

# Lost in translation? Religious elements and concepts in youth climate movements



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Climate change represents the most significant challenge facing the global community. The issue in question has an impact on the younger generation, whose prospects may be jeopardised. Both younger and older generations are participating in climate movements. An illustrious instance is the *School Strike for Climate*, which was orchestrated by the adolescent environmentalist, Greta Thunberg. The climate movements exhibit a range of objectives, actions and focus. Various social movements construct narratives that appeal to the youth demographic. The presence of a coherent narrative aids in the formation of personal identity and the establishment of a shared sense of self among individuals. Collectively, they have the potential to advocate for equitable treatment of the environment. Climate activism, although not regarded as religious, employs religious language and concepts. Research examining the climate movements' impact on churches has revealed the presence of religious effects. Upon conducting research on the involvement of young individuals in churches and climate movements, specifically with regard to their agency, it has been observed that climate movements are fundamentally grounded in religious language and ideals. This article analyses the religious concepts found within youth climate movements and further investigates the correlation between youth climate activism and religion through the analysis of religious rhetoric.

**Interdisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications:** The interdisciplinary and multi-disciplinary nature of this contribution is spread across the fields of theology and religion. The sub-disciplines of the youth in general, youth ministry and youth work, religious rhetoric, climate change, climate justice and environmental consciousness within the academic discourse of sustainability are studied.

**Keywords:** religious elements; religious concepts; climate change; climate movements, apocalypticism and eschatology; utopias; hope; cathedral thinking.

## Introduction

Climate change is one of the most urgent concerns for today's society worldwide (Beukes 2021a:1; Han & Ahn 2020; United Nations n.d.). Weather extremes, rising sea levels, droughts and wildfires are all consequences of a changing climate, causing crisis situations (IPCC 2022). Youth are at the epicentre of this crisis, as their future is at stake (Beukes, Stork & Swart 2021:1; Tacke 2020:120). Young people are not oblivious to this crisis and have also realised that their future is at risk. They unite themselves in climate movements together with other generations. One of the well-known examples of such a climate movement, is *School Strike for Climate* initiated by the young climate activist, Greta Thunberg, who started this strike on her own and managed to mobilise a worldwide climate strike movement (Kalt 2021; McKnight 2020). Thunberg is seen as a prophetic voice. She uses her voice to speak up at international climate conferences and to hold older generations accountable for the ongoing crisis (Friberg 2021; Gärtner 2020). Young people worldwide have followed her example and united their voices by composing new climate movements or joining existing climate movements.

Examples of such movements are: *Fridays for Future*, a global campaign initiated by *The School Strike* of Greta Thunberg, and *Extinction Rebellion*, an organisation that organises nonviolent civil disobedience actions (Gärtner 2020:18; Kalt 2021:1140). One can also find specific Christian climate movements, such as *Christian Climate Action*, related to *Extinction Rebellion*. Although these movements describe themselves as global, they primarily operate in the Global North. Young climate activists in Africa often start at a local level and stay within national circles rather than joining international protests (Beukes et al. 2021:4). They have, however, established the *Rise Up Movement*, a movement that wants to give African climate activists a platform. Nakate (2021) is

one of these voices who managed to present the African context of young people to a global audience.

Coming from different backgrounds and contexts, these climate movements differ in their purpose, actions and focus. Some climate movements organise big climate marches; others are lobby organisations to urge companies and governments to bring a hold to climate change, while others focus on creating more awareness among civilians. More radical movements are 'taking direct action and [have] an underlying orientation towards anarchist, anti-capitalist and anti-authoritarian perspectives' (Russell 2015:223). The different movements create different narratives that attract many (young) people. Such a coherent narrative helps people to recognise themselves in the narrative and to form a collective identity (Kalt 2021:1138). This way, they can engage in the struggle for climate justice together.

The utilisation of religious terminology and ideas is evident in the discourse of climate activism. The investigation into the influence of the climate movement on churches has uncovered the existence of religious implications. Through an examination of the participation of youth in both religious institutions and climate activism, it has been noted that the latter is inherently rooted in religious rhetoric and principles. Additionally, the agency of young individuals in these contexts has been studied. The present article undertakes an analysis of the religious concepts that are present in youth climate movements. Additionally, it explores the relationship between youth climate activism and religion by examining religious rhetoric.

## Methods

The narratives of climate movements often incorporate religious language, religious ideas and religious concepts. Hence, we reflect on these religious concepts in climate movements by tracing the religious language surrounding the movements and trying to determine the relationship between climate movements and religion. The use of religious influences in climate movements became apparent during research on climate movements and churches. While researching the position of young people in churches and climate movements, especially regarding agency in these spaces, it became visible that climate movements are embedded in religious language and religious ideas.

