ESCHATOLOGICAL FATALISM AND CLIMATE INACTION: A PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION ANALYSIS OF DOMINANT END-TIME BELIEFS IN NIGERIAN CHRISTIANITY

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Abstract

This paper interrogates the relationship between eschatological fatalism and climate inaction within the context of Nigerian Christianity using the lens of philosophy of religion. It observes that certain dominant end-time beliefs such as: the earth is transient, heaven is humans' permanent dwelling place, and the cosmos is divinely ordained for destruction, can foster a form of ethical disengagement from ecological responsibility. Drawing on conceptual analysis and critical hermeneutics, the study examines how these beliefs shape moral attitudes towards responsible environmental stewardship in the face of the global ecological crisis. The paper further engages African philosophical perspectives, especially communitarian and relational ontologies, to challenge the individualistic and otherworldly orientation of such eschatological frameworks. The study emphasizes that eschatological beliefs need not undermine ecological commitment. Ultimately, it contends that a critical re-evaluation of dominant end-time beliefs is necessary to realign Nigerian Christian thought with ethical imperatives for environmental sustainability. It concludes that reconstructing eschatological consciousness along the lines of this-worldly and responsibility-centered stewardship is crucial for mobilizing faith-based responses to the climate crisis in the twenty-first century.

Keywords: Eschatology, fatalism, climate change, ecological crisis, and ecological stewardship

Introduction

The accelerating ecological crisis of the twenty-first century evident in climate change, biodiversity loss, and widespread environmental degradation has prompted renewed interdisciplinary inquiry into the ethical, cultural, and religious drivers of human interaction with the natural world. While scientific and policy-oriented responses remain indispensable, growing attention has been directed toward the role of religion as a formative influence on

moral attitudes and behavioral dispositions (IPCC, 2021; Tucker & Grim, 2017). In Nigeria, where Christianity exerts significant socio-cultural and ethical influence, particular strands of eschatological thought within evangelical and Pentecostal traditions warrant critical examination. Specifically, dominant end-time beliefs that portray the earth as transient, prioritize heaven as the ultimate locus of human fulfillment, and interpret ecological crises as signs of divinely ordained cosmic destruction may inadvertently foster what can be described as eschatological fatalism. From a philosophical standpoint, such fatalism raises pressing questions about moral agency, responsibility, and the ethical valuation of the material world. When the present order is construed as disposable in light of an anticipated divine future, the motivation for sustained ecological stewardship may be undermined. This tension reflects a deeper conflict within philosophy of religion between transcendence and immanence, as well as between teleological hope and ethical obligation (Jonas, 1984; Polkinghorne, 2002). Moreover, in the context of climate change which demands long-term, collective, and responsibility-driven action, fatalistic interpretations of eschatology risk reinforcing passivity and disengagement. This study therefore undertakes a philosophical analysis of dominant end-time beliefs in Nigerian Christianity, interrogating their implications for environmental ethics and climate inaction. By engaging African relational ontology and communitarian ethics as critical resources, the paper argues for a reconfiguration of eschatological consciousness that affirms both spiritual hope and ecological responsibility.

Conceptual Clarifications

Concepts in a research can easily be misconstrued if they are not put in proper context. Thus, it is critical to provide conceptual clarifications of words such as: eschatology, eschatological fatalism, climate inaction and environmental ethics as used in this context.

