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7. A Kenyan Environmental Prophet: Wangari Maathai's Contribution to the Ecology of Religion

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Abstract

This chapter engages one of Jacob Olupona's many research interests, the relation between religion and the environment in Africa – what he calls the 'ecology of religion'. It does so by focusing on the work and thought of the late Kenyan scholar, environmental activist, and Nobel peace prize laureate, Wangari Maathai. In her book, *Replenishing the Earth*, Maathai engages a wide range of religious traditions, but especially Christianity and Kikuyu religion, in a quest for spiritual values that can contribute to healing the environmental wounds of the earth. Through a close reading of *Replenishing the Earth* and other writings of Maathai, the chapter offers a reconstruction and critical analysis of the 'ecology of religion' that she presents. Arguing that Maathai is an ecological prophet of our times, the chapter explores her significance for and contribution to the study of religion and the environment in Africa and beyond.

Introduction

The relation between religion and the environment has emerged as an important area of scholarly interest, giving rise to a new field of studies, sometimes referred to as the ecology of religion. It is one of the many subjects in which Jacob Olupona has demonstrated an active research interest himself, specifically focusing on African contexts. His contribution to this field of study is particularly concerned with what he calls 'indigenous hermeneutics', that is, 'a mode of interpretation that recognizes African imagination, sensitivity and concerns about the relationship between religion and nature' (Olupona 2006, 259). This leads him to three specific analytical lines of inquiry: first, 'the environmental referentiality of lived religion, especially rituals'; second, 'forms of religion and rituals and their contingency upon environmental variations'; third, 'the environmental imperatives of religion and rituals' (Olupona 2006, 259-260). Underlying Olupona's interest in these questions is the conviction that African religions have something to offer to the world today, in the light of the ecological challenges and environmental crises that our planet is facing. 'African traditional religions', he points out, 'are still much more closely tied to the environment where they are practiced, by incorporating natural and ecological ideas more readily into their belief structure' (Olupona 2006, 261). His suggestion is that these traditions thus offer important

and critical resources for understanding and rethinking the relationship between humans and nature, and for addressing and possibly solving our current ecological crises. Fundamentally, these resources center around ‘the sacralization of the environment and nature’, which Olupona acknowledges takes many forms in different African traditions of belief and ritual (Olupona 2006, 263).

Following Olupona’s suggestion, in this chapter I focus on the work and thought of one person who, perhaps more than anyone else, has been inspired by, and has effectively mobilized, the resources of religious traditions to address environmental concerns in contemporary Africa: the Kenyan scholar, writer, political and environmental activist, human rights campaigner, and Nobel Prize laureate, Wangari Maathai (1940-2011). Born in 1940 in Nyeri, a town in the heart of the rural homeland of the Kikuyu people with a magnificent view of Mount Kenya, Maathai grew up with a deep respect for Kikuyu traditions and customs. She trained as a biological scientist, obtaining degrees from institutions in Kenya, the US, and Germany, and became the first woman to become Chair (1976) and Associate Professor (1977) in the Department of Veterinary Anatomy of the University of Nairobi. Already from the early 1970s, she became increasingly involved in social and political activism, around women’s issues, health, democracy, human rights, and the environment, among others in her role as chairperson of the National Council of Women of Kenya (1981-1987). Her attempt to run for MP in 1982 was blocked by the ruling party of President Daniel arap Moi, which resulted in the loss of her University position in the same year. Yet, she used this setback as an opportunity to prioritize her environmental activism: ‘I started thinking hard about what the Green Belt Movement could become and the impact it could have if it was nurtured and grew and had sufficient funding and direction’ (Maathai 2006, 166). Maathai had founded the Green Belt Movement in 1977, with the aim to mobilize women in marginalized rural communities to plant trees. To date, the organization claims to have planted 51 million trees in Kenya alone (see The Green Belt Movement, no date), which testifies to the scale and enduring success of Maathai’s efforts.

