

River baptism and climate change among African-Initiated Churches: An eco-theological critique



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River baptism has biblical and historical significance in the Christian tradition. Many established mainline churches have baptismal pools where they safely conduct baptism. However, some African-Initiated Churches have been practicing river baptism because of their beliefs, theology and at times a lack of resources. While African-Initiated Churches have a theological basis for practicing river baptism, the challenge is that during rainy seasons, river baptism among African-Initiated Churches becomes hazardous because congregants can get swept away by water during the baptism ritual. This study uses an eco-theological critique to assess the relevance of river baptism amid climate change. This is a conceptual study that opted for content analysis as the research methodology. The study recommends that African-Initiated Churches that still practice river baptism must take extra caution in ensuring the safety of their congregants. If possible, life savers can be included in the baptismal programme of such churches as a way of ensuring the safety of their members. Most importantly, the African-Initiated Churches will have to rethink their theology of practicing river baptism amid climate change and other environmental crises. Such a theology should find a balance between the beliefs in river baptism and the safety of the believers.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: The theological concept of baptism is discussed within the environmental science challenge of climate change. The article proposes solutions to contemporary challenges of river baptism in African-Initiated Churches through an eco-theological critique.

Keywords: baptism; river baptism; eco-theological critique; climate change; African-Initiated Churches.

Introduction

Baptism is a sacrament and acts as a public testimony – the outward confession of an inward experience (De Long 2014). During baptism, believers act out the inward experience that they first received when they gave their lives to the Lord (Schillebeeckx 2014). In baptism, converts stand before the witness confessing their identification with the Lord (Asue 2014). Water baptism is the act in which the believer in Jesus Christ is immersed in water and raised from it by the clergy. Baptism was instituted by God to be the first step of obedience to demonstrate ones reception of the gospel of Christ (Hillsong South Africa 2015). This initial act of baptism identifies the believer as a follower of Jesus Christ. It is certainly appropriate to have a spoken word of testimony from the person being baptised, but even if he or she does not say a word, the action itself communicates very clearly and effectively (Asue 2014). Water baptism has also been practiced as a sacrament because Jesus Christ ordered that the practice must be ritualised (Mt 28:19–20). Hence, the practice has been popular in early Christian history and continues as a Christian practice in the 21st century.

In the context of this study, the following are the types of water baptism: Firstly, aspersion is a type of water baptism that is conducted by sprinkling holy water onto someone's head. This method of baptism is practiced by Catholics and some Protestant denominations (Asue 2014). Although theologians recognise that baptism by immersion is the typical way baptism was administered, historical practice recognises aspersion as a common alternative for sick people, children, and individuals in prison. Secondly, affusion is another type of water baptism, which is performed by pouring water onto someone's head (Asue 2014). However, the Roman Catholic Church believes that baptism is valid only if the water is moving. Thirdly, water baptism is also performed through immersion, which is carried out by submerging an individual in the water. This method of baptism is practiced by many churches across the globe. They conduct baptism in this way to imitate early church practice, in which many theologians predominately believe in the

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practice of water baptism by submerging individuals in moving water (Asue 2014). It is in this type of baptism that river baptism became common in biblical history and contemporary times.

In biblical times, particularly in the New Testament, baptism was conducted in rivers as opposed to baptismal pools. Thus, river baptism has a biblical and historical significance because Jesus Christ and many apostles were baptised especially in rivers such as River Jordan (Johnson 2007). However, river baptism was made popular by John the Baptist when he was preaching in the wilderness and baptised many people including Jesus Christ (De Chatel 2014; cf. Teague 2021). His preaching for repentance and the forgiveness of sins was followed by the baptism in water in the Jordan River. According to Kohlenberger III (2003:15), 'Many people came from Jerusalem and Judea and all the areas around the Jordan River to hear John'. Therefore, from the days of John, the Baptist and the early church, river baptism has been a common practice. The belief was that the river carried much water; hence, many people came to be baptised by the apostles. However, in the 21st century and because of rivers being full in some areas because of climate change, it can be hazardous for people to go to the rivers for baptism. This makes river baptism to be directly related to the current challenges of climate change experienced by many parts of the world.

