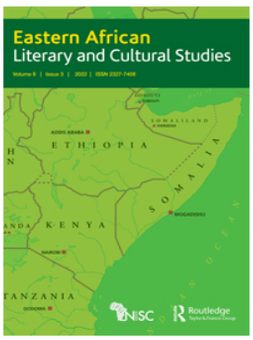

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Wangari Maathai's Environmental Bible as an African Knowledge: Eco-spirituality, Christianity, and Decolonial Thought

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ABSTRACT

Recent scholarship has acknowledged the contribution of the environmental activist and Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, Wangari Maathai (1940–2011), to African ecological and decolonial thinking. As far as Maathai's engagement with religion is concerned, scholarship emphasises her critique of Christianity for its links to colonialism and environmental degradation, and foregrounds her reclaiming of Kikuyu religion and culture as a form of indigenous African knowledge that enhances environmental awareness. However, Maathai's simultaneous creative and constructive engagement with Christian traditions, in particular the Bible, tends to be systematically overlooked, perhaps because it seems at odds with her status as a decolonial thinker. This article examines Maathai's engagement with the Bible, arguing that it presents an interrogation of the category of indigenous knowledge, which for her is not static but dynamic and can incorporate biblical scripture as an African knowledge. Hence, Maathai challenges scholars to take the Bible seriously as a relevant resource for environmental activism as well as for ecological and decolonial thought.

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'To what extent can one speak of an African knowledge, and in what sense?'
V.Y. Mudimbe (1988, ix)

Introduction

The life and work of Wangari Muta Maathai (1940–2011), the world-renowned Kenyan environmental, political, and women's rights activist and 2004 Nobel Peace Prize laureate, has received considerable scholarly interest in recent years (e.g., Muhonja 2020; Musila 2020a, b; Mutua, Gonzalez, and Wolbert

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2018). Maathai's contributions and legacies are widely acknowledged to be multiple. According to Grace Musila (2020b, 8), these legacies embody the 'tenacious pursuit of freedom for communities stranded in precarious lives: women, rural communities, political prisoners, Kenyans, Africans, and citizens of the global South saddled with the burdens of international debt'. First and foremost, Maathai achieved a global profile as a relentless environmental activist, in particular through her role as co-founder of the Green Belt Movement (a women-led organisation that, since its foundation in 1977, planted over 51 million trees in Kenya alone[1]). However, her activism and advocacy were not confined to environmental issues but were also concerned with women's rights, democracy, development, and international debt; in the 1980s–90s, she further was a staunch critic of the increasingly repressive regime of President Daniel arap Moi. These wide-ranging concerns, for Maathai, were intricately connected, and this crucial insight motivated the Nobel Committee to award her (as the first African woman) the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize, in recognition of her 'holistic approach to sustainable development' (The Nobel Peace Prize 2004). In addition to her activism, Maathai also was a scholar (she held a PhD in veterinary science, and made it to associate professor and department chair at the University of Nairobi, until she was forced to leave in 1982), a writer (in addition to numerous essays and articles, she authored four books), and a politician (she was a member of the Kenyan Parliament and served as Assistant Minister of Environment, 2002–2007). Recent scholarship has not only recognised Maathai as 'one of Africa's most celebrated female activists' as Tabita Kanogo (2020) puts it on the back cover of her biography, but as a scholar and thinker in her own right. For instance, Besi Muhonja's (2020) book about Maathai argues that she was an organic intellectual whose thinking presents a significant contribution to African decolonial thought. Following up on the latter suggestion, in this article I examine one specific aspect of Maathai's work and thinking, which has hitherto received very little attention: her engagement with the Bible.

It is generally acknowledged that religion and spirituality are an important part of Maathai's personal motivation, her activist work, and her ecological thinking (Du Toit 2019; Mutua and Kilonzo 2018; Mwangi 2020). Yet the fact that she, in her work and writing, has presented a substantial, creative, and constructive engagement with the Bible, has so far remained understudied. As discussed below, scholars have, instead, been keen to foreground Maathai's critique of Christianity for its links to colonialism and for its devastating environmental impact. My suggestion is that this imbalanced representation of Maathai's engagement with Christian traditions, and the apparent lack of interest in her engagement with the Bible and Christian thought, is not a mere coincidence. It can be seen as revealing of the controversial status of the Bible, and Christianity more generally, in African cultural studies, due to their links to the history and

[1]As of October 2020, according to the Green Belt Movement website, http://www.greenbeltmovement.org/ accessed 5 October 2020).

legacies of colonialism. In order to celebrate Maathai as a critical African thinker, it appears that one has to conveniently overlook her identification with a missionary religion, and her use of a key colonial artefact such as the Bible. Addressing this conundrum, and taking seriously Maathai as a scholar and thinker in her own right, in this article I make a twofold argument. First, I demonstrate that Maathai engages the Bible, and Christianity more generally, critically, but also creatively and constructively, as part of her environmental activism. This is a contribution to current scholarship of Maathai's life and work, as well as to the study of religion, women, and ecology more generally (Hoel and Nogueira-Godsey 2011). Second, I argue that Maathai's use of the Bible raises critical questions about the contested status of the Bible as an African knowledge, and challenges conceptualisations of African knowledges centred around a notion of indigeneity. This is intended as a contribution to current debates in African studies and African decolonial thought. Thus, the aim of the article is not just to examine Maathai's use of the Bible, but to use this as a case study for a broader discussion about the status of the Bible in postcolonial Africa and in African studies.

