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The Paradox of Faith: Environmental Moral Conscience in Abrahamic Religions and African Traditional Religion in Ghana

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Abstract

This study examines how Ghana's religious transition from African Traditional Religions (ATR) to Abrahamic faiths has shaped environmental values, addressing a critical gap in sustainability literature concerning the galamsey crisis. Using a desk-based critical analysis, it systematically reviewed scholarly and religious texts, applying thematic and comparative analysis within a sacralisation-desacralisation framework. The analysis indicates that the displacement of ATR's nature-sacralising worldview, which fostered conservation through sacred sites and taboos, has created an environmental moral vacuum. Although Christianity and Islam theologically advocate stewardship, these tenets have not been operationalised into a culturally compelling restraint against galamsey. This vacuum enables the well-documented political-economic drivers of environmental degradation. The study contributes by integrating religious cosmology with political economy in environmental analysis and centring ATR as a coherent ecological philosophy within African religious thought. It recommends an earth-keeping syncretism, merging indigenous environmental wisdom with Abrahamic stewardship within religious and policy frameworks.

Keywords: *Environmental Moral Vacuum; Sacralisation/Desacralisation; Galamsey; Abrahamic (Christianity, Islam) and African Traditional Religions; Cultural Sustainability*

Introduction

Ghana confronts an environmental crisis of unprecedented scale, driven by the proliferation of illegal small-scale mining, locally known as galamsey. This activity has precipitated a multifaceted disaster, characterised by catastrophic deforestation, systemic pollution of vital water bodies, and the degradation of arable land. The severity of this crisis was underscored in a February 2025 statement to the Parliament of Ghana, which reported that 44 of the nation's 288 forest reserves are under serious attack, with over 5,000 hectares devastated. Hydrological impacts are severe; contamination of major rivers has forced frequent shutdowns of water treatment plants, posing a direct threat to national water security (GhanaWeb, 2025; Parliament of Ghana, 2025). The human cost is devastating, manifesting as a public health emergency linked to increased birth defects, mercury poisoning, and respiratory diseases (Awewomom, Agyapong, Frimpong & Osei-Bonsu, 2024; Donkoh, 2025), thereby undermining key Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2022).

While the political economy and governance failures driving galamsey are well-documented (Botchwey & Crawford, 2025; Osei-Kojo & Andrews, 2020), the accelerating destruction signals a deeper, systemic crisis that extends beyond economics and regulation alone. Concurrently, Ghana has undergone a profound religious transformation, shifting from a society deeply rooted in African Traditional Religion (ATR) to one where Christianity and Islam are overwhelmingly dominant, with ATR adherence declining from 8.5% of the population in 2000 to 3.2% by 2021 (Ghana Statistical Service, 2022). This demographic shift signifies a monumental cosmological transition, displacing an indigenous worldview that historically institutionalised a system of “sacralised sustainability” through tangible mechanisms such as sacred groves and spiritually enforced environmental ethics (Watson-Nortey & Mensah, 2025).

This context reveals a critical paradox. Communities that predominantly follow Abrahamic faiths—which view creation as God’s handiwork and humans as stewards—are now directly involved in large-scale environmental degradation. Conversely, the indigenous ATR worldview they displaced demonstrably fostered a conservation ethic that preserved these same ecosystems for generations, with empirical studies showing its efficacy in maintaining biodiversity (Babalola, Lawal, Opii, & Oso, 2014; Sarfo-Mensah & Awuah-Nyamekye, 2014; Sinthumule, 2024). This dissonance points to a significant gap in the sustainability literature: a lack of critical engagement with the impact of religious transformation on environmental values and moral restraint.

Existing scholarship has thoroughly analysed the political and economic drivers of galamsey, yet a notable gap remains regarding the fundamental crisis of values accompanying Ghana’s religious transformation. This study reframes the galamsey crisis as more than a policy gap, locating it within a deeper reconfiguration of moral and ethical frameworks. It interrogates the paradox of faith and environmental moral conscience, proposing that the marginalisation of ATR’s immanent, nature-sacralising worldview by transcendent Abrahamic paradigms has fostered an ethical vacuum in environmental relations. This vacuum has eroded culturally embedded restraints essential for sustainability, thereby exacerbating Ghana’s environmental crisis (Zurba & Papadopoulos, 2023). To explore this thesis, the study analyses ecological ethics in ATR and the operationalisation of stewardship in Ghanaian Christianity and Islam, juxtaposing these ethical frameworks with the empirical reality of galamsey-driven destruction to illuminate the value crisis and propose pathways toward a reintegrated earth-keeping ethic.

CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This section presents an interdisciplinary framework that integrates political economy with religious cosmology and environmental ethics to analyse the galamsey crisis. The central argument is that the political and economic drivers of illegal mining are worsened by a deeper, frequently overlooked environmental moral vacuum. This vacuum arises from Ghana's religious transformation: the displacement of ATR's immanent, nature-sacralising worldview by the transcendent paradigms of Christianity and Islam, which have not been consistently translated into a culturally embedded and communally enforced environmental ethic in this context. The framework is built through a review of three interconnected domains: the political economy of galamsey, the contrasting ecological ethics of ATR and Abrahamic religions, and the unifying paradigm of sacralization and desacralization.

The Political Economy and Governance of Galamsey: Structural Drivers and Permissive Conditions

A substantial body of scholarship elucidates the complex political economy that perpetuates galamsey. Research consistently identifies potent economic drivers, including poverty, unemployment, and the allure of quick financial returns, which propel individuals into illegal mining (Asuamah Yeboah, 2023). These incentives are strengthened by rising gold prices and weak local economies, making galamsey a lucrative but destructive survival strategy in areas with few alternatives (Lawal, 2025). However, reducing the crisis to subsistence-level activity overlooks its organised and transnational nature. Studies reveal intricate informal networks involving local diggers, financiers, influential domestic elites, and foreign operators, notably from China, who provide capital, political cover, and advanced technology, thereby intensifying the scale of degradation (Botchwey & Crawford, 2025).

The persistence of these networks is fundamentally enabled by systemic governance failures, specifically a regulatory framework crippled by weak enforcement, bureaucratic complexity, and pervasive corruption (Osei-Kojo & Andrews, 2020). This environment is exacerbated by "competitive clientelism," where political actors across the spectrum protect galamsey operations for electoral or financial gain, creating a cycle of impunity (Botchwey & Crawford, 2025). Consequently, state

interventions often yield only temporary successes, failing to dismantle the underlying political-economic structures (Ayelazuno & Aziabah, 2025). This governance vacuum actively fosters a shadow economy in which short-term profit consistently outweighs long-term environmental and public health considerations, as evidenced by ongoing water bodies contamination and associated health crises (Awewomom, Agyapong, Frimpong & Osei-Bonsu, 2024; Donkoh, 2025). While this perspective is essential, it remains incomplete by overlooking the cultural and ethical systems that historically regulated Ghana's environment; the erosion of these systems creates a permissive moral landscape that political-economic drivers exploit.

Worldviews in Tension: Sacralised Sustainability versus Abstract Stewardship

To elucidate the value crisis underpinning galamsey, the framework juxtaposes two contrasting religious-ecological paradigms from Ghana's history and present.

African Traditional Religion and the Architecture of Sacralised Sustainability: ATR represents a comprehensive cosmological framework that inherently promotes environmental sustainability through its ontology of divine immanence (Alifa, 2023). This worldview, particularly within the Akan tradition, posits an interconnected spiritual and physical realm where deities (abosom) inhabit and personify specific natural elements, transforming the environment from a mere resource into a sacred, sentient community (Mbiti, 1990; Asante, 2003; de Witte, 2025). The Earth Goddess (Asase Yaa) is revered as the ultimate landowner, establishing a sacred tenancy for humans that embedded the principle of intergenerational equity, a cornerstone of modern sustainability, into the cultural fabric (Gyekye, 1996; Golo, 2024).