In this article, the challenge of climate change is discussed in the context of river baptism among African-Initiated Churches. Climate change has a major impact on making rivers full of serious consequences to human beings during river baptism. Ideally, this would call for churches to be cautious during river baptism particularly when the rivers are full (Nche 2020). However, even with alerts about climate change and the possibility of rivers being full, some African-Initiated Churches would still insist on river baptism because of their beliefs (Manganyi & Buitendag 2013). Only responsible churches take caution during climate change, but the rest would still conduct river baptism regardless of the risks. In addition, churches that conduct pool baptisms indoors are also exonerated from the climate change challenges (Mashero 2020). But it must be reiterated that most of the African-Initiated Churches would still prefer river baptism because they believe that it has more significance than just a normal baptism in a pool. This calls for an exploration of the relationship that exists between climate change and river baptism from an eco-theological perspective. Hence, this study assesses the relevancy of river baptism, particularly during climate change to identify challenges and solutions through an eco-theological critique. This will be achieved by studying the historical and biblical background of a river baptism to apply it to the African-Initiated Churches context. The challenges of river baptism during climate change will be explored to identify possible solutions in an African context. The aim is to propose a theology that balances the African-Initiated Churches' beliefs during river baptism and the safety of their congregants.

Framing an eco-theological critique

An eco-theology is a study that explores the relationship between theology and ecology (Stone 2020; cf. Kgatle 2022). Eco-theology is an interdisciplinary study that combines the fields of theology and ecology to study the environment from a divine perspective (Daneel 1999). Geysler-Fouche and Serfontein (2019) explain that theology and ecology:

[A]s intellectual disciplines, are in essence both interdisciplinary in nature, and therefore they both share in a mutual quest for a more comprehensive understanding of the origin, meaning and destiny of the universe. (p. 9)

Eco-theology is also helpful in studying the relationship between human beings and their environment (Conradie 2001). Thus, eco-theology makes it possible to study ecology not only from an environmental approach but also by looking at God and his intention for the creation including human beings. This means that ecological challenges such as global warming, climate change, environmental crisis, water pollution, air pollution, and so forth can be studied with a theological reflection. In this article, an eco-theological critique is used not only to study the relationship between theology and ecology but to also explore the theological challenges exacerbated by ecological challenges. In other words, with an eco-theological critique, this article will be able to explore the challenges of river baptism during climate change. The same theory will be used to propose solutions on how river baptism can be conducted among African-Initiated Churches without posing a danger to human beings during climate change. As much as river baptism has a theological significance to these churches, it should also recognise eco-theological challenges, hence the importance of an eco-theological critique.

River baptism among African-Initiated Churches and its theological basis

African-Initiated Churches are Christian churches independently started in Africa by African people rather than chiefly by missionaries from another continent (Chitando, Gunda & Kügler 2014). African-initiated churches are found across Africa; they are particularly well-documented in Southern Africa and Western Africa (Byaruhanga 2015). African-Initiated Churches such as Apostolic churches, Zionist churches, Ethiopian churches, and Messianic churches regard river baptism as the real baptism (Anderson 2001a, 2001b; Mwaura 2005). These churches are sometimes discussed within the broader growing Pentecostal movement but are different from classical and neo-Pentecostals. River baptism is well practiced among this kind of church in many parts of the African continent. Many believers in African-Initiated Churches still perform their sacred ritual of outdoor baptisms in rivers. They continue practicing such sacred rituals to preserve the river baptism, following the biblical example of Christ's baptism in the Jordan River by John the Baptist (Staten & Roach 2019). They believe in the baptism of

John the Baptist at the River Jordan, which is emersion baptism. They believe that being baptised in the river with flowing water makes their sins flow with the river; hence, they continue with this practice even when it poses a danger to human beings (Ademiluka 2022). It is for the same reason that others force to continue with their baptism sessions even if the rivers are overflowing and the congregants will be swept by the river sometimes. Therefore, unlike mainline churches that can use the baptismal pools to conduct the baptism to ensure that the lives of the congregations are safe, African-Initiated Churches insist on river baptism. In addition, some of them struggle with funds for basic services, and it will be impossible for them to afford the baptismal pool. Therefore, given both theological and economic reasons, it becomes a norm for African-Initiated Churches to use rivers for baptism (Ademiluka 2022).