Not only are young people, as said above, the primary bearer of the crisis, but young people are also in a phase of shaping their identity. They seek a sense of belonging, a collective identity they can relate to and be part of (Alkorta 2009: 113–114). Adolescents are thus vulnerable to the narratives of climate movements. These movements can play with their emotions or spread a solid collective message that young people want to be part of. Young people often have the feeling they are not heard in climate politics, but when they can take part in climate protests or climate actions, they can get a sense of agency and empowerment (McKnight 2020:300). The message young people hear regarding the climate crisis

influences their engagement and sense of empowerment in climate movements (O'Brien, Selboe & Hayward 2018). The message or created narrative is thus essential. This article intends to show the implementation of religious concepts in young people's engagement in climate movements.

We will first shortly sketch the background of the research by introducing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Next, it will discuss different religious elements that became apparent in the literature. Although not all these concepts are exclusively religious, the link to their religious usage can help spread awareness of the climate crisis in religious circles. Furthermore, religious organisations can benefit from it by linking their religious narrative to these dominant in climate movements. This link will be explored further in the concluding section of this article.

## Climate change and Sustainable Development Goals

The complexity of the changing climate – which influences not only natural disasters but also affects phenomena such as gender injustice, wars and urban migration – asks for an interdisciplinary approach (IPCC 2022:2429, 2501). This is partly captured in the SDGs initiated by the United Nations (UN). Sustainable Development Goals not only focus on the ecological crisis that the world is in today, but they include different aspects involved in providing a sustainable future. The goals cover 17 topics, ranging from ending poverty to promoting sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, to the call for urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts (United Nations 2022). Although the goals are diverse, all focus on the five Ps of climate, namely people, planet, prosperity, peace and partnership (United Nations, n.d.). These Ps show the complex task of sustaining a liveable and healthy environment for future generations. Goal 13 is central to this research. This goal focuses on urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts. Goal 4, which focuses on education and learning opportunities, and Goal 5, which focuses on gender equality, form an implicit part of this research.

We would like to emphasise that specific attention is given to the position of younger generations in climate action, as their voices are often marginalised. While they are seen – that is their existence as a future generation is acknowledged in the definition of sustainable development – their distinctive voice is often not heard (Beukes 2021b:4). Their involvement in decision-making processes, for example, is not self-evident. Hence this contribution is a modest attempt to advocate for the inclusion of religious language as a means to amplify the voices of younger generations and effectively communicate the urgency of global crises. Religion has long been a blind spot in development studies (Ter Haar 2011:5). If the role of religion has been taken seriously, the focus is mostly on religious institutions and their organisation. Ter Haar (2011:8) argues that research should focus on religious ideas instead, as these form the inspiration for people to get into action.



This article precisely addresses that starting with the elements in climate movements and linking them to similar religious ideas.

## Religious concepts in climate movements

Climate movements use different narratives to connect to (young) people. In her auto-ethnographic study, Russell describes two different types of climate movements. She is involved in more radical climate movements. These radical movements are often grassroots communities striving for broader social justice (Russell 2015:223). One can also find more moderate and mainstream movements, organising big protests and marches (Corry & Reiner 2021:200; Russell 2015:223). These different discourses manage to create a sense of belonging via narratives. Because young people are often searching for a sense of belonging, a creation of identity, the narratives especially appeal to them (Alkorta 2009:115). Whether consciously or not, climate movements use several religious elements, which will be discussed here (Kalt 2021:1138). These religious concepts often reach young people deeper and more emotionally than other characteristics (Alkorta 2009:113). Religious concepts thereby make young people even more prone to the narratives. The religious elements discussed below are apocalypticism and eschatology, utopias, hope and cathedral thinking.

### Apocalypticism and eschatology

Friberg (2021:2) argues that climate groups existing of predominantly young people have 'a strong apocalyptic sentiment'. This apocalypticism fits in with the idea that the earth is coming to an end; it is collapsing. Contrarily, strong apocalyptic sentiments in churches, mainly Evangelical and Pentecostal, lead to a form of apathy (Edvardsson Björnberg & Karlsson 2022; Peifer, Ecklund & Fullerton 2014). According to evangelical Christian believers, the worrisome state of the planet is precisely what is meant to happen with the earth. They believe that God will provide a new earth and do not feel the need to change the tide. Moreover, evangelical Christians fear that the focus on creation care will distract them from a focus on God (Peifer et al. 2014; Smith & Leiserowitz 2013). Their focus is on a relationship with God. They are convinced that God will take care of them; therefore, there is no immediate need, nor panic, to take care of the world.