As one of the most prominent women environmental activists, and as a writer and thinker about religion and ecology, Maathai deserves to be centered in the evolving field of religion and ecology (Gottlieb 2006; Jenkins, Tucker and Grim 2017). Recent scholarship on Maathai has foregrounded and explored her manifold contributions to diverse fields, not only environmental activism but also democracy, women’s rights, and sustainable development, and has portrayed her as an African eco-feminist and decolonial scholar-activist (Muhonja 2020; Musila 2020b). For Maathai, these various concerns were interconnected, and the importance of this insight was acknowledged by the Norwegian Nobel Committee as a motivation for awarding her the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize. Maathai’s work has been studied by scholars in fields such as women’s studies, development studies, and politics, and several scholars have acknowledged her religious or spiritual inspiration. For instance, Grace Musila notes how Maathai, in her autobiography *Unbowed* and in several other writings, ‘returns to this spiritual bond between human beings and nature, as a divine, life-affirming relationship that should be honoured and respected’ (Musila 2020b, 11). Layli Maparyan conceptualizes Maathai’s ecology as a ‘spiritualized sustainability’ informed by indigenous African

traditions, Christianity, and eco-spirituality (Maparyan 2012, chapter 11). Eddah Mutua and Susan Kilonzo foreground the way in which Maathai has sought ‘to maintain the spiritual connection between everyday life and the environment’ (Mutua and Kilonzo 2018, 189). In spite of these observations, scholars of religion have not engaged with Maathai’s work in-depth. Olupona himself has critically observed that her absence in the authoritative *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature* is a ‘serious omission’ (Olupona 2009, 62). Addressing this gap, this chapter examines Maathai’s contribution to the ecology of religion. I will do so by offering a close reading of her book, *Replenishing the Earth: Spiritual Values for Healing Ourselves and the World*, in which Maathai explicitly focuses on the religious and spiritual motivations that underlie her concern with the environment. Of the three lines of inquiry outlined by Olupona, Maathai appears to be particularly concerned with the third one, of ethical imperatives. Where for Olupona this is primarily an analytical question – about the ‘imperatives ranging from comprehension to control to appeasement of nature that are the *raison d’être* of religious behaviors and ritual practices’ (Olupona 2006, 260) –, for Maathai this is more of an activist question, about which ethical imperatives can be derived from religious traditions in order to enhance our relationship to nature. However, this is not a strict dichotomy, because arguably such imperatives could not be derived from religious traditions if their ritual and belief systems are not intricately connected to the environment in the first place.

Maathai opens her 2010 book, *Replenishing the Earth*, in which she explores the spiritual motivations for ecological activism, with a confession: initially, she did not link her own environmentalist work with the Green Belt Movement to her faith or to a religious inspiration. As she puts it, when beginning the work in the late 1970s, ‘I wasn’t motivated by my faith or by religion in general. ... I didn’t think digging holes and mobilizing communities to protect or restore the trees, forests, watersheds, soil, or habitats for wildlife that surrounded them was spiritual work or only relevant to the religious’ (Maathai 2010, 13). However, in the same breath she acknowledges that personally she ‘never differentiated between activities that might be called “spiritual” and those that might be termed “secular”’ (Maathai 2010, 14), thus echoing the point made by many scholars of religion in Africa, that such a distinction is problematic in African contexts (e.g. see Olupona 2014, 72). She came to realize that the planting of trees involved the sowing of a different sort of seed: ‘the ones necessary to heal the wounds inflicted on communities that robbed them of their self-confidence and self-knowledge’ (Maathai 2010, 14). This reflects Maathai’s critical awareness of what Musila (2020b, 25) calls the ‘cultural and spiritual violence’ of colonialism, and her commitment to revaluing indigenous knowledge systems. As I will demonstrate below, she undertakes such a revaluation by reconstructing and developing an eco-spirituality centered around three key themes: respect, restraint, and reverence. However, before examining these, a preliminary issue needs to be addressed: the way in which Maathai conceives of the relationship between indigenous religion and Christianity.