The African-Initiated Churches also have a theological basis for the drowning of people during river baptism (Daneel 2019). There is a belief among some African-initiated churches that a person can drown during river baptism because they have not confessed their sins (Modiko 2011). It is for the same reason that before baptism, African-initiated churches believe that everyone should confess their sins. Some African-Initiated Churches believe that if the one conducting the baptism is unprepared spiritually or they are not in a good state spiritually, this too can cause a person to drown during river baptism. In addition, drowning among African-Initiated Churches also happens because there is an evil force such as powerful demonic powers in the river that cause people to drown during river baptism (Oosthuizen 1992; cf. Anderson 2018). Or that the water source is being inhabited by a water spirit such as a mermaid (Anderson 2005; Bernard 2003; Drewal 2008; Meyer 1995). This means that instead of environmentally analysing the drownings to establish the natural cause, many African-initiated churches would rather blame it on the lack of faith or other evil spirits in the spirit realm occupying the water space in rivers. This theology among African-Initiated Churches requires a proper approach that will find a balance between the belief system and the safety of those who are being baptised. However, before exploring such a theology, it is pivotal to discuss the intersectionality of river baptism and climate change.

River baptism and climate change

Climate change refers to long-term shifts in temperatures and weather patterns (Howe et al. 2013). Climate change can be a natural process where temperature, rainfall, wind and other elements vary over decades or more (Fawzy et al. 2020). According to Shafiee and Topal (2009), climate change can be defined as:

the global phenomenon of climate transformation characterised by the changes in the usual climate of the planet (regarding temperature, precipitation, and wind) that are especially caused by human activities. As a result of unbalancing the weather of the Earth, the sustainability of the planet's ecosystems is under threat, as well as the future of humankind. (p. 182)

However, in the context of this study, climate change refers to abnormal rainfall that leaves the rivers full and overflowing. The overflowing river can put the lives of the church members who practice water baptism in such rivers in danger (Motaung 2020). The impact of climate change is alluded to by Manslin (2007) who painted a scene in which climate change will increase the sea level and contribute to flooding in some countries. In addition, climate change can also cause heat waves and make the rivers go dry. These climate change challenges about river baptism among the African-Initiated Churches are discussed next.

The challenges of climate change during river baptism

African-Initiated Churches experience several challenges when they are conducting their river baptism. River baptism has challenges that are dangerous to society and the church, especially in the era of climate change. Such challenges include among others dry rivers that impede the clergy from baptising their members, polluted rivers that infect the members of the church with diseases, and overflowed rivers that cause members of the church to drown. The challenges of river baptism are discussed next.

Dry rivers

A dry river refers to a river that has no water completely or the water in the river has decreased to the extent that nothing can be done with the water (Loucks & Van Beek 2017). Dry rivers are because of a lack of rain as a result of climate change experienced especially in African countries (Rameshwaran et al. 2021). Dry rivers also affect African-Initiated Churches especially when such churches want to perform their river baptism ceremonies (Adogame 2013). Africa continues to face geographic hardships such as dry rivers. Several African basins, such as Congo, Zambezi and Nile show significant drying over the past decades because of climate change. Hence, African-Initiated Churches are experiencing challenges to baptise their members during dry river seasons. As a result of the lack of rain, some rivers become dry and people lack access to water to be baptised as per their beliefs. In northern Africa, neighbours also struggle over access and control of shared river waters (Mustafa 2013). Therefore, the lack of rain because of climate change affects the African-Initiated Churches that utilise rivers to perform baptism. African-Initiated Churches depend on rivers for baptism because they cannot afford to build baptismal pools. African-Initiated Churches end up withholding their baptism schedule until they have access to the baptismal site by the rivers with sufficient water to baptise their believers. However, the challenge of dry rivers is not only an African problem because even River Jordan has experienced some drought. Water levels of the Jordan River decrease because of climate change. The current situation affects tourism and historical places such as the Baptism Site year after year (RNS Blog Editor 2005).