Setting the scene for our discussion, I begin by offering an overview of the status of the Bible in the field of African cultural studies. I continue by examining Maathai's work and thinking in detail, first focusing on her eco-spirituality and her critique of the Bible and of Christianity, and second, focusing on her ecological readings of Biblical and Christian traditions. Lastly, building on Maathai's thought, I propose to think about the Bible as an African knowledge.

The Bible in African Cultural Studies

The field of African cultural studies does not demonstrate a great deal of interest in the Bible. For instance, a simple search in the *Journal of African Cultural Studies* (formerly known as *African Languages and Cultures*), reveals that since its first volume in 1988, it only published one article with the word 'Bible' in the title (a study of issues of language in Bible translation, see Tuchscherer 2007). Some articles in the journal make brief references to the Bible as part of broader discussions of religious and cultural phenomena, but it is far from a major theme of analysis. The same applies to the journal *Eastern African Literary and Cultural Studies*. Similarly, Karin Barber in her acclaimed study of African popular culture makes only very few passing references to the Bible as part of popular cultural expressions in African societies, for instance when she mentions the decoration of *matatus* (private minibuses used for public transport) in Nairobi where 'pictures of famous rap artists, celebrities and Spider-Man are juxtaposed with painted quotations from the Bible, proverbs and boasts' (Barber 2018, 15). The significance of these bible quotations, and their meaning in relation to the other symbols and messages decorating the *matatus*, are not made subject of analysis, and the idea that they are in a juxtaposition appears to be Barber's own unquestioned assumption. Perhaps surprisingly, these observations also

extend to the field of African religious studies. In the *Journal of Religion in Africa*, I could only find one article with the word 'Bible' in the title (a study about the history of the Union Ibo Bible, see Fulford 2002). Although the journal published several articles that pay some attention to the Bible in their analysis and discussion, it does not demonstrate a particular interest in sacred Scripture as part of African Christian traditions and religious life. Admittedly, there does exist a thriving body of scholarship on biblical interpretation in Africa (for a recent overview, see Mbuvi 2017) — even with an academic book series specifically dedicated to this theme (*Bible in Africa Studies*, Bamberg University Press) that has published an impressive number of 26 volumes since its inception in 2009 by Masiiwa R. Gunda, Joachim Kügler, and Lovemore Togarasei. However, this appears to be quite a niche sub-field within African theology and biblical studies, with little reception by and impact on wider African studies circles.

The apparent lack of scholarly interest in the Bible in the field of African studies is surprising when taking into account the Bible's long history in Africa, its wide dissemination and reception across the continent, and the considerable linguistic, cultural, social, and political impact it has had, still has, and most likely continues to have in African communities and societies, as well as in the African diaspora (see Adeyemo 2006; Page 2010; Stiebert and Dube 2018; West and Dube 2000; West 2015). Although it is not the aim of this article to examine the possible reasons of this relative neglect of the Bible as a relevant, and indeed critical, theme in African cultural studies, it is fair to speculate that it may have something to do with the way in which this religious text was introduced in most parts of sub-Saharan Africa in the era of European exploration, imperialism, colonisation, and mission. This history has perhaps been captured most effectively in a widely circulated anecdote, sometimes ascribed to Jomo Kenyatta, other times to Desmond Tutu, which goes as follows:

> When the white man came to our country he had the Bible and we had the land. The white man said to us, 'let us pray.' After the prayer, the white man had the land and we had the Bible. (quoted in Dube 2005, 3)

This anecdote captures the deeply problematic reality that the 19th and early 20th centuries' history of the Bible in Africa — its introduction, translation, and dissemination — is, indeed, one of colonial imposition, violence, and abuse of power, with ongoing legacies (Dube and Wafula 2017). It might well be that this history is the reason why the Bible has become kind of a taboo subject for scholars in African cultural studies, especially in the light of current debates about decolonisation. However, recent scholarship has shown that as much as the Bible in Africa is part of a history of European colonialism and imperialism, it is also part of a complex dynamics of African agency, contestation, and appropriation. As Gerald West (2016) puts it in the sub-title of his book *The Stolen Bible*, from 'a tool of imperialism', the holy book has become 'an African icon'. Moreover, it is worth remembering that the Bible has a long history in Africa preceding European colonialism and mission — in countries such as

Egypt and Ethiopia, it has been a highly influential sacred text and cultural artefact for many centuries up to date. Against those backgrounds, my premise is that engaging with the use and interpretation of the Bible and the role of biblical texts, images, and symbols is imperative, not just for the study of African Christianity and religious cultures, but of cultural and social life in Africa more widely. As a case in point, I focus on the work of Wangari Maathai, for whom the Bible is a vital part of her environmental activism and a resource for ecological thinking.

Maathai's Eco-spirituality and the Critique of Christianity

Most of the literature about Maathai emphasises her role as an activist, at the detriment of her contribution as a scholar and thinker. Yet claiming that Maathai is 'one of the most significant critical thinkers of our time', Muhonja (2020, 118) offers a portrait of a scholar-activist for whom community mobilisation, socio-political advocacy, and intellectual work were organically interwoven, and she reconstructs the philosophical and theoretical concepts underlying and driving Maathai's transformative work. What, then, is Maathai's thinking about religion?