Eschatology and Eschatological Fatalism

Eschatology, within Christian theology, refers to doctrinal reflections on the "last things," including death, judgment, heaven, hell, and the ultimate destiny of the world. It provides a teleological framework through which believers interpret history and human existence in light of divine purpose (McGrath, 2017; Koko, 2018; Koko & Akinola, 2024). While eschatology can inspire hope and moral seriousness, certain interpretations tend toward what may be described as eschatological fatalism, the belief that earthly realities are transient and ultimately irrelevant due to the inevitability of divine intervention and cosmic destruction. This fatalistic orientation is often grounded in apocalyptic readings of biblical texts, where the present world is portrayed as passing away in preparation for a new divine order (Bauckham, 2010). Philosophically, eschatological fatalism raises concerns about moral agency and responsibility. For instance, if the world is perceived as irredeemably corrupt and destined for destruction, then human efforts to preserve or improve it may appear futile. Arguably, such a worldview risks fostering disengagement from pressing ethical concerns, including environmental care. As Polkinghorne (2002) notes, theological interpretations that emphasize discontinuity between the present world and the eschaton can weaken commitments to the material order. Thus, while eschatology is central to Christian theology, its fatalistic distortions present significant ethical challenges that warrant critical philosophical scrutiny.

Climate Inaction and Environmental Ethics

Climate inaction refers to the failure or reluctance of individuals, institutions, or societies to take meaningful steps toward mitigating or adapting to climate change, despite

clear scientific evidence of its impacts. This phenomenon is often attributed not only to political and economic factors but also to underlying belief systems and moral frameworks that shape human attitudes toward nature (Gardiner, 2011). Environmental ethics, as a branch of moral philosophy, examines the ethical relationship between humans and the natural environment, emphasizing duties of care, sustainability, and intergenerational justice (DesJardins, 2013).

From an ethical standpoint, climate inaction represents a failure of responsibility, particularly toward future generations who will bear the consequences of present environmental degradation. Gardiner (2011) characterizes climate change as a "perfect moral storm," where weak global governance, intergenerational injustice, and moral corruption converge to hinder effective action. Religious beliefs can either mitigate or exacerbate this problem. When environmental degradation is interpreted as inevitable or divinely ordained, moral urgency may be diminished. Conversely, ethical frameworks that emphasize stewardship and the intrinsic value of nature encourage proactive engagement. Therefore, understanding the philosophical and religious roots of climate inaction is crucial for developing more effective and ethically grounded responses to the ecological crisis.

Theoretical Framework on Ethics of Responsibility and Stewardship

This study is anchored on the ethics of responsibility, particularly as articulated within philosophical and theological traditions that emphasize stewardship of the earth. Hans Jonas' ethics of responsibility provides a compelling framework, arguing that the unprecedented scale of human technological power imposes a moral obligation to ensure the continued existence of life on earth (Jonas, 1984). According to Jonas, ethical action must be guided by a forward-looking responsibility that prioritizes the well-being of future generations and the preservation of the natural environment. This perspective challenges short-term and fatalistic orientations that neglect long-term consequences. Complementing this is the theological notion of stewardship, which views humans as caretakers rather than owners of the earth. Stewardship ethics emphasizes accountability, sustainability, and the responsible use of natural resources, grounded in the belief that creation possesses intrinsic value beyond human utility (Northcott, 2007). From a philosophical standpoint, this framework bridges the gap between religious belief and environmental ethics by reinterpreting dominion as responsibility rather than exploitation.

Applied to the present study, the ethics of responsibility and stewardship provides a normative basis for critiquing eschatological fatalism. It affirms that belief in a future divine order does not absolve humans of their present duty to protect and sustain the environment.

Nigerian Christianity and Dominant End-Time Beliefs

Christianity in Nigeria has a complex historical trajectory shaped by missionary enterprise, colonial encounter, and indigenous religious adaptation. The initial introduction of Christianity dates back to the fifteenth century through Portuguese contact along the coastal regions; however, its sustained expansion occurred in the nineteenth century with the activities of European missionary societies such as the Church Missionary Society (CMS), Wesleyan Methodists, and Roman Catholics (Ajayi, 1965). These missions emphasized evangelism, education, and moral reform, laying the institutional foundations of Nigerian Christianity. By the early twentieth century, tensions between missionary control and indigenous agency gave

rise to African Independent or Indigenous Churches, which sought to contextualize Christianity within African cosmologies and spiritual sensibilities (Peel, 2000). Consequently, the mid-to-late twentieth century witnessed the rapid growth of evangelical and Pentecostal movements, which have since become dominant expressions of Christianity in Nigeria. Influenced by global revivalist currents, Nigerian Pentecostalism emphasizes personal conversion, biblical literalism, spiritual warfare, and an intense expectation of divine intervention in worldly affairs (Gifford, 2004). Central to many of these movements is a heightened eschatological consciousness, often expressed through sermons, prophetic declarations, and popular religious media. This eschatological orientation has contributed significantly to shaping the worldview of many Nigerian Christians, particularly regarding the nature and destiny of the world. The three dominant eschatological beliefs are discussed below:

