



*Isabel “Bella” Mukonyora is an associate professor in the department of philosophy and religion at Western Kentucky University. Mukonyora has found a way of using her training as a scholar of religion to develop courses that help students understand the global society in which we all live today. Her teaching covers a wide range of topics in which she draws attention to many topical issues concerning life in the twenty-first century — from violence, oppression, and gender to even climate change! As someone born in a postcolonial African society riddled with violence, injustice, and poverty, Mukonyora is attentive to questions that matter to her. This history has deeply affected her teaching and research methods; her monograph, *Wandering a Gendered Wilderness**

(Peter Lang: New York, 2007) highlights the need for scholars to examine the public role of Christianity in postcolonial Africa. After having written articles on different aspects of Christianity in Africa that were published as chapters of books and journal articles, Mukonyora is now writing a book on ecojustice and is looking forward to conducting regular upper-level classes on religion and ecology at Western Kentucky University.

Terms, Concepts, and Etymologies

To globalize concepts involved in religion and ecology, it helps to begin with what students know and understand and to broaden out their understandings and widen their horizons. For example, I know that students from Bowling Green, Kentucky, are likely to understand the term "Gaia" and to relate to images of Goddesses from ancient times in the northern hemisphere. I have been able to teach a pilot course on religion and ecology at Western Kentucky University by turning to ideas more familiar to them that suggest the interconnectedness of all living creatures on earth in spiritual ecology. I then widened their horizons by introducing them to Mai Vedu, a Shona concept from my own culture whereby interconnectedness has been distorted by our human failure to comprehend the limits of our power. Mai Vedu has thus signaled to students from a Western hegemonic culture that there are other people making of the Earth a special place and connecting humans to a vast animal and plant kingdom. Mai Vedu, rather than Gaia, becomes that Archimedean point from which someone of my cultural identity can teach religion and ecology in a way that makes students feel that they are being challenged to take an interest in other cultures.

I start with simple words that define religion, especially those I can pick from etymology. For instance, *reli-gare* is the Latin root word describing religion as an activity that involves believers in community-centered activities aimed at making sure bonds exist between people enough for them to share value systems. *Reli-gare*, although focusing on human behavior, is important to religion and ecology, mainly because there is an emphasis on the interrelatedness of the living, which can here be extended to all life, albeit centered on the well-being of humans first and foremost. For purposes of discussion in classrooms filled with Christians, agnostics, atheists, and members of a few other types of religion, this simple etymology, associated with an example of religious behavior of members from an entirely different culture and associated with the larger earth community, is a good way of widening the horizons of what it means to be religious. Another useful word in defining religion in this era of climate change is the Latin word *salvus*

. This word is an adjective meaning “safe.” When used in religious terms to refer to a goal, *salvus* is a way of describing “healing” or “the restoration of things that are broken to their beauty,” so to speak. This I find to be a good theoretical device for getting students accustomed to salvation as a journey to the heavens away from earth; to think critically about that understanding of the term in today’s world. As Bron Taylor notes in a recent book called *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future* (Berkeley: University of California Pres, 2009), there is a spectrum of religions from the supernatural-oriented to the animist and Gaian, and each type has “explanatory and interpretive power” that has implications for living on the earth. This pluralist theoretical framework resonates with me because my own goal in this course is to raise the awareness of the earth community through lenses developed from a variety of theories of religion.

Mai Vedu, in this discussion, becomes an example of a “religion” that uses the idea of the evolution of planets to heighten the awareness of the divine in everything. “Our Mother Earth,” as she is described by Aschwanden (1989), is the womb of creation in which we find the ocean, land, mountains, rivers, plants, animals, humans, and whatever else that lives. In Mai Vedu’s womb one finds human beings coming into being and sharing with animals an existence that depends on other lives described in Her story. Almost as scientists describe processes of evolution in which there are other bodies in the heavens — some like the sun and moon, without life, yet a lot older than Earth — the story of evolution according to Mai Vedu has nothing to do with climate change in the way the Karanga people tell it in Africa. Mai Vedu is portrayed as a young planet filled with watery substances facing the threat of death when the sun gets very hot, which the Karanga people from central Africa believe happened to the ecosystem in the past and is guaranteed to happen again. Mai Vedu opens students up to alternative ways of thinking religiously and ethically about Gaia in a global society that pays attention to the predicament of others.

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