The Relationship between Indigenous Religion and Christianity

The account offered in this chapter serves as a counterbalance to some interpretations of Maathai that over-emphasize her critique of Christianity. An example of such an interpretation can be found in an essay by the leading scholar in the field of religion and ecology, Bron Taylor, in which he argues:

Over the years, 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 means to their own material ends. In contrast to her view of the colonial influences, Maathai's teaching and writing have promoted an organicist and holistic worldview – in which all of nature is understood as interrelated and sacred – as well as a sense of belonging, a connection to nature, and an animistic and biocentric kinship ethics. (Taylor 2020 [2013], 225)

Taylor is certainly right that Maathai has expressed profound criticism of the Western colonial religion par excellence, Christianity. Drawing critical attention to the way in which this religion was introduced to Kenya, and to much of sub-Saharan Africa, as one of the three C's of colonialism (Commerce, Civilization, and Christianity), Maathai writes: 'Throughout the nineteenth century, European missionaries crisscrossed Africa, clearing the way for Christianity. Almost immediately behind them came numerous explorers, adventurers, fortune seekers, and those in the service of the European powers prospecting for riches in Africa (both natural and human) to exploit' (Maathai 2006, 8). One of the consequences of this was a desacralization of the environment: '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). As Musila points out, Maathai follows post-colonial thinkers such as Frantz Fanon in the diagnosis that colonial modernity and the missionary project imposed 'cultural and spiritual violence' on African societies, resulting in the 'systematic corrosion of indigenous knowledge systems' (Musila 2020b, 25).

While Taylor, Musila and other scholars rightly acknowledge Maathai's critique of colonial and missionary Christianity, in my view it is equally important to recognize that her work simultaneously draws upon resources from the Christian tradition. For instance, as epigraph to her autobiography, *Unbowed*, Maathai selected a quotation from the Bible: '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' (Ezekiel 34:27). This text entails a divine promise of fertility of the land and abundance of fruits and crop. It illustrates a point that Maathai makes elsewhere with reference to the Hebrew Bible (or Old Testament), 'that if the Israelites obey the laws of the land that God has established, the land will be fruitful' (Maathai 2010, 45). Later in *Unbowed*, this biblical verse about the sacred significance of trees is complemented by the Kikuyu myth of the *mĩgumo*, or wild fig tree, which Maathai's mother taught her is 'a tree of God' (Maathai 2006, 45) and which she later discovered has great environmental importance for preserving water streams and holding the soil together.

Thus, instead of creating a simple dichotomy between indigenous African religions versus Christianity, it seems pertinent to examine how Maathai engages both traditions for a re-imagination of the relationship between humans and the environment, and how she extracts from both traditions, in the words of the sub-title of her book *Replenishing the Earth*, spiritual values for ecological healing. Although Maathai does not use concepts such as indigenization, common in African religious studies circles, or inculturation, common in African theological circles, her thinking does present an example of what Olupona (2014, 100) describes as ‘the indigenization of Christianity in sub-Saharan Africa’, which for her is an activist-intellectual quest in response to the ecological crises of our times. In this quest, she may have been inspired by her father, who belonged to the African Independent Church, which she describes as a ‘church [that] embraced both Protestant and Catholic teachings as well as aspects of Kikuyu culture’ (Maathai 2006, 10, 16), and which is one of the independent churches that, in Olupona’s words, ‘take African cosmology seriously and make great efforts to root their theologies in terms and practices that make sense to Africans’ (Olupona 2014, 100). Maathai herself converted to Catholicism while attending a Catholic boarding school run by Italian sisters, which instilled in her ‘a sense of service and the importance of volunteerism for the common good’ and the idea ‘to serve God by serving fellow human beings’ (Maathai 2006, 60-61). While studying at relatively liberal Catholic institutions in the United States during the years of Vatican Council II (1962-65), she 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). Among her sources of inspiration, she mentions the civil rights movement with its prophetic black Christian leaders such as Dr Martin Luther King Jr, Latin American liberation theology with its emphasis on social justice, and the Christian ecological movement. These movements, for her, present ‘hopeful signs [as] they can help redeem the past legacy of Christianity as a partner in the subjugation of communities and nations, and perhaps engage its leaders in the forefront of the struggle to seek justice and replenish the earth’ (Maathai 2010, 170). They reinforce Maathai’s hope that religion, in particular Christianity, ‘will become a liberatory experience’ in sub-Saharan Africa (Maathai 2010, 164) – a reality that she herself helps to imagine.