The importance of religion and spirituality for Maathai's personal motivation, and for her activism and thinking, has been generally acknowledged. For example, in their discussion of Maathai's 'spiritual legacy', Eddah Mutua and Susan Kilonzo (2018, 189) draw attention to the way in which she sought 'to maintain the spiritual connection between everyday life and the environment'. Along similar lines, Musila (2020b, 11) points out that Maathai 'returns to this spiritual bond between human beings and nature, as a divine, life-affirming relationship that should be honoured and respected'. The point made by many interpreters is that Maathai in her writing develops an eco-spirituality based on indigenous knowledge, specifically from her Kikuyu tradition. For instance, drawing attention to the tale about the sacred fig tree in the village of her childhood that Maathai tells in her autobiography *Unbowed*, Ogaga Okuyade (2020, 202) observes a 'narrative strategy [that] helps to illustrate the power of culturally grounded knowledge, and in particular, the significance of a traditional African worldview … that establishes a connection between nature, humans, and the divine'. Discussing the environmental work of Maathai and the Green Belt Movement, Bron Taylor (2020, 225) observes a 'radical' strategy centring around 'a revival of respect for and practice of native traditions, including African traditional religions, which … tend to promote environmentally sustainable behavior'. These scholars further point out, and rightly so, that Maathai's efforts at reclaiming indigenous religious and cultural knowledge go hand in hand with her explicit criticism of Christianity as it was introduced in Kenya by European missionaries, and is practiced by many Kenyans today, as a religion that has effectively undermined, and continues to threaten, the 'holistic environmentalism' (Muhonja 2020, 21) of indigenous African traditions. Thus, from his reading of Maathai's autobiography, Okuyade (2020, 203) claims that 'the church remains

a colonial capitalist instrument for devaluing African belief systems founded on pragmatic interrelatedness of all the worlds'. Taylor (2020, 225) similarly argues that Maathai has 'escalated her criticism of colonial Western religions and epistemologies, which, in her view, lead to a commodification and desacralization of life, and ultimately to people treating nature only as a means to their own material ends.'

These observations by Okuyade, Taylor, and others capture an important part of Maathai's thinking. In several of her writings, she has indeed offered an explicit postcolonial critique of Christianity for its historic and ongoing devastating cultural, social, economic, and political impacts on African communities and the natural environment. For instance, in her book *The Challenge for Africa*, she discusses the impact of colonialism and Christian mission in a chapter aptly titled, 'A legacy of woes'. Here, she draws specific attention to the 'deep cultural inferiority complex' that was instilled in Africans (Maathai 2010a, 38) as a result of what Musila (2020, 25) describes as the 'cultural and spiritual violence' enacted by the colonial state and the missionary project. As Maathai writes:

> They [colonized people] were told that Christianity not only represented a better expression of devotion than their own cultural practices, but indeed was the true faith; to question its authority or that of those who interpreted it was a sin and indeed heretical. To local peoples all around the world, including Africa, the Bible became the entry point to a new way of life that was guided by a new priesthood, whose power and authority were reinforced by the conquerors' guns. (Maathai 2010b, 38–39)

Thus, in this respect Maathai sympathises with other African post- and decolonial thinkers who have argued, in the words of Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018, 11–12), that 'conversion to Christianity was itself a form of epistemicide. … On the graveyard of African indigenous knowledges, colonialism planted European memory.' Maathai specifically foregrounded the devastating environmental effects of this process, pointing at 'acts of sacred vandalism' through which the sacred groves and trees of the Kikuyu, as of other African people, were desacralized (Maathai 2010a, 95). As a result of such acts, 'hallowed landscapes lost their sacredness and were exploited as the local people became insensitive to the destruction, accepting it as a sign of progress' (Maathai 2006, 6).

However, as much as Maathai presents a postcolonial critique of Christianity, an often overlooked but equally important part of her work and thinking is that she, simultaneously, engages constructively with Christian traditions, in particular the Bible. She personally, as recounted in her autobiography, was born in a Protestant family, converted to Catholicism while attending boarding school, and during her studies in the United States in the 1990s developed from a 'very strict and dogmatic Catholic' into someone who began to question her faith, but 'not to the extent of losing it entirely' (Maathai 2006, 81). As she confessed in an interview, 'I do have faith, and I believe in God. I come from a tradition where God was

a given. I would say I am a good student of Jesus Christ. I read the Bible and am inspired by it' (MacDonald 2005). Referring to Maathai's Christian identity, Namulundah Florence (2014, 40) observes that she 'never resolved her contradictory allegiance to Western influence … [and] understood her dual provenance as a protégée of both Africa and the West'. However, although there is indeed a tension between Maathai's critique of Christianity and her simultaneous identification and engagement with Christian traditions, it is questionable whether this should necessarily be seen as an unresolved contradiction. If, following Muhonja (2020), we take seriously Maathai as a critical thinker, we should acknowledge that she does, in fact, make intellectual efforts to develop what she calls a 'ecumenical understanding of faith' (Maathai 2010, 20). By this she means an understanding of faith that is not exclusionary Christian at the expense of other traditions of faith and spirituality, and certainly not at the expense of African indigenous religions, but that reconciles and integrates ethical and spiritual values from various traditions. Referring to her studies in Germany in the late 1960s, Maathai (2006, 109) points out that, 'my exposure to Europe, which had brought Christianity to Kenya, helped me to see that there should be no conflict between the positive aspects of our traditional culture and Christianity.' Subsequently, the restoration of 'positive spiritual and cultural values' from indigenous traditions and integrating them into a society that has become predominantly Christian, became an important mission for Maathai and for the Green Belt movement (Maathai 2004, 48). In the process of developing this ecumenical understanding of faith, Maathai took inspiration from the American civil rights movement with its prophetic black Christian leadership, from Latin American liberation theology, and from Christian environmental initiatives. She refers to these movements as 'hopeful signs' that Christianity can be redeemed from its legacy as 'a partner in the subjugation of communities and nations' and 'will become a liberatory experience' in sub-Saharan Africa (Maathai 2010a, 164, 170). She not only states that 'the church has a crucial role to play' in promoting environmental awareness, but has herself actively worked with church leaders and communities in developing a sense of 'responsibility to God's creation (Maathai 2010a, 140). Doing so, she explicitly resorted to the Bible as a resource.