Water pollution

According to Moss (2008), water pollution refers to the contamination of water sources by substances that make the water unusable for drinking, cooking, cleaning, swimming and other activities. Pollutants include chemicals, trash, bacteria and parasites. All rivers that are not taken care of can be polluted by several pollutants irrespective of the location of the river either in Western or African countries. Therefore, the quality of water provision in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries is a great concern, because water pollution bears on the quality of water and has an unavoidable impact on the health of humankind (De Klerk 2014). The poor and vulnerable in the community experience the worst effects. As many of the people in the more arid areas of Africa live next to rivers, the pollution of their drinking water, washing water and fields (food) truly hurts their lives. Pollution of water also affected negatively the African-Initiated Churches that conduct river baptism.

The challenge of river baptism is that the congregations can be baptised in contaminated water. Like a group of congregants dressed in long robes wade into the water of Soweto township's Fleurhof river, some immersing their entire bodies, while their pastors loudly sing prayers and blessings. The river is one of many water sources of spiritual significance across South Africa for communities, although researchers and scientists warn that contamination from nearby open mine sewage and waste puts worshippers at risk of water poisoning (Harrisberg 2019). The dust contains a mixture of chemicals such as arsenic and cyanide, which could expose worshippers bathing in toxic water to all manner of health issues, from brain damage to skin cancers. Rivers that are intoxicated or polluted are hazardous to the congregants who use the river to perform baptism rituals (De Klerk 2014).

In 2013, members of the community were left stunned as Madzibaba an Apostolic Church in Zimbabwe baptised people with unsafe water. Baptism took place in dirty water flowing in the Mukuvisi River where industrial waste and even sewage are common occurrences (Religion in Zimbabwe 2013). African-Initiated Churches must be prohibited from baptising their members in rivers that are polluted. Governments in all countries must ensure that such rivers are even closed so that churches do not get access to them. The concerns about pollution and water quality at the Jordan River once prompted an environmental advocacy group to call for the banning of baptisms in the same river (RNS Blog Editor 2005). According to Times Live (2023) river baptisms that took place at the Jukskei or Klip rivers in Gauteng in South Africa are suspected to be the cause of the latest cholera cases. This means the two rivers are polluted and members of the African-Initiated Churches use such polluted rivers for baptism. The victims were admitted to the hospital with signs of diarrhoea, nausea, and vomiting and their results confirmed positive status. It was also confirmed that the victims were baptised in Jukskei or Klip River in the previous weeks (Times Live 2023).

Floods

Floods refer to overflow of water that has been caused by continuous and non-stopping rains that keep the rivers overflowing and full. Such rains are a result of climate change that has been experienced in Africa. As a result of climate change in the rain, rivers become full or even overflow (Vandenbohede 2016). Flooding is a serious challenge for churches, especially African-Initiated Churches that use rivers to baptise their members because many people drown during baptism ceremonies in flooded rivers (Motaung 2020). Open-river baptism rituals, especially by untrained clergy who head Africanist Christian churches, are running into a fast-changing climate in South Africa. Climate change is intensifying river flooding across African countries such as South Africa (Tongwane, Ramotubei & Moeletsi 2022). Hence, African-Initiated Churches in South Africa especially those conducting unlicensed open river baptism tragedies are mounting too. There is a growing toll of worshippers losing their lives during flash floods that are now making open-river baptisms deadly. For example, in December 2021, floods swept away a 21-year-old priest and a 41-year-old woman whom he was baptising in the Free State, in central South Africa (Simango 2023). Hence, there are frequent media reports that church members have drowned during the baptism ritual. For example in the Jukskei River in Bramley Park in Gauteng, South Africa, the media also reported that at least two people drowned during river baptism. It is understood that the congregants were conducting the baptism ritual in the river. More than 15 members are also believed to have been washed away by flash floods during the same river baptism (Eyewitness News 2022). Media also reported that a 27-year-old male church congregant also slipped into the water and drowned after being baptised in the Groot Letaba River at Nwamarhanga village in Giyani in South Africa on Saturday (Times Live 2023).