Although converting to Catholicism at a young age, and never formally leaving that tradition, Maathai admits that throughout her life she has developed ‘an ecumenical understanding of faith’ (Maathai 2010, 20). By this she appears to mean a belief in God that is not restricted to one particular religious tradition. This was expressed at her funeral where ‘multidenominational prayers were offered by clerics from the Christian, Hindu, Bahai and African traditional faiths’ (Musila 2020a, 311). In spite of this interreligious profile, and true to her Christian upbringing, in her writing Maathai often engages elements from the Christian tradition, in particular the Bible, as discussed below (also see van Klinken 2022). Ironically, it was during her PhD studies in Germany, in the late 1960s, that Maathai was challenged to further rethink the relationship between Christianity and indigenous African traditions:

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. After all, Europeans were themselves very close to their culture: How could it be bad when Africans held on to their culture even as they embraced Christianity? This was important to me because my culture was ruthlessly destroyed under the pretense that its values and those of Christianity were in conflict. (Maathai 2006, 109)

Committed to reconciling, and drawing upon, the positive aspects of both traditions, Maathai exemplifies an active quest for indigenization, or inculturation, which in her case is specifically (but not exclusively) concerned with the environment. Doing so, she engages with what Olupona conceptualizes as ‘indigenous hermeneutics’. But importantly, for her this is not limited to indigenous religious traditions and ritual but also includes Christianity, consciously or unconsciously following the argument of scholars that Christianity can be considered an African religion (e.g. see Mbiti 1989, 223). Thus, alongside indigenous hermeneutics, she also engages in biblical hermeneutics, as in *Replenishing the Earth* she extensively quotes and discusses texts from the Bible. Partly this appears to be strategic. Acknowledging that in Kenya and in most of sub-Saharan Africa, ‘Christianity is the dominant religion and the Bible is usually the only text that people associate with it’, Maathai (2010, 20) motivates the Green Belt Movement’s use of the Bible as part of its outreach to communities. These biblical teachings ‘offer guidance – alas, widely ignored by the faithful – on how the earth’s natural resources ought to be treated’ (Maathai 2010, 20). However, her engagement with the Bible also reflects her own rootedness in, and familiarity with, the Christian tradition, and her belief that Christianity can be saved from its colonial and exploitative excesses. As she puts it, ‘In the Christian tradition, for example, aspects of the original faith were disconnected from care of the earth, when carriers of the faith became politically entangled with the expansionists, colonialists, and exploiters of peoples and the planet’ (Maathai 2010, 18-19). The suggestion here is that care of the earth is part of the original tenets of the Christian faith, which have become marginalized but can be rediscovered and reclaimed. Maathai herself indeed undertakes the latter by offering ecological readings of the Bible, which she harmonizes with the Kikuyu indigenous rituals and beliefs that she reclaims, and which together form the basis for an ecological spirituality and ethics.

Admittedly, *Replenishing the Earth* demonstrates an engagement with a wide array of religious traditions, including from Asia. This illustrates the global scope of her interest and work, and it reflects her conviction that generally speaking ‘the world’s spiritual traditions are well placed to help us not only appreciate the possibility of limits, but foster a feeling of gratitude and respect for the earth’s resources’ (Maathai 2010, 117). In what follows, however, the focus will specifically be on Kikuyu religion and Christianity, as these are most substantially engaged in her writing, and are most relevant to the Kenyan context that was Maathai’s primary concern (she pays relatively little attention to Islam, which in Kenya is another significant factor in the religious landscape). I will discuss three central themes in Maathai’s eco-spirituality – respect, restraint, and reverence –, which I have identified through an analysis of her writings, in particular *Replenishing the Earth*.

Respect

As mentioned above, Maathai came to realize that the current ecological crisis is not only of a physical but also of a spiritual nature. Addressing this crisis, she argues, ‘requires a new level of consciousness, where we understand that we belong to the larger family of life on Earth. If we were able to achieve this consciousness, we’d see that the planet is hurting, and internalize the spiritual values that can help us move to address the wounds’ (Maathai 2010, 25).

For humans to rediscover that they are part of ‘the larger family of life on earth’ is essential to developing an attitude of respect for the environment. Such respect was at the heart of several traditional rituals and practices of the Kikuyu, which ‘expressed gratitude for the bounty of their region and its continuance’ (Maathai 2010, 50). As an example, she refers to the practice of *ikũmbĩ ria Ngai* (“granary of God”), according to which every farmer was expected to leave a small portion of the harvest in the field, for consumption by people with a lack of food and wild animals. As much as this ‘tithe’ was meant for other people and animals, the name also suggests that simultaneously it was seen as a sacrifice to God. Respect for domestic animals was reflected in the Kikuyu social taboo around slaughter. To kill an animal, permission had first to be sought from God and the ancestors, and ‘to protect the animal from the trauma of instant death, it would first be denied air and blood to the brain before a knife touched its body’ (Maathai 2010, 52). Such practices ‘inculcated respect and a sense of gratitude for animals sacrificed to sustain human life’ (Maathai 2010, 53). The same applies to Kikuyu ceremonies that ‘mandated an interlude of rest’, such as on the day after a burial, and around the time of harvest (Maathai 2010, 120-21).