Maathai's Ecological Readings of the Bible

In her book *Replenishing the Earth*, Maathai seeks to identify and explore, in the words of the sub-title, 'spiritual values for healing ourselves and the world'. In this quest for an ecological spirituality that can enhance environmental awareness and responsibility, Maathai engages with a range of religious and spiritual traditions from across the world. Possibly, this is to appeal to a global readership, but it also is reminiscent of a broader trend in religious environmentalism, to engage consciously, reflexively but also somewhat selectively with ideas and practices from a variety of traditions that help to buttress the notion of nature

as sacred (Tomalin 2009, 4–5). In this process, Maathai most extensively engages with Kikuyu religion and culture, and with Christianity, in particular the Bible. Throughout the book, one finds extensive references to, and discussions of, biblical texts. These parts of the book appear to be directly based on her work with the Green Belt movement, including the running of numerous environmental workshops with local communities, and even preaching in church. As Maathai points out,

> In Kenya, as in much of Africa south of the Sahara, Christianity is the dominant religion and the Bible is usually the only text that people associate with it. Therefore, in the GBM's efforts to reach out to local communities we use the Bible, and as a result, many of the examples are drawn from what to Christians are known as the Old and New Testaments. These teachings offer guidance — alas, widely ignored by the faithful — on how the earth's natural resources ought to be treated. (Maathai 2010a, 20)

However, her use of the Bible does not appear to be purely strategic, but also reflects her personal familiarity with, and inspiration from, biblical and Christian traditions. This is evidenced by the epigraphs in two of her books. Her autobiography, *Unbowed* (2006), opens with Ezekiel 34:27: 'The trees of the field will yield their fruit and the ground will yield its crops; the people will be secure in the land. They will know that I am the LORD, when I break the bars of their yoke and rescue them from the hands of those who enslaved them.' This text presents the divine promise that if the people will respect God's commandments, they will be abundantly blessed and their land will be prosperous and protected. Obviously, the reference to the fruitful trees of the field also reminds of Maathai's large-scale tree planting efforts through the Green Belt Movement. The epigraph of *Replenishing the Earth* comes from Ecclesiastes Rabbah, which is an ancient Jewish commentary on the book of Ecclesiastes in the Bible. It reads: 'Behold my works! See how beautiful they are, how excellent! All that I have created, for your sake did I create it. See to it that you do not spoil or destroy my world; for if you do, there will be no one to repair it after you.' In this text, God asserts to be the source of the beauty of creation, an assertion that serves to underline the ethical obligation of stewardship of the earth. Both epigraphs are carefully selected texts from biblical traditions. They enable Maathai to ground her eco-spirituality in a biblical idiom that is suitable for Christian audiences, while at the same time being general enough not to exclude non-Christian readers, as they contain a more general religious wisdom. Yet the use of these texts as epigraphs also suggests that they reflect the personal motivation underlying Maathai's work and thinking.

In addition to these epigraphs, throughout *Replenishing the Earth* Maathai engages biblical Scripture quite extensively as part of what can be called ecological biblical hermeneutics (see Horrell, Hunt, Southgate, and Stavrakopoulou 2010). She does so with the disclaimer that she is 'neither a theologian nor a student of religions or faith traditions' (Maathai 2010a, 19). Indeed, Maathai is not primarily concerned with the linguistic, historical, or theological details of

the biblical texts that she discusses. Her engagement with the Bible is, instead, directed by an activist drive to mobilise a resource that is authoritative in the context in which she operates, and that is effective in promoting environmental awareness and responsibility among local communities. However, in this regard Maathai is not different from many African biblical scholars who have explicitly critiqued Western biblical scholarship for being elitist and merely driven by scholarly intellectual agendas, and who instead chart a course 'that is more interested in making biblical interpretation relevant to present realities … [and in] providing meaningful responses to concerns that are pertinent to African communities' (Mbuvi 2017, 149). For Maathai, one of the most urgent issues facing African communities today is the environmental crisis of the 'physical destruction of the earth', which she suggests offers an opportunity to help the earth to heal (Maathai 2010a, 16). As part of her ecological biblical hermeneutics, she creatively engages biblical texts for three interrelated purposes: to convey a clear sense of environmental urgency, to instil an attitude of environmental respect, and to promote a sense of environmental responsibility. Together, these three notions feed into what Muhonja (2020, 61) refers to as Maathai's 'decolonial eco-agency', that is, 'the capacity to harness one's environment as a pathway to cultural, economic, social, and political empowerment and societal equity'. Importantly, in developing this decolonial eco-agency Maathai not only tapped into indigenous knowledge, but also biblical knowledge, implicitly recognising the compatibility of these two canons.