According to the Herald (2021), eight self-proclaimed prophets drowned during church rituals. Eight male church members, including two brothers of the Bguwo Tsvuku (Jerusalem) church, drowned in the Mazowe River in Rushinga in Zimbabwe during a ritual, with 3 of the 11 men who jumped into the pool being rescued. According to My Zimbabwe News (2022), five church members drowned while performing rituals in a river. The men allegedly went to the river at about midnight to perform rituals, and they were swept away and drowned in the river. The Botswana Gazette (2013) reported that a bishop and church member drowned during baptism. While many churches were preparing to celebrate his resurrection on Easter Monday, a tragedy befell the Dipula Tsa Medupe Apostolic Church in Zion; their bishop and a member who was being baptised drowned in the Mmakgodumo River in Kanye in Botswana. The drowning challenge when baptising has become a serious problem in African-Initiated Churches and the government must interfere to ensure the lives of people are saved. Governments in Africa should put measures in place to ensure that such churches that perform baptism rituals in flooded rivers are prohibited.

Confronting climate change challenges during river baptism

As a result of climate change, many rivers in African countries have become dry. This has an impact on African-Initiated Churches that utilise the rivers to perform ritual activities including baptism. This results in such African-Initiated Churches that no longer conduct their baptism of members in rivers because they are getting dry. This also has an impact on the faith and belief of members of African-Initiated Churches because they believe that the real baptism is from the rivers. The challenge is that when rivers are dry, it becomes impossible for such churches to perform their baptism ceremonies. This is supported by Mustafa (2013) who alluded that African-Initiated Churches struggle to access rivers with water because many of them are dry because of climate change. As a result, African-Initiated Churches are not able to baptise their members. African-Initiated Churches must start to engage in the use of baptismal pools. Even to avoid dry rivers, African-Initiated Churches can also make use of baptismal pools to perform their baptism ceremonies. Although it is expensive, or a sound budget is required to establish such, the lives of the members of the church will always be saved and baptism will go on as planned without relying on out-of-control natural disasters caused by climate change. If African-Initiated Churches are registered with the relevant departments, they can have documents that permit them to apply for funding or sponsorship that can provide them with baptismal pools and other resources that are needed for them to conduct safe baptism ceremonies.

Pollution of water in rivers because of climate change where rivers are polluted by industries around them, or communities around them affect the rituals performed in rivers such as baptism in the African-Initiated Churches. After baptising in such rivers, members of the church can get ill because of consuming contaminated water. Members of the church can suffer from diseases such as diarrhoea and diseases that can be caused by consuming dirty water such as cholera. As alluded by Times Live (2023) the Jukskei and Klip rivers in South Africa are suspected to be spreading cholera because members from the African-Initiated Churches who were baptised in the rivers tested positive for cholera. To avoid baptising their members in polluted rivers, African-Initiated Churches must work together with the Department of Water and Sanitation to ensure that the rivers they want to use are inspected first before baptism ceremonies can be conducted. African-Initiated Churches must register with the department and sign a memorandum of understanding that before any baptism ceremony, the department will have to send their trained staff to go inspect the rivers and advise such churches if they can use such rivers for baptism. This will help the African-Initiated Churches to avoid risking the lives of congregations by baptising them in polluted rivers because of climate change.