Maathai distills a similar attitude of respect for the environment from the Bible. The creation story in Genesis 2-3 for her conveys the key message that ‘although the human being is given permission to use the resources he finds there [the Garden of Eden], he must be respectful of and grateful for them, recognizing that some are off-limits, and that he should not waste either them or the opportunity to be a good steward’ (Maathai 2010, 117). She further points at the Jewish tradition of the Shabbat (in Christianity developed into the Sunday) as a day of rest that enables us ‘being grateful for what the earth has provided, and allowing ourselves and nature a chance to regenerate’ (Maathai 2010, 119). The Hebrew Bible instructs keeping a Jubilee year, which for Maathai is a year ‘intended to acknowledge the inherent goodness of God’s creation ... and an opening for the community as a whole to start again’ (Maathai 2010, 119). ‘Revivifying the meaning of the Sabbath and Jubilee’, she suggests, is a way of honoring ‘the ancient wisdom contained in the Hebrew scriptures with a commitment to confronting the particular environmental challenges of today’ (Maathai 2010, 120). Elaborating on the importance of biodiversity, including protection of the smallest species which significance for the ecosystem we may not even be aware of, Maathai again quotes the Bible, this time the New Testament: ‘The Bible understands the importance of recognizing 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 2010, 68).

She laments how traditional attitudes of ecological respect have been greatly affected by modernity. Among the Kikuyu, they died out with the introduction of the cash economy that was ‘created by the colonial authority, quickly embraced by the locals, and continued by postcolonial governments’, and in which land and animals became simply objects of consumption and exploitation (Maathai 2010, 53). With regard to contemporary Christianity, she observes that ‘although the Bible may offer instruction to care for the earth and not to waste God’s creation, some aspects of contemporary Christian culture unfortunately encourage precisely the reverse’ (Maathai 2010, 122). She illustrates this by referring to the other-worldly orientation of some Christians, who believe that the earth is just a transit camp as their destiny is in heaven. ‘This encourages a belief that the environment around us is not really important, such a worldview is directly opposed to the value of gratitude and respect for what the earth provides’ (Maathai 2010, 123).

Restraint

A fundamental attitude of respect for the environment will result in a practice of restraint in the management of the earth’s resources. Early on in *Replenishing the Earth*, Maathai recalls a visit to the Congo Basin rain forest in central Africa – known as the world’s ‘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:

At the remains of the once living, vibrant tree was 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 2010, 42)

Having invoked the Christian trope of hell, 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 Book of Numbers, chapter 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 2010, 45)

The key lesson, for her, is that humans need to control the insatiable craving for more, which only leads to the exploitation of the environment, and which indicates 'psychological desperation and spiritual weakness' (Maathai 2010, 45). Controlling such craving, she admits, will require 'monumental discipline' which will only occur when it is linked to the 'consciousness that is essential to healing the earth' (Maathai 2010, 49).

Maathai points at several traditional practices in which that discipline and restraint is embedded. For instance, the Kikuyu tradition of hospitality, according to which travelers were allowed to eat food from the fields, but only as much as they could eat. For her, the underlying cultural message is that 'no one should be too greedy or take advantage of another's generosity', adding that 'this sense of restraint was also considered a virtue' (Maathai 2010, 51). Another example is the way in which the Kikuyu traditionally handled situations of excessively abundant harvests or over-productive livestock, with people being required to fast and to sacrifice part of the crops and animals. 'In these disparate ways, members of the community were thanking God for what they had been lucky enough to receive, practicing humility for his generosity toward them, along with felling almost a sense of regret for the excess' (Maathai 2010, 122). Such practices, Maathai suggests, contain important lessons for today, where the earth is exploited, its resources unequally shared, and so much food is wasted.

