



# Indonesian biodiversity spirituality and post COVID-19 ecclesiastical implications



## Authors:

Julianus Mojau<sup>1</sup>   
Ricardo F. Nanuru<sup>2</sup> 

## Affiliations:

<sup>1</sup>Faculty of Theology,  
University of Halmahera,  
Tobelo, Indonesia

<sup>2</sup>Faculty of Theology,  
Moluccan Indonesian  
Christian University,  
Ambon, Indonesia

## Corresponding author:

Ricardo Nanuru,  
ricardonanuru632@gmail.com

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The enormous impact of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has caused Indonesian Christian leaders and theologians to become preoccupied with theodicy-humanistic questions rather than considering the rights of life for biodiversity. This is unacceptable because humans are not the only living things with the right to life and are entitled to God's justice in all-natural disasters. According to biologists and epidemiologists, the pandemic sends a message of ecological injustice. Therefore, by using a method of reading with a perspective of biological diversity, this research argues that humans and other living things have a right to God's justice amid disasters. The Indonesian spirituality of biological diversity, which is in line with the gratitude of Francis of Assisi and Calvin's idea of living in a church that considers God's justice for all creation, can serve as an epistemological foundation for developing theodicy-ecological ecclesiology.

**Contribution:** Considering the spirituality of biodiversity enables churches in Indonesia to embrace biodiversity as fellow creatures of God post-pandemic. In this way, they can affirm their ecclesiastical identity as the ecological body of Christ amid ecological injustice.

**Keywords:** spirituality; biodiversity; theodicy-ecological; ecclesiological implications; post COVID-19 pandemic.

## Introduction

In March 2020, Indonesia recorded the first two cases of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), which left church buildings deserted during the celebration of Holy Communion, as well as other services of the church being postponed or moved to a live-streaming service. The COVID-19 outbreak appears to have awakened every country to the fact that the 'third world war' is underway as a result of improvements in science and technology, which are backed by a modern culture that overlooks biodiversity (Fransiskus & Al-Tayyeb 2019:11).

This study showcases the link between the COVID-19 pandemic and the ecological injustice of zoonotic diseases associated with deforestation. It implies that the pandemic contains a religious message about God's justice to humanity. However, during this process, religious leaders and theologians' discussions of God's justice (theodicy) focused exclusively on human fate and salvation, without mentioning biodiversity. The responses from scientists and religious leaders in the book titled *Ragam Perspektif Dampak COVID-19: Sumbangan Ilmuwan AIPI Untuk Bangsa Indonesia* [Varieties of Perspectives on the Impact of COVID-19: AIPI Scientists' Contribution to the Indonesian Nation] (2021) have continuously focused on humans as victims (Oey-Gardiner & Abdullah 2021). The article written by Mgr. Adrianus Sunarko O.F.M. titled '*Teologi Belarasa dan Harapan Akan Perdamaian*' ['Theology of Compassion on the Green Church. Hope for Peace'] (2021), is a reminder of the ecological crisis without discussions on the issues of injustices experienced by other God's creations, such as biodiversity (Sunarko 2020:47–61). The lack of theological and ecclesiological knowledge about the importance of ecological theodicy is also demonstrated by mapping the results of Indonesia's Islamic, Protestant Christianity and Catholicism communities to the pandemic (Sukanto & Parulian 2020:273–283). Joas Adiprasetya, in his professorial inauguration speech on *Gereja Pascapandemi Merengkuh Kerapuhan* [Post-pandemic Church, Embracing Fragility] also failed to mention the fragility of God's other creations amid an ecological crisis (Adiprasetya 2021).