When it comes to young climate activists, the apocalyptic sentiment thus leads to quite the opposite reaction. For them, the collapse of the earth leads to a form of panic. They feel an urgency and want to do as much as possible (Friberg 2021:2). Instead of giving up now that the deadline of the planet is coming closer, they unite in radical actions. Apocalypticism has to do with a notion of time. Young climate activists use this aspect of time to make their claims. They believe they are living in the end times, while they were not alive yet during the cause of the end times. Young people thus speak of

intergenerational justice and are motivated by this notion of time (Kalt 2021:1141).

On the one hand, young people realise they are living in the end times, deprived of their future by previous generations. On the other hand, they try to create awareness of this by holding previous generations – who are often the ones in power – accountable and by showing panic. The apocalyptic narrative is used to show what the future will look like. It can be related to prophetic voices in the Old Testament who speak up about the future that God has revealed to them (Van Ekris 2018:9–10). Although everyone could know about the apocalyptic future caused by the climate crisis, prophetic voices such as Thunberg and Nakate spread this message.<sup>1</sup> Young climate activists simply share a message that is known but is not yet acted upon (Boucher 2022). Because people do not like the message these climate activists spread and because they do not listen to them, their voice is compared to the prophetic voices of biblical times.

### Utopias

The panic above is not strictly related to apocalyptic sentiments. As said, this could quickly lead to apathy and a lack of action. However, Friberg (2021:3) also notes how young people are often mobilised by 'negative utopian energies'. According to the Merriam-Webster, an utopia is: '(1) a place of ideal perfection especially in laws, government and social conditions; (2) an impractical scheme for social improvement; (3) an imaginary and indefinitely remote place'.<sup>2</sup> This threefold definition shows a form of impossibility, something that cannot be[come] true. Yet, the idea of perfection motivates people to keep on working on this perfect image. Although utopias are not religious per se, many religions describe archetypes of an ideal reality. Christianity's utopia is the Garden of Eden; in Buddhism, the utopian idea exists in the form of Ketumati and several religious communities have tried to form their own utopias together. Ter Haar (2011:16) even argues that the idea of development is built on a Western-Christian utopia of God's kingdom that can be created on earth. Religious connections, in rituals and laws, furthermore form a stronger incentive to work on something like a utopia than incentives based on secular ideas (Alkorta 2009:113).

McKnight (2020:49) noted that young people in the *School Strike for Climate Movement*, which uses utopian narratives, are connected in a 'collective daydream'. They dream the utopia might become true. Although the young climate activists are hopeless because of the apocalyptic sentiment, the daydream helps to remain hopeful that it is not yet too late. This collective daydream that climate movements share is a utopia of a better world. This easily resonates with eschatological thinking in religious departments. In Christianity, the promise of a (future) kingdom of God

1. See, for example, <https://rmx.news/article/former-archbishop-of-canterbury-compares-greta-thunberg-to-biblical-prophets/>

2. See <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/utopia>

prevails. The collective utopian daydream that youth use to motivate themselves and their surroundings to move into action can thus be traced back or linked to an eschatological Christian image of a better and new world to come.

Thunberg is the voice of the utopian narrative. She focuses on a better future while showing her despair and realism of the current state of the earth. She asks for people to panic, playing into the apocalyptic sentiment, so that they will directly come into action (Friberg 2021). A dystopian image, on the other hand, would create a state of acceptance. This would thereby lead to maintaining the situation as it is. Politicians often use the dystopian vision to avoid taking too radical actions, while the utopian narrative is striking for the modern environmental movements (Friberg 2021:2–3).

## Hope

Utopias, apocalypticism and eschatology all relate to one another. While apocalypticism reveals the end of the world as an imminent event, eschatology studies expectations surrounding these end times. Utopias can both be aspects revealed in apocalyptic books as well as interpretations of the telling of end times and the new world to come. The idea of a utopia after the end of times helps people to remain hopeful, another aspect of climate movements that could be seen as a religious concept (Moltmann 1993:33). Within Christianity, hope is one of the three theological virtues, next to faith and love. Hope is pronounced as a confident expectation and trust that with God's guidance, a favourable outcome will follow (Ellis 2015:132–134; Moltmann 2019:8; Vogt 2022:2).

The concreteness and temporality of the utopia motivate people to work on something they can reach. This creates images of hope based on fear of the current world and utopian impulses, trusting the favourable outcome. Although the utopian vision might not become true, it does provide a mobilising stimulation that is useful (McKnight 2020:55). Fear is overthrown by hope because people feel part of a bigger community where everyone believes in this same outcome. The sense of belonging created in the narratives of climate movements speaks to this (Kalt 2021:1142).