Reverence

For Maathai, the notions of respect and restraint are not just general ecological ethical principles, but are embedded in an eco-spirituality characterized by reverence towards the earth. In her elaboration of this point, Maathai creatively negotiates a tension between Kikuyu indigenous religion and Christianity in their respective understandings of the natural environment.

With regard to the Kikuyu, she argues that the natural environment is sacred, directly so, because it is seen as inhabited by spiritual beings. She specifically points at the significance of trees. Although trees were not revered per se, specific trees were considered the habitation of spirits and divinities. Reconstructing what Olupona calls 'indigenous hermeneutics', Maathai explicates the environmental imperatives of Kikuyu religious beliefs and practices. For instance, when foresting a particular area, communities were supposed to let the largest trees stand, as they would provide a home to the spirits of the other, smaller, trees that had been cut down. This spiritual rationale had, however, a vital ecological effect: it prevented 'wholesale deforestation' and thus retained water and topsoil (Maathai 2010, 78). Another notable example is the already mentioned *mĩgumo*, or fig tree, which the Kikuyu perceived as a tree of God. Recalling how her mother forbade collecting twigs for firewood from around the fig tree near their homestead, Maathai emphasizes the 'protoecological reasoning' behind this perception of the *mĩgumo* as sacred:

The tree's deep root system prevented landslides and allowed rainwater to travel from underground reservoirs to the surface in the streams and rivulets that then burst through the soil. Killing or harming every fig tree would, therefore, mean destabilizing the soil and making both the conservation of water and removing it from the ground more difficult. (Maathai 2010, 78-79)

Years later, when she returned to the homestead, she found the fig tree of her youth being felled by the new owner, who thought the tree took up too much space that could be used for growing tea instead. 'By then', she reflects, 'I understood the connection between the tree and water, so it did not surprise me that when the fig tree was cut down, the stream where I had played with the tadpoles dried up' (Maathai 2006, 122). Mourning the loss of that tree, Maathai realized how the reverence for the fig tree presented a case, in Musila's words, of 'indigenous ecological epistemologies as guidelines on maintaining ecological balance' (Musila 2020b, 29).

Interestingly, Maathai suggests that the belief in the sacredness of trees is not only found in indigenous religions across Africa – she cites examples from Ghana and Nigeria, Zimbabwe, South Africa, Malawi, Zambia and Angola as well as North Africa – but also in the Hebrew Bible, where specific trees are seen as 'a token of God's presence', such as in the stories about the Garden of Eden, Noah's ark, Joshua and Abraham, and in the prophecies by Ezekiel, Jeremiah, and Hosea (Maathai 2010, 81). Similarly, pointing at the African belief in the sacred grove – particular parts of the forest where the divine might be experienced – she suggests that similar beliefs can be found in the Bible, for instance in stories about Jesus retreating in the desert or praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, underlining the point of certain landscapes serving as sites of divine revelation (Maathai 2010, 83).

The attitude of respect and honor for certain trees for Maathai reflects a more 'general reverence for nature' among the Kikuyu (Maathai 2010, 79). This reverence was further expressed by practices such as removing one's sandals when approaching a tree during a ritual ceremony, or when climbing Mount Kenya, the sacred mountain of the Kikuyu. In her autobiography *Unbowed*, Maathai explores the sacred significance of Mount Kenya, known locally as Kirinyaga ("place of brightness"). She refers to the Kikuyu myth of origin, according to which 'God created the primordial parents, Gikuyu and Mumbi, and from Mount Kenya showed them the land on which they were to settle' (Maathai 2006, 4). Mount Kenya being a sacred place, the Kikuyu would face the mountain 'whether they were praying, burying their dead, or performing sacrifices [...] and when they built their houses, they made sure the doors looked toward it. As long as the mountain stood, people believed that God was with them and that they would want for nothing' (Maathai 2006, 5). Maathai critically recounts how the belief that 'God dwelled on the mountain' was undermined by Christian missionaries who convinced people that God rather lived in heaven, which effectively disenchanting the mountain and its forests (Maathai 2009, 173). Subsequently, the mountain's unique and vital ecosystem has been 'ravaged by deforestation, illegal logging,

nonindigenous plantations, overcultivation, and other forms of human encroachment’ (Maathai 2009, 240).