At the beginning of the pandemic, Julianus Mojau wrote an opinion piece at *SatuHarapan.com* on the importance of biological diversity spirituality amid a disaster (Mojau 2020). Subsequently, Yusak Budi Setyawan developed the idea of the Church as an ecological community in an article titled 'The Church as an Ecological Community: Practicing Eco-Ecclesiology in the Ecological

Crisis of Indonesia' (Setyawan 2021:91–107). Before Yusak Budi Setyawan's article was published, the Persekutuan Gereja-Gereja di Indonesia (PGI) had already adapted the World Council of Churches' (WCC) idea on the Green Church.<sup>1</sup> However, these theological and ecclesiological ideas have not considered Indonesian biodiversity spirituality, including the gratitude of Francis of Assisi and John Calvin's spirituality.

The spirituality of Indonesian biodiversity, as well as Francis of Assisi and John Calvin's appreciation of biodiversity, can be a source of inspiration and the epistemological basis for developing eco-ecclesiological awareness that considers God's ecological justice in every situation. This research analysed the relationship between the spirituality of Indonesian biodiversity and its ecclesiological implications after the pandemic. It was carried out using the hermeneutic method, also known as ecological hermeneutics among biblical scholars and concerned with environmental issues, in accordance with the Bible's testimonies from an ecological standpoint (Habel & Trudinger 2008).

## COVID-19 ecological injustice message amid Indonesian biodiversity

The World Health Organization (WHO), on 11 March 2020, declared COVID-19 a global pandemic. The Government of the Republic of Indonesia, through Presidential Decree No. 12 of 2020, dated 13 April 2020, also determined that the pandemic is a non-natural national disaster, which means it is human-related caused because of technological and modernisation failures. Therefore, by linking the first transmission to the industrial city of Wuhan, it is concluded that COVID-19 is a pandemic caused by technological and modernisation failure (BNPB 2022).

Pamungkas's (2020) article titled: '*Jangan Korbankan Kelelawar*' ['Do Not Blame Bats'], published in *Kompas Newspaper* (March 2020), stated the following:

[...] The extermination of insectivorous bats can potentially increase the population of insects that act as carriers of disease agents (*anthropo-de-borne* disease). This implies that the extermination of bats is inappropriate and ineffective to reduce the risk of disease in human populations. (p. 6)

Joko Pamungkas' critical note is significant because forest degradation causes biodiversity loss, increasing zoonotic illnesses that endanger human life. The tremendous biodiversity of Indonesia, Brazil, America, Congo and Africa should be able to prevent these countries from contacting the virus (Supriatna 2021:19). However, these places were unable to prevent the spread of the virus because the mining sector has badly harmed many of their forests and natural environments, particularly in Africa and Indonesia. In some villages in North Moluccas, Indonesia, such as Gulo (North Kao District, North Halmahera Regency) and Nolu (Central

Loloda District, West Halmahera Regency), the activities of the mining sector occur at the centre. The inability of the village community to deal with a consumeristic lifestyle offered by the neo-liberal economy affected ecological behaviour, including in rural communities. Hence, they willingly sold their lands to mining companies,<sup>2</sup> to support their daily lives. Furthermore, humans do not hesitate to serve their egoism by clearing trees and grass and building huge walls for life's comfort. Houses that are harmful to the environment flourish in today's world, contributing to global warming, which continues to rise regularly, while biodiversity is being overlooked (Anugrahbayu 2021:25–31, 140–141; Francis 2015).

The COVID-19 pandemic is closely related to human behaviour that ignores the right to life of biological diversity as God's creation. The pandemic sends a message about ecological injustice and notifies humans that natural resources must be respected.

According to the Bible, God did not create biodiversity to meet the needs of mankind, as often preached in the practise of consumeristic spirituality. Rather he created it for the life cycle to become more humane and ecological since not only humans reflect his image (cf. Gn 1:26–27) but also the universe (cf. Ps 104:1–35). The pandemic reminds humans that God's justice (theodicy) is not just concerned with human life but also with biodiversity to maintain a balance of life on earth.