Environmental Urgency

Early on in *Replenishing the Earth*, Maathai recalls a visit to the Congo Basin rain forest in central Africa — known as the worlds 'second lung', after the Amazon –, where a timber company was harvesting trees. Giving a vivid account of the logging operation and its devastating effect on the environment, she writes:

> As the remains of the once living, vibrant tree were being turned into burnt, dead matter, the smoke, combined with the red glare of embers in the kiln, seemed to me a more-than-adequate definition of hell — and not just because smoke, soot, and red flame are the standard motifs the Christian tradition has assigned to it. It was hell because of the environmental destruction, poverty, and desperate scrambling around for resources that goes along with the burning of charcoal. (Maathai 2010a, 42)

Having invoked the Christian trope of hell to convey a strong sense of environmental urgency, Maathai suggests that the exploitation of the forest she encountered in the Congo Basin reflects a widespread attitude across the world — the attitude that the earth and its resources are there to be exploited. She then brings in a biblical narrative to challenge this attitude: a story from the Old Testament (Numbers 11), according to which the Israelites in the desert, after escaping slavery in Egypt, complain to their leader, Moses that they do

not have any meat to eat, despite God providing them with food in the form of manna. After Moses takes their complaint to God, God punishes them by sending quails, but while the Israelites are eating this meat they are struck by a plague and many people die. Drawing a lesson from this story, Maathai writes:

> The fate of the quail eaters suggests that we should respect limits and not demand more than we need or can handle. … As in many places in the Hebrew Bible, it is made clear here that if the Israelites obey the laws of the land that God has established, the land will be fruitful; if they are disobedient and take more than God allows them, the land will produce the equivalent of thorns. Indeed, the Bible and many scriptures are replete with instructions about how to maintain the relationship to food, the land, animals, and one another, as determined by God's word. (Maathai 2010a, 45)

The key lesson, for Maathai, is that humankind needs to control the insatiable craving for more, which only leads to the exploitation of the environment. She admits that this will require 'monumental discipline' which will only occur when it is linked to the 'consciousness that is essential to healing the earth' (Maathai 2010a, 49).

Maathai further invokes the second creation story (Genesis 2-3), according to which Adam and Eve are banned from the Garden of Eden after the Fall, in order to frame current environmental challenges in a biblical discourse. Referencing Genesis 3:19, where God reminds Adam and Eve that 'they were made of dust, and it was to dust that they would return', she directly links this to the widespread soil erosion and subsequent environmental devastation taking place in Africa. The continent's vanishing soil, in her words, threatens 'to turn all life to ashes and dust' (Maathai 2010a, 58). Citing Genesis 3:17-18, she points out how strikingly 'ecological the consequences' are of God's curse of Adam and Eve, and she observes that these consequences manifest themselves in the erosion of fertile topsoil in much of Africa today (Maathai 2010a, 72). Referring to the etymological and theological connotations of the Hebrew names Adam ('earth') and Eve ('life'), Maathai underlines the interdependency between humankind and the earth in the quest for life, and rhetorically asks whether we, as humans, 'are not in danger of being washed away along with the soil?' (Maathai 2010a, 73). Thus, Maathai reads the Genesis story about the creation of humankind, the fall into sin, and the expulsion from the Garden of Eden as an ancient myth with great contemporary relevance as it captures the threat of the current environmental crisis and underlines the urgency to avoid an apocalyptic ecological catastrophe: the expulsion of humankind from the paradise of earth as a result of climate change and environmental degradation.

Environmental Respect

As much as Maathai conveys a strong sense of environmental urgency, she equally reflects optimism that the wounds of the earth can be healed, and an

ecological catastrophe can be avoided. The basis for that to happen is the restoration of a fundamental attitude of respect for the natural environment, and again she uses the Bible among other resources to instil such an attitude.

The earlier-mentioned biblical story about manna — the food from heaven that sustained the Israelites in the desert — comes up again later in *Replenishing the Earth*. Referring to media reports about the Turkana and Samburu people in northern Kenya who, at a time of long-term drought, were kept alive by eating wild fruits, Maathai comments:

> The fact that local wild fruits had survived the drought was an excellent illustration of why we should protect local biodiversity: everything else had dried up, but these wild fruits remained. … The fruit from the trees reminded me of God's provision of manna — a food suited for the harsh conditions — to the Israelites in their desert. (Maathai 2010a, 66–67)

She subsequently elaborates on the importance of biodiversity, including protection of the smallest species whose significance in the ecosystem we may not even be aware of. Doing so, she again quotes the Bible, this time the New Testament: 'The Bible understands the importance of recognising the smallest. Jesus asks his disciples to consider the simplicity and beauty of the lilies of the field (Matt. 6:28) and notes that God cares for sparrows (Matt. 10:29)' (Maathai 2010a, 68). These are illustrations of how Maathai associatively brings in biblical references to interpret contemporary environmental events and to reinforce the importance of environmental respect. Yet another example is her reference to the story about Moses making water gush out of a rock, which she uses to biblically signify her own story about water streams resurging in a previously deforested area where indigenous vegetation had been replanted:

> Seeing the replenishment of the deforested area and the resurgent streams almost overwhelmed me. Not only was the land recovering, but we had been instrumental in creating water where none had existed for years. It seemed like a miracle from God — like Moses striking the rock and seeing water gushing froth into the desert (see Num. 20:11). (Maathai 2010, 90)