Flooding fills the rivers full and others even overflow because of climate change are dangerous to the community and

especially to members of the African-Initiated Churches that use rivers for baptism or even performing their spiritual rituals. Churches that ignore the overflowing rivers contribute highly to cases of drowning especially in South Africa. In South Africa, for example, many people affiliated with African-Initiated Churches die because of drowning in full rivers. However, members of such churches continue risking their lives by baptising in overflowed rivers even today. This has an impact on African-Initiated Churches that need rivers to perform their rituals such as baptism. However, such incidents of members and pastors drowning prevent many members from partaking in such activities, and that can hurt their faith as believers. Times Live (2023) reported that a male church congregant drowned in the Groot Letaba River during the river baptism ceremony. This indicates that cases of drowning members of African-Initiated Churches who baptise in rivers continue to grow especially in South Africa. To avoid cases of congregation and pastors drowning during baptism ceremonies, it is the responsibility of the African-Initiated Churches to assess the rivers before the baptism ceremonies. African-Initiated Churches can also work with the Department of Water and Sanitation to help assess the river before they use them for baptism. The department will be able to know and advise if it is safe or dangerous to enter such rivers, especially after heavy rains. The department has better resources to assess the rivers and determine if people will be safe from entering such rivers for baptism. African-Initiated Churches can also request the department to appoint lifesavers who will assist the church during baptism. Lifesavers will be there to ensure that they guide the congregation on what they can do in rivers to ensure that people are always safe. Lifejackets can also be given to members of the church so that it will be easy for them to prevent drowning during the river baptism. The department can also provide some members of the church with lifesaving skills so that they can always help the church especially when there is river baptism taking place.

Theology on rivers baptism, belief system, and the safety of believers

Indeed, the African-initiated churches have a strong theological basis for river baptism. They believe that baptising a person in flowing waters has more impact than a baptismal pool. However, such a theology and belief system should be balanced with the safety of the individuals who are being baptised in mind. This is an important factor to consider among the African-initiated churches, particularly during climate change. In other words, it does not help to insist on baptising people in the flowing water while it exposes their lives to danger. This means that instead of saving lives during river baptism, the African-initiated churches end up losing them because of climate change. Therefore, any theology and belief system on the practice of river baptism should prioritise the safety of people. The faith of the clergy in baptising the people during climate change should not be exercised at the risk of their congregants. Hence, it is suggested here that during climate change, it will be important to use lifesavers

not as a sign of lack of faith but as a precautionary measure against drowning. In addition, using the lifesaver during river baptism will not make the baptism of less significance. On the contrary, the river baptism will have the same impact even in the presence of the lifesaver.

Conclusion

In conclusion, as much as river baptism has spiritual and biblical meaning and significance, it is equally crucial for churches such as the African-Initiated Churches to ensure safety measures are put in place before the baptism ceremony takes place. African-Initiated Churches must ensure that their members are even saved from drowning especially during heavy rains as a result of climate change. The only way this can be achieved is if the churches put safety measures as a priority. Safety measures can include the assessment of the river by experts before the baptism ceremony, deployment of life savers during the baptism ceremony and some members of the church can attend workshops and training on safety measures to ensure that members of the church are safe during the baptism ceremony. River assessment will also ensure that the rivers used for baptism are clean before they can be used. This will ensure that the members of the congregation do not catch diseases that are caused by consuming polluted water, for example, diarrhoea. African-Initiated Churches can also invest in the procurement of baptismal pools to ensure that even during dry seasons baptism ceremonies can continue without challenges. Baptismal pools can also be used when rivers are flooded. Although river baptism is critically significant in African-Initiated Churches, they must ensure that their members are safe and their lives are preserved. Most importantly, there is a need for a theology among African-Initiated Churches that balance their beliefs and the safety of their followers during river baptism.

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Authors' contributions

M.S.K. contributed in the conceptualisation, formal analysis and writing of the article and M.M. contributed on data curation.

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Disclaimer

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