## The spirituality of Indonesian biodiversity

Almost all ethnic groups in Indonesia have amazing biodiversity, which is appreciated using different spiritual expressions. Spiritual appreciation of biodiversity, for example, can be seen among the Halmahera people in the form of 'ecological faith'. They recognise and value the natural world around them, such as trees, water, rocks and animals, as living entity that needs to be respected. Humans are not the owners of biodiversity, but only one of the created organisms that are equal with others and dependent on the Creator as their Owner, locally known as *de mandate oka* (Botara 2013:223–233; Mojau 2003:81–88, 2015:113–134). A similar ideology is possessed by the Kalumpang people in West Sulawesi regarding their local wisdom on farming in the *Batu Pare* myth. Robert Patannang Borrong noted that the *Batu Pare* myth contains a message of a friendly ethical attitude towards the natural surroundings. Therefore, they do not harm the soil but keep renewing its humus cycle by reverting agricultural lands to forests. Robert Patannang Borrong detested that the tradition of the spirituality of biodiversity is not being brought into dialogue with modern thought. Still, it is being crushed by consumerism's mentality and capitalism's economics (Borrong 2015:141–163). Furthermore, this type of local wisdom also exists in the

1. Among the WCC, the practice of the Green-Church is still alive today. See <https://www.oikoumene.org/news/green-reformation-seeds-of-hope-for-an-ecological-theology>.

2. Interview with residents of the Nolu Village-Central Loloda District, April 2020 and Gulo Village, May 2021.

religious tradition of Hinduism-Balinese, particularly the concept of *Tri Hita Karana*, which has become the basis of the spirituality of the Balinese people in Teluk Benua (Suartini 2019). This is similar to the Sangserekan idea in the *Tallu Lolona* philosophy among the Toraja people. Fransiskus Randa stated that the philosophy of *Tallu Lolona* in Tana Toraja is in line with the *Tri Hita Karana* on the island of Bali, which emphasises the importance of preserving the natural environment by paying attention to the balance of human, animal and plant life (Randa 2016).

Unfortunately, the pietistic spirituality given by Western/European missionaries has undermined local understanding and a spiritual appreciation of biodiversity. The dichotomy between 'heavenly/eternal' and 'worldly/mortal' is emphasised in pietistic spirituality, which is influenced by the Enlightenment (Freedom Nanuru, Munir & Tjahyadi 2019:1274; Mojau 2003:93). Indonesians need to stop blaming the missionaries for this issue because the type of spirituality they brought was in line with their era.

The COVID-19 pandemic should enlighten everyone about the importance of biodiversity spirituality. This task is stated by considering biodiversity hermeneutics to rediscover its spirituality in the form of local wisdom, which remains a part of Indonesian Christians. The act of cultivating theophanic spirituality without succumbing to pantheism, such as trees, water, animals and birds, should not be taken for granted because they are divine in themselves. Biodiversity spirituality is theophany spirituality, in which we can sense the presence of God, the Lord, the Creator of the Universe, in and through all he has made. Everything created by God is not God but God is present in everything that he created (panentheistic) (Mojau 2015:125–126).

Therefore, along with the importance of human ethical responsibility related to every suffering and disease is the responsibility of maintaining their surrounding biodiversity. The process of considering the ethical responsibility of humans in the face of disease outbreaks such as the COVID-19 pandemic by ignoring the preservation of biodiversity because of excessive disinfectants reflects human selfishness. Yonky Karman in an article in *Kompas News Paper* (13 April 2020) titled '*Antrodise Wabah*' ['Antrodise Plague'], stated that it is imperative to value humanist-related ethics in dealing with disease outbreaks (Karman 2020:6). This view needs to be complemented with the importance of ecological theodicy from the perspective of biodiversity hermeneutics for humans to be more introspective and respectful of the rights of life for biodiversity in future. Herein, the contribution of an 'earth-oriented ethics' can complement human ethical responsibilities to ensure they do not only think about safety and justice for themselves but also the environment. There is an integral relationship between social justice and ecological and environmental justice (Rasmussen 1996:103–105).