Maathai's notion of environmental respect is grounded in a strong sense of reverence for the earth as sacred (a notion sometimes referred to as 'biodivinity'; see Tomalin 2009, 4–5). First and foremost, she links this to Kikuyu and other African indigenous religions which affirm the sacredness of nature. Illustrative is the autobiographical story that she repeatedly shares, about the *mīgumo* (wild fig tree) in the homestead of her childhood, which her mother taught her is 'a tree of God' and therefore cannot be used for firewood (Maathai 2006, 45). Maathai later discovered that this traditional reverence for the fig tree was of crucial environmental significance, as these trees help preserve water streams and hold the soil together, thus preventing erosion. She discusses several other indigenous cultural and spiritual practices that express 'a general reverence for nature' and that specifically reflect the belief that trees are inhabited by spirits

and thus worthy of deep reverence (Maathai 2010a, 79). As discussed earlier, she asserts that this fundamental attitude of respect and reverence for nature has been profoundly undermined by European colonialism and mission. Acknowledging that the indigenous belief in the sacredness of the environment cannot simply be restored in the modern context where Christianity has become firmly established, she points out that the Green Belt Movement seminars 'do not suggest that people see God or the Source in elements of the natural world, lest we be accused of pantheism' (Maathai 2010, 134). Nevertheless, she creatively invokes a range of biblical texts that, in her understanding, reflect a similar reverence of nature that characterised Kikuyu indigenous culture. In the Old Testament, or Hebrew Bible, she identifies several scriptures that feature trees 'as a token of God's presence' (Maathai 2010a, 81), ranging from the stories of the Garden of Eden and the Ark of Noah, to stories about figures such as Joshua and Abraham, to prophecies from Ezekiel, Jeremiah, and Hosea. In the New Testament, she points at the symbolic role of palm trees, and also at stories about John the Baptist and Jesus retiring into the wilderness to receive divine messages, which for her reflect the belief that the natural environment is a space 'where the divine might be experienced' (Maathai 2010a, 82). By invoking these biblical scriptures, Maathai seeks to counter the desacralization of the environment, which she believes has been ecologically detrimental, and attempts to instil a sense of reverence for nature, particularly trees.

Perhaps her most powerful appropriation of the Bible, in this regard, is Maathai's sermon about the cross that she once delivered in a church, and which she recounts at some length in *Replenishing the Earth*. It is powerful because the cross is one of the most central symbols in the Christian faith, as it is where Jesus Christ through his death is believed to have brought about salvation. Reminding the congregation that a cross is made of wood, and that a tree thus has been cut down for it, she preached:

> If every one of you has been saved by Jesus Christ and is grateful for the salvation you received because of that one tree, then you should be saying thank you to every tree you see. … That's why I'm asking the bishop to tell the faithful to plant a tree during Easter as a way to say thank you to Jesus for dying on the cross for me. (Maathai 2010a, 132)

Creatively linking New Testament stories about the cross to the Genesis creation story about the Garden of Eden, Maathai argues that respecting trees, and planting new ones, for Christians is an expression of gratitude for the salvation brought about by Jesus Christ, and is a reflection of 'a new consciousness of the nature of the salvation that Christ offered', because redemption is not just for humankind but for the world as a whole (Maathai 2010a, 134). She supports the latter idea with a reference to the most well-known text from the Bible (John 3:16). Although Maathai (2010a, 133) disclaims her sermon for not being 'theologically sophisticated', she demonstrates not only great biblical literacy and creativity in her biblical interpretation, but also considerable theological

inventiveness in promoting an attitude of environmental awareness and respect in a way that speaks to her overwhelmingly Christian local audience.

Environmental Responsibility

The just-outlined spirituality of respect and reverence for nature is the basis on which Maathai grounds an environmental ethics of responsibility towards the earth's resources. She observes such an ethics in traditional Kikuyu rituals and practices that 'expressed gratitude for the bounty of their region and its continuance', and that also effectively reduced waste, enhanced food security, contributed to the common good, and kept the ecological footprint on the land as light as possible (Maathai 2010a, 50). Yet she similarly observes this ethics in the Hebrew Bible, for instance in the instructions to observe the Sabbath and the Jubilee year. The meaning of these religious observances should be revivified in order to honour 'the ancient wisdom contained in the Hebrew scriptures with a commitment to confronting the particular environmental challenges of today' (Maathai 2010a, 120).

Maathai argues that the 'sense of collective responsibility for community well-being' that characterized traditional Kikuyu and other communities has been replaced with an 'individualistic ethic that focuses on self' as a result of the introduction of the cash-crop economy and other changes brought about by colonial and postcolonial modernity (Maathai 2010a, 54). Seeking to counter this, she again invokes the biblical creation stories which provide her with a rich resource for eco-spiritual reflection. These stories, like other myths of origin in sacred scriptures of the world's religious traditions, for Maathai are attempts to understand the majesty of the earth, and they instil in humans 'the awesome responsibility' of protecting the earth (Maathai 2010a, 64). Engaging the biblical creation myths in-depth, she observes an apparent paradox:

> We are at once the culmination of the process of creation, and yet its most dependent creature. … The dual position human beings have — in charge because we are most dependent, the apogee of creation because we are most vulnerable — is echoed by the apparently contradictory messages contained in both narratives of the creation of Adam and Eve (Gen. 1:26-30; 2:7-24). In the second reference, God tells Adam to serve and protect the garden; in the first, he is commanded to have dominion over the earth and subdue it. (Maathai 2010a, 70–71)

The different emphases of the two stories, according to Maathai, alludes to the free will that humans have, to either 'destroy or tend, protect or subdue, act as dominators or as conservers and custodians' (Maathai 2010a, 72–73). She further suggests, however, that there is not necessarily a contradiction between the two stories, because 'dominion' should be interpreted as 'stewardship' and thus does not offer a 'carte blanche to exploit nature without thinking of the consequences of our action' (Maathai 2010a, 71). Critiquing common interpretations of dominion as an excuse for domination and exploitation, and

pointing at the devastating effect these have had on traditional communities, Maathai echoes eco-feminist readings of the creation stories that have questioned the hierarchical structures of power undergirding the way in which *man*kind relates to women, animals, and land (e.g., see Kebaneilwe 2015; Ruether 1994). Although Maathai's emphasis on stewardship and responsibility towards the earth puts great emphasis on human agency, she does implicitly recognise the agency of the non-human environment, when she acknowledges the vulnerability and dependency of humans on the rest of creation while stating that no other species are depending on humans to sustain them.