Restoring a sense of reverence for the environment is crucial, for Maathai, in order to develop ecological responsibility. However, she appears to realize that indigenous Kikuyu worldviews in which the environment is sacred because it is a home to spirits and God, cannot simply be reinstated in the contemporary context where Christianity has become the major religion. Indeed, with reference to the Green Belt Movement seminars in Kenya, she points out that ‘we also 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), which reflects her awareness that the conflict between indigenous and missionary Christian cosmologies is still very real. Yet within a Christian framework, she creates a maximum space for acknowledging the sacredness of nature. For instance, pointing at the human ability to appreciate the natural world, Maathai suggests that such responses ‘inspire in us a sense of wonder and beauty that in turn encourages a sense of the divine’:

That consciousness acknowledges that while a certain tree, forest, or mountain itself may not be holy, the life-sustaining services it provides – the oxygen we breathe, the water we drink – are what make existence possible, and so deserve our respect. From this point of view, the environment becomes sacred, because to destroy what is essential to life is to destroy life itself. (Maathai 2010, 18)

Thus, the natural environment is sacred, not because it is inhabited by spirits or God, but because it contains the force of life that, fundamentally, is rooted in God as the creator.

Replenishing the Earth opens with a semi-biblical quotation as epigraph, coming from Ecclesiastes Rabbah, which is a medieval Jewish commentary on the biblical book of Ecclesiastes. 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.’ The I-person in this text is God, who here claims to be the origin of the beauty of creation. It confirms Maathai’s just-quoted belief that the beauty of the earth can inspire ‘a sense of the divine’. As much as hell reveals itself in the harvested forests of the Congo Basin, she also recognizes 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 2010, 75). Thus, from this perspective the natural environment is worthy of reverence because it is God’s creation. Reading the Genesis creation stories, Maathai takes as the key lesson ‘that God’s primary vision, expressed in the Garden of Eden, is one of humans living in harmony with the natural world’ (Maathai 2010, 72). Maintaining, or restoring, that harmony, then, through attitudes of respect and responsibility for the environment, becomes the most important ecological imperative.

An Environmental Prophet

The title of this chapter suggests that Maathai can be considered a contemporary environmental prophet. This is more than just a nice rhetorical suggestion, and it is not just to add another chapter to my interest in contemporary prophetic figures in Kenya (van Klinken 2016; Kapinde and van Klinken, forthcoming). My submission is that Maathai is a prophet, both in the Kikuyu and in the biblical traditions of prophecy.

In their book about prophecy in East African traditions, Douglas Johnson and David Anderson define the figure of the prophet as ‘an inspired figure [...] concerned with the wider moral community at a social or political level’ whose moral authority ‘carries force *because* it is believed to be inspired by a divinity or other source of spiritual or moral knowledge that influences the destiny of the community’ (Johnson and Anderson 1995, 17-18). Obviously, as an environmental, political and women’s rights activist, Maathai was profoundly concerned with the fate and future of her community – locally, nationally and globally – at a socio-political level. She addressed and campaigned on these concerns with great courage, strong determination, and clear vision. Doing so, she experienced severe opposition and resistance, but also received more and more recognition. The tributes that were published after her death in 2011 ‘paint an awe-inspiring mosaic of Maathai’s multilayered legacy that will continue to guide, inspire and provoke many generations of people from different geopolitical and cultural contexts’ (Musila 2020a, 304-305). She received a state funeral from the same state that for so long had harassed and repeatedly imprisoned her. The environment being the primary focus of her activist work since the early 1970s, Maathai explains her early interest in, and concern about environmental change by referring to a variety of factors, such as her growing up in the countryside and the wisdom from her mother, her scientific training, and the international networks she had begun to establish. Importantly, in the light of the above definition of the prophet, she also points at the divine – which she interchangeably refers to as God or the Source – as a defining factor:

I can also point to the Source as the wellspring for all the ideas that came. Sometimes the inspiration to act arrives as a spark; sometimes it takes the form of a process. Whether one is drawn into an action through a sudden rush of inspiration, or through the slow dawning of a realization that something needs to change, I would argue that it all comes from the Source. (Maathai 2010, 31)