## Francis of Assisi and Calvin's spirituality of gratitude to biodiversity

The Indonesian biodiversity spirituality in the form of Francis of Assisi and John Calvin's appreciation of nature appreciates the ecological dimension of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Hence, the ecological-meditative sensitivity of Francis of Assisi pastorally invites all God's creations to share in praising the Creator of life as follows Stanislaus (2019):

[M]y brethren, birds, you should praise your creator a lot and always love Him who gave you feathers for clothing, wings for flight, and whatever things you need. God has made you exalted among His creatures and prepared your dwellings in pure air. For even though he neither sows nor reaps, he protects you and takes care of you without the slightest trouble. (p. 163)

John Calvin, who believed in the glory of God in the context of the humanist-enlightenment era, did not ignore the sensitivity of the spirituality of biodiversity and provided a signal about its importance to every believer. In a commentary on the meaning of the text of Genesis 2:9, John Calvin wrote (McNeill 2006) admirably:

[I]n the grass, the trees, and the fruit, besides their various uses, there is an apparent and pleasing beauty. God dresses flowers so beautifully that they make our eyes feel the fragrance they emit. (Institution III, 10:2). (pp. 721–722)

The gratitude spirituality of Francis of Assisi and John Calvin is a reminder of Christoph Stückelberger's statement about the 1990s global ecological crisis in his doctoral dissertation. In the dissertation Stückelberger reminded that humans are only of the guest and not the owner of this earth. Similar to Stückelberger, Mojau (2011) and Rasmussen (1996) stated that both humans and other creations of God are fellow guests on this earth, hence they need to align themselves with the cosmic feast and have more respect for biological diversity. Earth is God's home, hence humans must be more respectful of the rights to life and the dignity of God's creations. This attitude of respect will prevent them from having a political view of nature, which takes courage to expand the understanding and appreciation of the image of God by including other creations. In this case, the spirituality of biodiversity can be a basis for the PGI (2020).

## Spirituality of biodiversity as the basis of ecological-related theodicy

In the book, *The Providence of God*, Gerrit Cornelis Berkouwer defined five types of theodicy, namely; dualistic, harmonious, theological, Wilfred Monad and Christological theodicies:

1. Dualistic theodicy is a philosophy based on dualism, such as the conflicting elements of evil and good, as is evident in the Persian, Zoroastrian and Manichaeic religions.



2. Harmonious theodicy, founded on the views of stoicism and Augustine, states that evil is only temporary, and its presence clouds the light of life.
3. Theological theodicy was founded on the belief that everything has a purpose where suffering and evil are rationally justified, like war.
4. The theodicy of Wilfred Monod seeks to rehabilitate Marcion's views by denying the omnipotence of God.
5. Christological theodicy is founded on Karl Barth's Christocentric view of all creation in the light of Christ (Berkouwer 1983:235–244; Ngelow 2016:181–199).

Gerrit Cornelis Berkouwer did not choose a harmonious theodicy but one closer to Karl Barth. In our opinion, the brief description of the five types of theodicy mentioned by Berkouwer is clear. Karl Barth did not choose the harmony theodicy for fear of the dangers of pantheism. Nevertheless, Berkouwer suggested three important things that believers need to consider to understand theodicy from the point of view of the Christian faith, namely God's wrath, human sin and ecclesiastical doxology (Berkouwer 1983:256–275). In the context of the post COVID-19 pandemic, Berkouwer's notes can be a source of inspiration for humans to be more humble. Therefore, those relying on the pandemic as a historical repeat of human suffering, namely sacrificing the harmony of the ecosystem created by God, are wrong. Gerrit Cornelis Berkouwer's opinion can remind humans of the ambivalence and ambiguity of being good because God is glorified through human dignity and biodiversity. Conversely, manipulating human life and biodiversity for human egoism, particularly those in political and economic power positions, by enslaving others and exploiting biodiversity would be evil.