For Maathai, the Genesis creation myths reflect God's primary vision of 'humans living in harmony with the natural world' (Maathai 2010a, 72). As much as hell reveals itself in the harvested forests of the Congo Basin, she also recognises heaven 'in a clean, deep river full of fish and surrounded by banks lush with vegetation and wildlife' which for her is an 'acknowledgement that all of the Source's handiwork is worth preserving' (Maathai 2010a, 75). She further points at New Testament scriptures, in particular the teachings of Jesus, that convey the 'need to feel at ease and in harmony with ourselves and the environment within which we live', and that encourage humans to devalue material possessions and instead embrace a 'higher level of consciousness' (Maathai 2010a, 115). Citing a range of biblical scriptures that 'offer instruction to care for the earth and not to waste God's creation', Maathai (2010, 122) critically observes that 'some aspects of contemporary Christian culture unfortunately encourage precisely the reverse'. She takes issue with the 'other-worldly' orientation characterising popular forms of Christianity in Kenya. The teaching that the destiny of the faithful is in heaven, according to Maathai, effectively discourages people to take responsibility for the earth. Discussing eschatological texts in the Bible — from Old Testament prophecies to the New Testament apocalyptic visions of Revelations, she argues that these scriptures are not about rejecting the present world in expectation of a better world to come, but instead express and reinforce a commitment to protecting the earth we live on:

> I see them [the biblical prophets and seers] depicting an alternative to the degradation of the environment that has turned waters of life here on earth that were 'bright as crystal' into mud and silt, and the 'tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit' into stumps and charcoal, and has led to nations not being healed, but rather fighting one another for access to the remaining clean water and food supplies. (Maathai 2010a, 125)

These words present a case where Maathai directly invokes the Bible, offering her own interpretation to interrogate and transform prevalent attitudes and beliefs among Christians. She does something similar in relation to the passivity she observes among believers who do not take responsibility but rather wait and pray for God to intervene in their lives. An epitome of this is the *kesha* culture of overnight prayer that is popular among Pentecostal Christians, and which according to Maathai (2010a, 143) makes people forsake 'all belief in their own

ability to bring about the change they would like to see in their lives.' Countering this culture, she invokes the well-known parable of the talents from the Gospels (of Matthew and Luke), as well as a story from the Book of Acts (chapter 3) about the apostles Peter and John in their interaction with a crippled man. She interprets the latter as presenting a message of 'social uplift and personal responsibility', including responsibility for the environment and for healing the wounds of the earth (Maathai 2010a, 137). Hence, Maathai mobilises biblical scripture to promote self-empowerment and responsibility. As she puts it,

> It is in the Green Belt Movement's vision to urge individuals not to wait for divine intervention, but to give themselves the energy they imagine, or pray that God will provide, and to recognize that God expects them to take action and rise up and walk! (Maathai 2010a, 143)

Thus, Maathai's ecological readings of the Bible, in particular the Genesis creation stories, feed into what Muhonja conceptualises as 'radical *utu*'. This is the idea and ideal of being human with respect for the humanity of others, and in harmony with the natural environment that, according to Muhonja (2020), drives Maathai's thinking and is at the heart of her decolonial eco-agency. Importantly, as much as the philosophy, ethics, and practice of radical *utu* and decolonial eco-agency are inspired by African indigenous knowledge systems, for Maathai they are also buttressed by biblical knowledge.

The Bible as an African Knowledge

As discussed earlier, in much of Sub-Saharan Africa the Bible was closely connected to colonialism and 'was part of the European imperial project of resource extraction' (West 2016, 35). Given this problematic history, which Maathai as a critical thinker fully acknowledges, why does she continue to engage with the Bible in creative and constructive ways? There are several possible answers to this question. One is that Maathai's use of the Bible is a case of the activist prevailing over the intellectual. However, that seems an unsatisfactory, even inappropriate, suggestion because it creates a false opposition between activism and intellectual work which does not apply to Maathai as an organic scholar-activist. It also fails to acknowledge how much *thought* Maathai put in her interpretation of biblical texts. Was Maathai, then, merely driven by a quest for practical resources that appeal to, and are effective among, the local and mostly Christian communities with which she worked? Her appropriation of the Bible was certainly informed by such strategic considerations, as established earlier in this article; however, to suggest that it was *merely* pragmatic discounts the fact that Maathai was and remained a Catholic who from her youth was deeply familiar with the Bible and for whom this sacred Scripture was a source of personal inspiration. Should we then conclude that Maathai, given her use of the Bible and indeed her Catholic (albeit ecumenical) faith, falls short of true decolonisation as

she kept allegiance to a faith tradition and sacred Scripture intricately connected to the history and ongoing legacies of colonialism? My suggestion would be a different one, and it centres around Maathai's embodiment of what Ndlovu-Gatsheni calls 'epistemic freedom in Africa', which for him centres around 'the right to think, theorize, interpret the world, develop own methodologies and write from where one is located and unencumbered by Eurocentrism', and which involves 'democratizing "knowledge" from its current rendition in the singular into its plural known as "knowledges"' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018, 3–4).