Thus, as much as her foundational inspiration is gendered, as Musila (2020a, 308) argues, it is also spiritual. Arguably, there is no tension between these two, as women activists, writers and thinkers have been at the forefront of developing new religious discourses that address ecological concerns (Hoel and Nogueira-Godsey 2011). In Maathai’s case, her spiritual inspiration is not just informed by her understanding of religious traditions, both indigenous, Christian, and otherwise, but fundamentally, as she claims herself, by her experience of the divine. This experience itself is, of course, mediated, both by her rootedness in Kikuyu tradition and in Christian faith. As far as Kikuyu tradition is concerned, in the words of Ogaga Okuyade, Maathai ‘enchantingly weaves myth into history’ in order to enunciate the interconnectedness of the social, cultural and religious practices of her people and the natural environment in which they are practiced (Okuyade 2020, 201).

As far as Christian faith is concerned, Maathai demonstrates a high level of familiarity with the Bible, undoubtedly the most-cited text in *Replenishing the Earth*. Not only does she creatively relate biblical stories and texts to contemporary ecological issues, she also inventively reinterprets central symbols of the Christian tradition, such as the cross, as a resource for building environmental awareness. Pointing at the wooden cross on which Jesus brought salvation to humankind, she preaches that the planting of a new tree becomes the ‘symbolic replacing of Christ’s tree of death with a tree that can bring life and food to many creatures (including humans)’ (Maathai 2010, 133-34). Above all, Maathai is clearly inspired by traditions of prophecy in the Bible. Referring to prophets such as Isaiah and Ezekiel, she argues: ‘I see them 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’ (Maathai 2010, 125). She takes direct inspiration from these prophets when she critiques popular forms of Christianity in Kenya, with their other-worldly orientation and their dependency on God’s intervention to deal with problems rather than an emphasis on individual and communal responsibility and initiative. What Maathai (2010, 125) writes about the biblical prophets – that they ‘are asking why we do this to the earth, and they are commanding us to heal and replenish it now’ – does, in fact, also apply to herself.

In Johnson and Anderson’s definition of the prophet, one criterion is whether the receiving community believed the prophecy to be divinely inspired. Whether or not this was the case with Maathai’s ecological prophecy is difficult to verify, and is perhaps not a relevant question to ask. After all, she herself acknowledges that for her, there is no strict distinction between spiritual and secular activities. Certainly, many people discerned that she spoke with great moral and spiritual knowledge, and thus effectively ‘recognized and bestowed authority’ on her, giving her ecological prophesy an audience and rendering it meaningful (Johnson and Anderson 1995, 19).

Conclusion

This chapter has sought to address what Olupona (2009, 62) has identified as a ‘serious omission’: the failure to recognize Wangari Maathai’s contribution to the study of religion and nature. For someone who excuses herself for being ‘neither a theologian nor a scholar of religion’ (Maathai 2010, 19), Maathai has made an important and original contribution to this field of study. This contribution is twofold: first, it relates to the ecology of Kikuyu religion, where she reconstructs the indigenous hermeneutics through which Kikuyu belief, ritual and custom map onto the environment and serve to maintain an ecological balance. Second, it relates to her ecological critique of contemporary Christianity in Kenya, and her creative re-imagination of Christian traditions in ways that converge with indigenous traditions of environmental respect and reverence, and that offer biblical and theological resources for an indigenized, ecologically responsible form of Christianity. As far as scholars have engaged with Maathai’s attitude towards religion, they have frequently over-emphasized her critique of Christianity in both its colonial and postcolonial forms. This chapter has shown, however, that Maathai, despite her profound criticism of the colonial and exploitative excesses of

Christianity, also creatively and constructively engages with Christian traditions, alongside indigenous Kikuyu religion. She offers an ecological account of both traditions that renders them compatible and that integrates them to support an ecological and ecumenical spirituality in the contemporary context. This in itself is methodologically important, as it brings home the point made by many scholars of religion in Africa, that indigenous African religions and Christianity cannot be studied separately but in their manifold and complex interactions. As an activist and writer, Maathai has innovatively contributed to emerging 'African traditions in the study of religion in Africa' (Adogame, Chitando and Bateye, 2012), by putting questions of ecology on top of the agenda, by experimenting new ways of writing and knowledge production in the form of storytelling and personal reflection, and by reconstructing and mobilizing African religious knowledges to address some of the major challenges of our time.

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