The Belief of the earth as a temporary dwelling

One of the most pervasive beliefs within this framework is the *notion of the earth as a temporary dwelling*. Drawing on biblical motifs such as believers being "strangers" or "pilgrims" on earth, this view interprets human existence as transient and provisional (Adeboye, 2006). While such imagery can encourage detachment from material excess and moral discipline, it may also engender a diminished sense of responsibility toward the physical environment. For instance, if the earth is merely a temporary passage, its long-term preservation may appear less morally urgent. Philosophically, this raises questions about the grounding of environmental obligations in a worldview that devalues permanence and continuity.

The Belief of the heaven as the ultimate and permanent home of the faithful

Closely related is *the belief in heaven as the ultimate and permanent home of the faithful*. Within many Nigerian Christian circles, heaven is not only the final destination but also the primary focus of religious aspiration. Sermons and devotional practices frequently emphasize the need to prepare for eternal life, often portraying earthly existence as secondary or even insignificant in comparison (Marshall, 2009; Koko, 2018; Koko & Akinola, 2024). This strong otherworldly orientation can foster a dualistic outlook that separates the spiritual from the material, privileging the former at the expense of the latter. From a philosophical perspective, such dualism risks undermining the intrinsic value of the natural world by subordinating it entirely to eschatological fulfillment.

The Belief in the divine destiny of cosmic destruction

A third dominant belief is *the conviction in the divine destiny of cosmic destruction*. Influenced by apocalyptic interpretations of biblical texts, particularly from books such as Daniel and Revelation, many Christians understand current global crises including environmental degradation and climate change as signs of the imminent end of the world (Bauckham, 2010). This perspective often frames ecological collapse not as a problem to be solved but as a prophecy to be fulfilled. As Gifford (2004) observes, apocalyptic narratives in African Pentecostalism frequently interpret socio-political and environmental crises through a theological lens that emphasizes divine sovereignty over human agency. While this belief may reinforce faith in divine providence, it can also cultivate a sense of inevitability that discourages proactive engagement with environmental challenges.

The dissemination of these beliefs occurs through multiple channels, including preaching, biblical interpretation, religious literature, music, and increasingly, digital media.

Pentecostal pastors and evangelists, in particular, play a significant role in shaping popular theology through sermons that often emphasize eschatological urgency and spiritual preparedness (Ukah, 2008). Television broadcasts, social media platforms, and Christian publications further amplify these messages, creating a widespread and deeply internalized eschatological consciousness. The authority accorded to religious leaders in many Nigerian contexts enhances the persuasive power of these teachings, making them influential determinants of moral attitudes and behaviors.

From a philosophical standpoint, these dominant end-time beliefs collectively contribute to what may be described as eschatological fatalism a worldview that interprets earthly realities as ultimately inconsequential in light of an anticipated divine future. For lack of space, it is appropriate to postpone the discussion of the significant implications of these beliefs for environmental stewardship to a latter section.

Implications of Eschatological Fatalism for Environmental Stewardship

It is safe to argue given the inferences above that eschatological fatalism exerts a profound influence on moral psychology by shaping how individuals perceive agency, responsibility, and the significance of human action in history.