Long before the pandemic in Indonesia, Sindhunata, while reviewing Signs of the Age (2019) called 'Tanyakan Hidupmu Pada Sayuran' ['Ask about Your Life to Vegetables'], made efforts to spur development growth without robbing nature (Sindhunata 2019:2–3). Scientific epistemological awareness is insufficient to consider the cyclical existence of life in theological and religious education as well as the character of modernism, which represents a humanist epistemological understanding. Therefore, human religious culture, including that of Indonesians, is also profoundly human-centric (Prior 1999:49–60).

It's time for humans to reflect on themselves because humans have been controlled by their selfishness without considering other creations, such as the diversity of trees and rivers. The humanitarian crisis caused by COVID-19 indicates that scientific and technological progress threatens the life of humanity. This denotes that it is time for humanity to recover their scientific epistemology and religious spirituality, which respects biodiversity inherent in humans as *homo sapientia* [wisdom humans] (Pannenberg 1976:7–14).

Therefore, in the face of the pandemic, it is necessary to go beyond the rational calculative spirituality and develop an

intuitive, meditative epistemology of biodiversity spirituality. This intuition will help humanity to have a meditative value for their natural surroundings to help humans to experience the presence of *Sang Yang Lyan* [God, the Creator of the Universe] (Haryo Tejo 2013:156–168). The epistemology of biodiversity spirituality helps humanity care for their selves and other creatures. It attempts to contemplate theologically based eco-theodicy: God's justice for biodiversity, which human beings have neglected. The pandemic has convinced humans that God's justice (theodicy) applies to all creations (Stanislaus 2019:49–52).

Biodiversity spirituality is the epistemology of meditative spirituality to foster ecological sensitivity for the establishment of ecological justice to enable human life and other living beings created by God to live in harmony. The COVID-19 pandemic forced the human consciousness to jump into biodiversity spirituality and capture the ecological theodicy, God's justice for 'all creatures'. Jesus also advised His disciples that the gospel of the kingdom of God also needs to be preached to 'all creation' (cf. Mk 16:15). In the Old Testament, the eco-theodicy beliefs are in the form of Sabbath spirituality (cf. Lv 25:3–7).

Ecological-theodicy contemplation, or theodicy-harmony in Berkouwer's terms<sup>3</sup>, is an attempt to raise awareness of biodiversity spirituality to urge people to utilise their freedom and reason to advance civilisation without ignoring the rights of life for the environment. Biodiversity spirituality as the epistemological basis for eco-theodicy or theodicy-harmony emphasises the importance of the progress of human civilization, which is both humanist and ecological. Human civilisation needs to respect the rights and dignity of humans and their natural surroundings. Therefore, in accordance with Karl Barth's Christological theodicy perspective, it can be concluded that both humans and biological diversity are fellow creatures of God's Life and fellow recipients of the gift of redemption from the power of sin, which is capable of destroying man and all creatures (cf. Rm 8) (Stanislaus 2019:264–266).

## Ecclesiological implications of biodiversity spirituality post COVID-19

Churches worldwide are committed to environmental justice, despite not using the term 'biodiversity spirituality'. According to a key document by the WCC titled *Costly Unity*, the Church's Unity Movement will have substantial consequences for justice, peace and integrity (DGD 1993). Similarly, the PGI has been increasingly paying attention to appreciating biodiversity spirituality since the 1980s. In the studies and documents of seminars on religions in the 1980s, the need to pay attention to the preservation of the natural surroundings amid advances in science and technology was realised. Since the XV General Assembly at Mamasa GTM,

