate change and environmental degradation continue to pose significant challenges, religious leaders have a critical role to play in guiding their communities toward sustainable and responsible environmental practices. By embracing eco-hermeneutics, religious traditions can contribute to a global movement for ecological justice, rooted in faith and ethical action. The adoption of eco-hermeneutical interpretations can help religious communities reframe their relationship with nature, emphasizing care and responsibility for the Earth as a divine trust.

Further research is needed to explore the practical applications of eco-hermeneutics in religious communities, particularly in how these interpretations can be integrated into religious education, worship, and community action. Future studies could examine case studies where eco-hermeneutical readings have been successfully applied, assessing their impact on environmental awareness and action within different religious traditions. Additionally, research on the barriers to the adoption of eco-hermeneutics, particularly in conservative or traditional religious settings, would provide valuable insights into how these challenges can be addressed. Further exploration of interdisciplinary approaches that combine eco-hermeneutics with environmental activism and policy development could also offer new opportunities for faith-based contributions to global sustainability efforts.

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