Psychological implication

At its core, fatalism encourages the belief that ultimate outcomes are divinely predetermined and therefore largely independent of human intervention. Within certain strands of Nigerian Christianity, this orientation is reinforced through apocalyptic preaching that emphasizes the imminence of the end times and the inevitability of divine judgment. Psychologically, such beliefs can produce a diminished sense of efficacy, where individuals perceive their actions as inconsequential in altering the course of events (Bandura, 2001; Koko, 2018; Koko & Akinola, 2024). When moral agency is weakened in this way, the motivation to engage in long-term, collective efforts such as environmental conservation becomes significantly reduced. As Gardiner (2011) argues, climate change already presents challenges of motivation due to its diffuse and long-term nature; when compounded by religious fatalism, the likelihood of inaction increases. This moral psychology often translates into a practical indifference to environmental degradation. This is because if the earth is understood as transient and destined for eventual destruction, ecological concerns may be viewed as secondary or even irrelevant. In such a framework, environmental degradation is not necessarily perceived as a moral failure but as part of a broader divine plan. This attitude resonates with what White (1967) famously critiqued as the desacralization of nature within certain interpretations of Christianity, where the natural world is stripped of intrinsic value and reduced to a temporary stage for human salvation. Although White's thesis has been widely debated, it remains instructive in highlighting how theological assumptions can influence environmental attitudes. In the Nigerian context, where religious authority is highly influential, such interpretations can normalize neglect of ecological responsibilities. Northcott (2007) is therefore perfectly in order to observe that when environmental crises are interpreted through a theological lens that prioritizes divine sovereignty over human responsibility, the urgency of ecological action may be significantly undermined.

Scientific and theological implications

A further dimension of eschatological fatalism is the interpretation of climate change as a sign of the end times. Within apocalyptic frameworks, natural disasters, extreme weather events, and ecological disruptions are often read as fulfillments of biblical prophecy, particularly those associated with the "last days" (Bauckham, 2010). It is critical to submit that while such interpretations can provide existential meaning in the face of uncertainty, they also risk reframing climate change from a problem requiring human intervention into a confirmation of divine inevitability. This shift has significant implications. First, it can discourage critical engagement with scientific explanations of climate change by subordinating them to theological narratives. Second, it may foster a passive acceptance of environmental decline as both expected and unavoidable. As Boykoff (2011) observes, public understanding of climate change is deeply shaped by cultural and ideological frameworks, including religion; when these frameworks interpret environmental crisis as divinely ordained, they can hinder efforts toward mitigation and adaptation.

Moral implication

Moreover, the framing of climate change as eschatological fulfillment can create a paradoxical moral stance in which ecological deterioration is not only tolerated but, in some cases, implicitly welcomed as evidence of impending salvation. This dynamic reflects what Skrimshire (2015) describes as the "apocalyptic imagination," where catastrophic visions of the future are imbued with redemptive significance. In such a context, the ethical imperative can shift from preserving the earth to preparing for its end, thereby displacing environmental responsibility with spiritual readiness. The consequence is a form of disengagement that undermines collective efforts to address climate challenges at both local and global levels.

Philosophical and Ethical Implications

From a philosophical perspective, these patterns of thought raise critical concerns regarding responsibility, agency, and ethical neglect. The concept of responsibility presupposes that individuals and communities have both the capacity and the obligation to act in ways that influence outcomes. However, eschatological fatalism disrupts this assumption by locating ultimate control in divine will, thereby attenuating the perceived relevance of human action (Koko, 2018; Koko & Akinola, 2024). Jonas (1984) argues that in an age of technological and environmental vulnerability, the scope of human responsibility must expand rather than contract. To retreat into fatalism is, therefore, to abdicate a fundamental ethical duty to safeguard the conditions of life for present and future generations. Similarly, the issue of agency is central to any meaningful ethical framework. Moral agency entails the ability to deliberate, choose, and act in ways that have real consequences. Fatalistic beliefs, by emphasizing inevitability, can erode this sense of agency and foster passivity. This is particularly problematic in the context of climate change, which requires sustained, intentional action across multiple levels of society. As Gardiner (2011) emphasizes, overcoming climate inaction demands a robust sense of moral agency that resists the temptation to defer responsibility to external forces, whether political, economic, or theological. Finally, eschatological fatalism could contribute to what may be termed ethical neglect- a failure to recognize and respond to moral obligations toward the environment. This neglect is not necessarily the result of malice or ignorance but of a worldview that deprioritizes the material world in favor of a transcendent future. From the standpoint of environmental ethics, such a position is deeply problematic. It undermines principles of intergenerational justice, which

require that current generations act in ways that do not compromise the well-being of future ones (DesJardins, 2013). It also conflicts with relational and holistic ethical frameworks, particularly those found in African philosophy, which emphasize the interconnectedness of all forms of life (Gyekye, 1997).