3. Indeed, Berkouwer did not choose theodicy-harmony as previously mentioned.

South Sulawesi (2009), the PGI has increasingly embraced the spirituality of biodiversity. After the 2010 MPL-PGI session in Tobelo, this appreciation was further concretised in collaboration with the Ministry of the Environment of the Republic of Indonesia and the United Evangelical Mission (UEM), which produced a socio-eco-ecclesiological document entitled: *Environmental Damage: The Role and Responsibilities of the Church*. The document contained the prophetic voices of churches in Indonesia on the damage to the natural surroundings and demanded serious responsibility from the PGI member churches (Bancin 2011). The 2013 PGI MPL session echoed the ecological concerns of churches in collaborating with the Indonesian Ministry of Environment and the Jakarta Theological College (STT Jakarta) to develop a guide for people to be friendly with their natural surroundings. This collaboration resulted in a guide for developing ecclesiological insights and praxis entitled: *Gereja Sahabat Alam* [Nature-Friendly Church]. It provided ecclesiological insights in the form of a liturgical arrangement with concrete examples from the PGI member churches that have developed and become increasingly sensitive to ecological justice. The idea of PGI's Nature-Friendly Church is an adaptation of the Green Church idea, which has been on the agenda since the 1983 WCC VI General Assembly in Vancouver, Canada.

In the future, this theological and ecological awareness must be more concretely expressed by the churches as an integral part of their spiritual appreciation of life. The architecture of the Balinese Protestant Christian Church (GKPB) in Blimbingsari, Bali, Ganjuran Catholic Church in Yogyakarta and the Maria Assumpta Catholic Church in Klaten are all nature friendly. The architectural problems in Indonesia are related to the influence of Enlightenment-related design, which is a challenge in developing ecclesiological insights amid the ecological and post-pandemic crisis of COVID-19 and other variants.

In addition to the implications of sharpening eco-ecclesiological and eco-liturgical insights, it is also important to concretise the appreciation of biodiversity spirituality in daily life. An example is the practice of a zero-plastic lifestyle producing a yard brimming with diverse trees. In the PGI environment, the practice of zero-plastic is increasingly entrenched. Churches worldwide can increasingly live biodiversity spirituality by developing a lifestyle within the environment which no longer uses plastic in every ecclesiastical activity. Generally, humans have been driven by the neo-liberal market economy paradigm and are almost helpless to face the pressure of this mechanism. In this respect, the COVID-19 pandemic has raised an alarm as well as momentum to reflect and make decisions on the importance of living biodiversity spirituality in daily life, including in developing patterns and practices for churches.

After the pandemic, churches in Indonesia developed an ecclesial identity based on the country's biodiversity

spirituality. Developing this ecclesial identity is an anticipatory step and advocacy for the prevention of ecological damage that can bring zoonotic diseases. Therefore, by considering the spirituality of biodiversity as the epistemological basis for the development of ecclesiology, it is hoped that in the future, churches can truly become an *ecological community*, particularly when implementing the trinitarian ecclesiology of the Christian and biblical faith traditions. The development of ecclesiology after the pandemic will free churches from the ecclesial anthropocentrism mentality that has so far controlled its awareness and practice. It will also enable churches to embrace human fragility and the right to live with other living things created by God, thereby affirming their ecclesiastical identity as the ecological-social body of Christ.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic has conveyed a powerful message on ecological injustice and human civilisation's progress as rulers over the world in the form of scientific and technological progress to suit their consumeristic needs, governed by the neoliberal economy. The Indonesian biodiversity spirituality, including Francis of Assisi and Calvin's spirituality of gratitude, is the epistemological basis for developing eco-theology and eco-ecclesiology after the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, one of the important implications of the theodicy-ecological epistemology of biodiversity is the Nature-Friendly Church, as developed by the PGI.

The development of ecclesiology in this direction will enable churches in Indonesia and worldwide to prevent the stigmatisation of biodiversity when disasters occur. Churches will also be able to create biodiversity-friendly ecclesiastical identities despite the associated ecological disaster. By considering the spirituality of the biodiversity of the Indonesian people, including Francis of Assisi and Calvin, the churches in Indonesia can further affirm the idea of the Church as an ecological community capable of embracing biodiversity. In this way, they can affirm ecclesiastical identity as the ecological body of Christ amid ecological injustice.

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## Authors' contributions

Both authors contributed equally to this work.

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This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

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