This hopeful imperative can also be related to eschatological thinking. Hope and despair are two sides of the same coin, activating and paralysing. Without hope, one cannot know despair and vice versa (Moltmann 1993:15–16). Moltmann, therefore, equals eschatological viewpoints and hopeful viewpoints. They both are a way of looking forward, where eschatology presupposes the hope that God's promise of a new earth will be realised. This should motivate humankind to keep acting: if we do not know what the future will bring, we must keep working on it. In the current crisis, people cannot know what their future will look like. This uncertainty can help us remain hopeful about the promised future, but we need to work on this future ourselves (Moltmann 2019).

Moltmann shares the understanding of despair and fear while remaining hopeful. Climate activists play into this understanding. They share a collective dream, a utopian vision. This dream is something people long for, but they must work on this dream step-by-step. It should be more than a dream if they want it to become a reality. The vision keeps them hopeful, and the step-by-step approach should lead to fulfilment (McKnight 2020).

The dystopian image discussed in the previous section can be related to the despair that Moltmann talks about. Although Thunberg also shows despair, she mediates this with hope. She wants people to panic and uses apocalyptic sentiment to reach her goal. She does so to make people come into action and to make them feel the need and hope for a radical change in the existing systems. Without real hope, people will become passive beings, but hope should transform the thought and actions of people to become effective. The collective hopeful daydream of a utopian future that can be handled as a step-by-step process towards the future helps people to get into action.

## Cathedral thinking

Young climate activists such as Greta Thunberg remain hopeful by cathedral thinking. Cathedral thinking can be found in the concern about the lack of panic from world leaders in a world that is on fire. The fear of continuing the world as it is, knowing that this will lead to ecological catastrophes, inspires young generations to this way of cathedral thinking (McKnight 2020:55). Although they do not know where it will end, young people do know that going on as it is can never lead to a better future. Friberg explores this form of cathedral thinking and relates it to the utopian vision discussed earlier in this chapter. Although utopian thinking often has been treated as a theoretical vision of a distant future that is possible but not yet known, it can also become concrete. Friberg (2021:14) states: 'A concrete utopia is a vision that connects the not yet with processes and possibilities. ... Concrete utopian thinking is achieved through experiences, resistance, and failure'. Within climate movements, this asks for temporal utopias, 'visions of the future that are reachable while being visionary enough to provide the people with a task and politics with a soul' (Friberg 2021:14).

Because the world is changing fast, and a lot is uncertain, this asks for quick action. Quick action often takes place in the form of militant optimism, actions inspired by anxiety without knowing what the outcome will be (McKnight 2020:55). This militant optimism can be seen as a form of cathedral thinking, where one starts building before knowing what the final product will look like. The notion of time is distinctive for the younger generation, who realise that their future is taken away by previous generations. Because of the lack of time, they panic and come into action. They understand that they are constantly being overtaken by events, which makes them unsure about their future. Yet, that insecurity



directs them into a form of cathedral thinking. As said, people often believe that fear leads to apathy, but Kleres and Wettergren (2017:508, 517) show that it can also be used as a driving force. Militant optimism in the Global North is fuelled by anxiety while mediated by the hope for a better, unknowable world. On the other hand, activists from the Global South are motivated by an interaction of fear, guilt and anger. Instead of passively suffering from these emotions, young climate activists use them to motivate to change the world (Kleres & Wettergren 2017:508).

## Implications and recommendations

Although it seems religious organisations are often not included in the language of development (Van Wensveen 2011:86–89), hitherto this contribution indicated that climate movements use many religious ideas, elements and concepts. The narratives of hope, apocalypticism and utopias are all familiar elements in Christian circles. These narratives help climate movements to construct a convincing message to relate to. Climate movements thus create a sense of belonging in the same manner as religious organisations. Religious organisations, particularly Christian communities in this article, can use these same narratives to make a connection with climate movements. There is potential for Christian communities to connect the religious understanding of the elements described above to the use by climate movements.