In all, it could be stated that eschatological fatalism shapes moral psychology in ways that diminish agency, fosters indifference to environmental degradation, reframes climate change as a sign of inevitable divine intervention, and ultimately contributes to ethical neglect. While these beliefs have huge implications on environmental consciousness, there are those who argue otherwise in favour of such eschatological beliefs. Some of these counterarguments need to be considered.

Possible Counterarguments in Favour of Christian Eschatological Beliefs

There is no doubt that a balanced philosophical analysis requires serious engagement with counterarguments that defend eschatological belief and question its alleged link to climate inaction. One prominent counter position is that Christian eschatology, properly understood, does not entail fatalism but rather hope that can motivate ethical responsibility. Theologians argue that biblical eschatology is not about the annihilation of creation but its renewal and transformation. Wright (2008) contends that the New Testament envisions not the abandonment of the earth but its redemption, thereby affirming the enduring value of the material world. Similarly, Bauckham (2010) emphasizes that creation remains part of God's salvific plan, which implies that it should be treated with care rather than neglect.

Another important perspective emerges from stewardship theology, which interprets humanity's role in the world as that of responsible caretakers. Rooted in the Genesis mandate to "tend and keep" the earth, this view maintains that environmental responsibility is an integral aspect of Christian discipleship (Horrell et al., 2010). From this standpoint, eschatological hope does not negate ecological concern; rather, it reinforces it by situating human action within a broader divine purpose. Northcott (2007) further argues that Christian ethics, when properly articulated, provides a strong foundation for environmental stewardship by linking care for creation with love of neighbor and justice.

In addition, some scholars caution against overgeneralizing religious influence on environmental behavior. Empirical studies suggest that attitudes toward climate change are shaped by a complex interplay of socio-economic, political, and cultural factors, not solely by theological beliefs (Boykoff, 2011). Within Nigerian Christianity itself, there is considerable diversity, and not all believers subscribe to fatalistic interpretations of the end times. Many churches and faith-based organizations actively promote environmental awareness and sustainability initiatives, indicating that religion can also function as a positive force for ecological engagement.

While these counterarguments are significant, they do not entirely invalidate the concerns raised in this study. The key issue lies not in eschatology per se but in its popular interpretations and practical effects. Even if theological scholarship supports a non-fatalistic reading, the widespread dissemination of apocalyptic and otherworldly messages in sermons and religious media can still shape attitudes in ways that discourage environmental action. As Kearns (1996) notes, the gap between official theology and lived religion is often substantial, and it is the latter that most directly influences behavior. Therefore, the task is not to reject eschatology but to reinterpret it in ethically constructive ways. A viable alternative lies in integrating eschatological hope with ecological responsibility, emphasizing continuity between

present creation and its future renewal. Such an approach is embedded in African relational ontology and communitarian ethics which form a central aspect of this paper.

African Relational Ontology and Communitarian Ethics as Alternative

African philosophy offers a compelling framework for critiquing eschatological fatalism through its emphasis on relational ontology and communitarian ethics. At the heart of many African worldviews is the idea that reality is fundamentally interconnected, encompassing not only human beings but also nature, ancestors, and the spiritual realm (Akuva & Koko, 2025). This ontological perspective resists sharp dualisms between the material and the spiritual, instead affirming a holistic vision in which all elements of existence are mutually implicated (Mbiti, 1969). Within such a framework, the natural environment is not a disposable backdrop to human salvation but an integral part of a living, relational cosmos. Relational ontology in African thought underscores the principle that to be is to be in relation. Human identity and moral worth are constituted through relationships with others, including the natural world. This stands in contrast to eschatological frameworks that prioritize an otherworldly future at the expense of this-worldly responsibilities. As Gyekye (1997) argues, African metaphysics affirms the intrinsic value of both the individual and the community, grounding ethical obligations in a network of interdependence. Consequently, environmental degradation is not merely a physical or economic problem but a disruption of the moral and ontological order.