This sacralised cosmology was operationalised through sophisticated, enforceable institutions. Sacred groves (Kwae Kronkron), dedicated to deities and ancestors, served as inviolable sanctuaries for biodiversity (Cusack, 2011). River deities like Tano protected water bodies through anti-pollution taboos, while spirits such as the Mmoatia guarded forests by using spiritual fear to control human behaviour (Arthur, 2021; Asante, 2024; Adu-Boahen, Frimpong, Mensah, & Okyere, 2023). Beyond designated sites, a complex system of taboos (akyiwadee) and totemic practices encoded sustainable resource management and kinship with

other species, enforcing natural regeneration cycles (Appiah-Opoku, 2007; Dübgen, 2024). The entire system's robustness was secured by the belief in immediate spiritual sanctions for violations, providing a culturally potent and pervasive deterrent (Watson-Nortey & Mensah, 2025). The empirical efficacy of this "sacralised sustainability" is demonstrated by studies showing superior biodiversity, biomass, and soil quality in sacred groves compared to exploited areas (Bhagwat & Rutte, 2006; Campbell, 2005; Ray, Chandran, & Ramachandra, 2014). Its erosion through religious conversion and modernisation has therefore removed a critical pillar of Ghana's indigenous environmental governance infrastructure (Sarfo-Mensah, Owusu-Bi, Awuah-Nyamekye, & Amisah, 2014; Berkes, 2018).

Abrahamic Religions in Ghana: Theological Potential and Contextual Gaps: Christianity and Islam possess rich theological resources that can support a robust environmental ethic. Christian "creation care" or stewardship theology derives from scriptures affirming God's ownership of the Earth (Psalms 24:1) and humanity's mandate to "till and keep" it (Genesis 2:15), advocating for responsible care, intergenerational justice, and an "ecological conversion" (Berry, 2000; DeWitt, 2011). Global documents, notably the encyclical *Laudato Si'*, provide a powerful articulation of this perspective (Francis, 2015). Similarly, Islamic environmental ethics are built on *Tawhid* (divine oneness), which imbues creation with sacred significance as *ayat* (signs) of Allah, and *Khilafah* (vice-regency), framing humans as accountable trustees (*khalifah*) tasked with maintaining balance (*Mizan*) and preventing corruption (*fasad*) (Khalid, 2010; Ozdemir, 2024). This is operationalised through principles like the prohibition of waste (*israf*) and the tradition of protected zones (*hima*) (Rahmat, 2025; Izzi Deen, 2003).

However, in the specific Ghanaian context regarding *galamsey*, scholarly research indicates a significant gap between this theological potential and its practical application. Within influential Pentecostal/Charismatic discourse, an interpretative emphasis on human "dominion" (Genesis 1:28), often detached from the ethic of "keeping," combined with prosperity theology and an eschatological devaluation of the material world, can marginalise ecological concerns and inadvertently sanctify extractive pursuits (Golo & Yaro, 2013; Ofoe, 2019). In mainstream Islamic discourse, while principles exist, explicit, frequent, and practical preaching that directly links *Tawhid* and *Khilafah* to the condemnation of *galamsey* and the protection of specific ecosystems is not a dominant feature, with environmental issues often perceived as secondary to themes

of individual piety and social justice (Quaye & Oppong, 2025; Rahmat, 2025). This suggests that while the transcendent stewardship tenets of Abrahamic faiths are theologically profound, they have not been consistently translated into a functionally equivalent, culturally embedded, and actionable ethic that provides a compelling, immediate restraint against destructive activities like *galamsey*.

The Sacralisation-Desacralisation Paradigm and the Environmental Moral Vacuum

To integrate analyses of political economy and contrasting worldviews, this study employs a theoretical lens that synthesises the concepts of sacralisation, desacralisation, and the resultant “environmental moral vacuum.” This paradigm, rooted in classical sociology (Durkheim, 1995; Eliade, 1959; Berger, 2011), explains how shifts in cosmological meaning alter the moral restraints governing human-environment interactions.

Sacralisation describes the process, epitomised by ATR, through which ecological values are institutionalised by attributing sacredness to nature. This immanent worldview transforms specific rivers, forests, and groves from natural resources into sacred abodes of deities and ancestral spirits, making their protection a spiritual imperative enforced by beliefs in immediate supernatural sanctions (Asante, 2024; Mbiti, 1990; Adu-Boahen, Frimpong, Mensah, & Okyere, 2023; Watson-Nortey & Mensah, 2025). The documented conservation efficacy of sacred groves validates the practical impact of this sacralised sustainability (Bhagwat & Rutte, 2006; Sinthumule, 2024).