This can also help the message of climate movements. The Christian tradition has a lifelong understanding of these narratives, which can help strengthen the message movements share. Instead of only looking at religious organisations as instruments, religion can be an integral part of climate movements (Van Wensveen 2011:89–90). The issue of climate change and environmental injustices has emerged as a multifaceted challenge encompassing moral, cultural and spiritual dimensions. Within this context, the church has the potential to actively engage in the discourse surrounding environmental consciousness among its members. This can be achieved through various means, such as imparting teachings on the importance of maintaining a clean environment, promoting gardening as a means to enhance both financial savings and dietary health, highlighting the therapeutic properties of certain plants and emphasising the potential efficacy of prayer in mitigating natural disasters. These practical initiatives exemplify the church's capacity to contribute to the ongoing environmental dialogue within its community (cf. Kabongo & Stork 2022:4). For churches, this can also be an opportunity to be relevant to the youth. They show they care about the climate and acknowledge the youth's voice. If youth are not seen as serious conversation partners, they will find their own spaces to speak up. If churches create this sense of belonging in cooperation with climate movements, this will empower youth. It furthermore enhances their social skills. Considering the SDGs, which require diverse disciplines to be involved, the common narratives described above can be essential for better cooperation.

According to Johannessen (2022:2), the issue of climate change can give rise to various forms of psychological distress and stress, commonly referred to as 'climate anxiety'. Adolescents exhibit a diverse array of emotional responses in relation to climate change, encompassing feelings such as anxiety, anger, grief, fear, powerlessness and hopelessness, despite their potential lack of direct personal impact from the phenomenon. She further states that there exists a positive correlation between elevated levels of pro-environmental behaviour among students and increased well-being (Johannessen 2022:2). This association may be attributed to the fulfilment of fundamental psychological needs, such as autonomy, competence and relatedness. Nevertheless, although engaging in activism can potentially alleviate feelings of helplessness and enhance the sense of empowerment, meaning and purpose among young individuals, it can also have adverse effects on their health by exacerbating stress levels (cf. McCarroll 2022). Hence, there is a need for churches to enhance their capacity to recognise and confront the prevailing sentiment of loss and grief associated with the environmental crisis while also providing assistance to their members and local communities. Churches have the potential to fulfil a crucial function in offering pastoral support for individuals experiencing climate-related grief. The church possesses extensive knowledge and understanding of coexisting with affliction, offering empathy and support to individuals in confronting their mortality, while also persistently striving towards the realisation of a fairer future. In a manner similar to the provision of pastoral care and support by local churches in response to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) crisis, it is anticipated that a similar need for pastoral care will arise in addressing the plight of individuals afflicted by the environmental crisis (cf. McCarroll 2022). Furthermore, religious rituals such as prayer can be implemented as mediating practices for climate grief. Religion can help to give meaning to the stressful confrontations adolescents experience, for example, in their climate actions. At the same time, climate movements can help churches to remain societally relevant and engaged.

## Conclusion

This article showed how much religious, specifically Christian, language is implemented in the discourse of climate (youth) movements. These elements of apocalyptic sentiments, utopias, hope and cathedral thinking do not stand alone but are interconnected. While apocalyptic beliefs could lead to apathy, the vision of a utopia and the notion of hope can be mediating factors. The urgency of apocalypticism combined with hope can lead to direct action. The mixture of emotions can create a feeling of agency and confidence in youth. Consequently, self-confident youth can enact themselves in the future and are thus able to have an influence. While self-confidence is negatively influenced by fear, which creates a sense of powerlessness, hope can help to reclaim confidence and agency.

Emotions related to the ideas of utopias and apocalypticism thus play an important role. They help in attracting youth and in creating a sense of belonging. Although Alkorta argues that religious concepts can positively affect emotions and a sense of belonging, climate movements have also shown to be successful in responding to the emotions of young brains. Instead of leading to apathy, these emotions and how climate movements react to the emotions activate people. Because the climate crisis is such a major crisis, it creates the same emotional response as a faith system. Climate marches, collective protests and moral, individual actions create the same response as music, symbols and moral values in religion. The benefit of climate movements might even be that they are fighting a collective enemy.

The downside of this kind of belonging is that one can become disappointed in the promises of the collective. People sometimes lose their faith because they have an experience that does not connect with their perception of God. People can experience a feeling of alienation from their faith if they do not experience the help of God at times they need it. The same can also be valid for climate movements. Although climate movements manage to mediate a feeling of despair and fear with hope, there could be a point at which this does not hold up anymore. For example, such despair can result in ecological grief and mourning about the climate crisis. This can have negative consequences and might lead to a sense of losing community. The integration of the long tradition of Christianity can help shape these feelings and keep the community alive through difficult stages.

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G.v.V. did the conceptualisation, methodology, formal analysis and writing of the original draft for this paper. J.W.B. also contributed to the analysis, conceptualisation, project administration, supervision and writing review and editing of the article.

### Ethical considerations

No ethical clearance was necessary as the article was a literature study and review. Research did not include human participants.

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### Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

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