In the quest for epistemic freedom, many scholars have foregrounded African indigenous knowledge systems as key to decentring Eurocentric perspectives, including in relation to questions of ecology (Gordon and Krech 2012; Mafongoya and Ajayi 2017). However, the term 'indigenous knowledge' has also been criticised for having static and essentialising connotations, and for referring to 'an unchanging product of "culture" and "tradition", passed down from ancestors, and often tied to a specific place' (Green 2014, 39). In the light of such criticism, Brenda Cooper and Robert Morrell have advocated the alternative term 'Africa-centred knowledges', to account for the multiplicity and dynamism of the African continent and for the 'entangled, contextual and contingent' nature of African knowledges. For them, 'knowledges can become Africa-centred regardless of where they originate from. But they do so only when they get entangled in African realities, lexicons and matrices that are shaped by these contexts' (Cooper and Morrell 2014, 3–4). Applying this to Maathai, one could argue that for her, the Bible — despite its links to the history of European colonisation — has become an Africa-centred knowledge. The way in which she creatively interweaves Kikuyu traditions and biblical texts as part of her ecological hermeneutics demonstrates how, for her, the Bible is entangled in African cultural realities and social life. Doing so, she adheres to the above-mentioned principle of democratising knowledge, as she recognises that many people in Kenya and elsewhere in Africa have embraced the Bible as a vital source of knowledge shaping their understanding of the world, of life, and of their relationship to the earth.

The concept of 'Africa-centred knowledges' allows for a conceptualisation of forms of knowledge that do not necessarily originate from the African continent, yet that have become entangled with African life-worlds. Applied to the Bible, the underlying connotation is then that the Bible may originate from the West but can now be seen as Africa-centred because of its recent history through which it has become entangled with the continent. Although this is a valid argument to make, one might even go a step further and ask why not simply acknowledge that the Bible is an African knowledge? After all, this Scripture has a reception history on the continent that long predates European colonialism and mission (West and Dube 2000). And in the present day, it is more widely read and used by Africans than by Western Europeans. In the light of this longstanding history and the contemporary popularity of the Bible in Africa, Maathai can be seen as decolonising the Bible, that is, stripping Scripture from its entanglement

with European colonialism and appropriating it as an African knowledge. Her life and work exemplify that conversion to, or identifying with, Christianity is not necessarily an epistemicide, as Christian and biblical traditions can be appropriated and (re)interpreted in ways that are congruent with African religious and ethical worldviews. Thus, she calls into question the idea that Christianity is a Western religion, and demonstrates that it can be considered an African religion, in line with arguments developed by leading African theologians such as Kwame Bediako (1995), John Mbiti (1989) and Lamin Sanneh (2003). Maathai uniquely highlights the ways in which knowledges from Kikuyu indigenous traditions and from the Bible converge in their recognition of the earth and the natural environment as sacred, and can be constructively utilised to instil a sense of environmental urgency, respect, and responsibility.

Conclusion

Wangari Maathai is commonly depicted as an activist and scholar concerned with retaining indigenous knowledge in the light of contemporary environmental concerns (e.g., Jagire 2014; Muhonja 2020; Mutua, and Kilonzo 2018). That depiction is certainly true, as Maathai advocated relentlessly for replanting indigenous trees and revaluing indigenous technologies because of their environmental value; she appropriated traditional symbols, myths, and ritual practices, in particular from the Kikuyu, in order to enhance environmental awareness and promote an eco-spirituality of environmental responsibility. However, the depiction becomes problematic when Maathai's commitment to indigenous knowledge systems, and her related critique of Christianity for undermining these indigenous knowledges, are foregrounded in such a way that her simultaneous engagement with Christian traditions, and specifically the Bible, is systematically overlooked and remains unrecognised. The latter is not incidental but appears to reflect a broader lack of interest in the Bible as part of socio-cultural life that can be observed in African cultural studies, given the Bible's contested status as a religious text associated with the history of European colonialism and mission.

For Maathai, identifying as Christian and reading the Bible was not at odds with reclaiming African indigenous religions and cultures. She considered these traditions to be compatible, as they both offered spiritual values for ecological healing. However, she does suggest that capitalising on this compatibility requires re-reading the Bible and the Christian tradition, dissociating them from their colonising and exploitative elements. In that sense, Maathai makes an important contribution to ongoing debates about decolonising Christianity in Africa (Sakupapa 2018), as well as to the process of democratising African knowledges. The value of Maathai's work, beyond its original contribution to African biblical ecological hermeneutics, is that it demonstrates how the idea of the Bible as African knowledge is relevant, not just for the study of Christian communities and religious life on the continent, but for the study of social and political

activism, community mobilisation, and public culture in contemporary Africa. Positioning the Bible as a site of African cultural creativity and socio-political agency, Maathai challenges scholars to take the Bible seriously as a significant factor in African cultural production and social life, and as a resource for ecological and decolonial thought. It is a resource for decolonial thought, because she demonstrates how the Bible can be dis-entangled from its European colonial history and can converge with indigenous understandings of human personhood, holistic environmentalism, and ecological agency (Muhonja 2020). Finally, Maathai's creative engagement with the Bible is important for the ongoing work of environmental activism in Kenya and other African countries that, like the world at large, face huge ecological challenges. It presents a model of creatively using faith-based resources to engage communities in the work of protecting the environment. With about 60% of the population of sub-Saharan Africa identifying as Christian to date, Maathai's environmental Bible can be an effective resource for enhancing environmental respect and for healing the earth.

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