Closely linked to this is the ethic of communitarianism, often expressed through concepts such as *ubuntu*, which emphasizes shared humanity, mutual care, and collective responsibility. Communitarian ethics extends beyond human society to include the environment as a vital component of communal well-being (Akuva & Koko, 2025). As Metz (2011) explains, African moral philosophy prioritizes harmony, solidarity, and the promotion of life within a community broadly conceived. This ethical orientation challenges the individualistic and escapist tendencies that may arise from certain interpretations of Christian eschatology, particularly those that detach personal salvation from ecological responsibility. From this perspective, eschatological fatalism appears philosophically inadequate because it undermines the relational and communal basis of moral life. By treating the earth as transient and ultimately expendable, fatalistic beliefs disrupt the moral continuity between present and future generations. African communitarian ethics, by contrast, affirms intergenerational responsibility, recognizing that the well-being of future members of the community depends on the actions of the present (Wiredu, 1996). This aligns closely with contemporary environmental ethics, which emphasizes sustainability and the preservation of ecological systems. Moreover, African religious thought often sacralizes aspects of nature, viewing forests, rivers, and land as imbued with spiritual significance (Iroegbu, 1995). Such perspectives reinforce a sense of reverence and care for the environment, providing a counter-narrative to theological interpretations that diminish its value. While African Christianity has incorporated many indigenous elements, the persistence of eschatological fatalism suggests a tension between inherited theological frameworks and indigenous philosophical intuitions.

Thus, it could be argued that African relational ontology and communitarian ethics provide a robust philosophical alternative of eschatological fatalism by reasserting the interconnectedness of life and the moral imperative of environmental stewardship. They challenge the detachment from earthly concerns and call for a reintegration of spiritual belief

with ecological responsibility, thereby offering valuable resources for addressing climate inaction within Nigerian Christianity.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper has critically examined the relationship between eschatological fatalism and climate inaction within Nigerian Christianity from a Philosophy of Religion perspective. It has argued that dominant end-time beliefs particularly the notions of the earth as a temporary dwelling, heaven as the ultimate home, and the divine destiny of cosmic destruction can foster moral disengagement from ecological responsibility. Through conceptual and philosophical analysis, the study demonstrated how such beliefs shape moral psychology, weaken agency, and contribute to environmental indifference. At the same time, it showed that these outcomes are not inherent to eschatology itself but arise from particular fatalistic interpretations that prioritize transcendence at the expense of immanence. By engaging African relational ontology and communitarian ethics, the paper offered a robust philosophical critique that reaffirms interconnectedness, intergenerational responsibility, and the intrinsic value of nature. It further highlighted alternative theological perspectives, including stewardship and creation-centered eschatology, which provide resources for reconciling religious belief with environmental responsibility. The proposed reconstruction of eschatological ethics underscores the need to integrate hope for the future with ethical commitment in the present. Philosophically, the study contributes to ongoing debates on responsibility, agency, and the ethical implications of religious belief. Practically, it calls for a reorientation of religious discourse in Nigeria toward ecological consciousness. In line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) particularly Goals 13 (Climate Action), 15 (Life on Land), and 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) religious institutions should play a proactive role in promoting environmental stewardship through teaching, advocacy, and community engagement. Future research may explore empirical dimensions of these dynamics, while interdisciplinary collaboration between theologians, philosophers, and environmental scientists is essential. Ultimately, addressing the ecological crisis requires not only technological solutions but also a transformation of the belief systems that shape human action.

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