Desacralisation denotes the erosion of this nature-honouring worldview. In Ghana, this has been propelled by modernisation and the ascendancy of Abrahamic faiths. Although both religions have stewardship theologies, local interpretations have frequently shifted their practical application in a different direction. An overemphasis on human dominion (White, 1967; Ampofo, 2025), the prosperity gospel, and a transcendent, otherworldly focus can implicitly “disenchant” the landscape, recasting nature as a neutral resource for human benefit (Ofoe, 2019; Watson-Nortey & Mensah, 2025). Even within Islamic communities, where textual resources are strong, the limited contextual emphasis on ecological ethics as a core religious obligation reflects this desacralising trend (Quaye & Oppong, 2025; Ampofo, 2025).

The critical consequence is the emergence of an environmental moral vacuum (Babalola, Lawal, Opii, & Oso, 2014). This concept captures the

condition where the immediate, culturally compelling, and place-based restraints of ATR have been eroded without being functionally replaced by an equally potent and actionable environmental ethic from the dominant Abrahamic traditions. The sacralised prohibitions of ATR were specific and fear-inducing. In contrast, Christian and Islamic stewardship principles remain abstract and contested, failing to integrate into daily moral reasoning under economic pressure (Ampofo, 2025; Ofoe, 2019). This creates a normative vacuum where the old, spiritually enforced prohibitions of ATR have faded, and new ethical frameworks lack comparable immediate force. Short-term economic incentives and weak governance fill this void, allowing the galamsey crisis to flourish (Botchwey & Crawford, 2025).

The theoretical framework posits that the shift from ATR's sacralised worldview to a desacralized one—mediated by particular interpretations of Abrahamic faiths—has produced an environmental moral vacuum. This vacuum is a critical, under-acknowledged driver that allows political and economic forces to operate with devastating effect. Thus, the crisis is reframed not simply as a policy gap but as a foundational failure of cultural sustainability: the erosion of values and knowledge systems essential for socio-ecological balance.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study uses a constructivist-interpretive paradigm, viewing social and ethical realities as products of discourse and cultural systems. A desk-based critical analysis (Bassot, 2022) serves as the methodological approach, involving the systematic examination and synthesis of existing texts to deconstruct arguments and build a theory-driven argument. The research design employs a qualitative document analysis, facilitating philosophical engagement with concepts and discourses through a deliberate critique of assumptions, coherence, and implications in scholarly and documentary sources, aligning with the study's aim to interrogate the moral dimensions of the galamsey crisis.

Data Collection: Source Selection and Materials

Data were gathered through a systematic review of scholarly literature and document analysis. The materials consist entirely of textual sources, categorised as follows:

- *Scholarly Literature*: Peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, and book chapters constituted the primary materials.
- *Documentary Analysis*: Sources included religious texts (The Bible, The *Qur'an*); official reports from Ghanaian governmental bodies (Ghana Statistical Service, Parliament of Ghana); policy documents and public statements from religious institutions (Ghana Catholic Bishops' Conference); and reports from reputable non-governmental organisations.

Systematic Selection Process

To ensure rigour and relevance, a systematic selection process was employed:

- *Database Searches*: Electronic searches were conducted in Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar.
- *Keywords*: Searches utilised combinations of keywords and phrases, including “galamsey,” “illegal small-scale mining in Ghana,” “religion and environmental ethics,” “ATR ecology,” “Christianity creation care Ghana,” “Islam khalifah Ghana,” and “sacred natural sites.”
- *Inclusion Criteria*: Sources were prioritised based on the following criteria: peer-reviewed status; publication in English between 1990 and 2025; and direct relevance to the study's core themes of religion, environmental ethics, and/or the political economy of galamsey in Ghana.
- *Snowballing*: The reference lists of key articles were reviewed to identify additional relevant sources.

Data Analysis

Textual data was analysed using a multi-pronged strategy to build a coherent, evidence-based argument.

Thematic Analysis: This was employed to identify, analyse, and report patterns (themes) concerning ecological moral principles within the literature and religious texts. The analysis was operationalised in three stages:

- *Familiarisation*: Immersive reading and re-reading of the source materials.
- *Coding*: Systematic generation of initial codes (descriptive labels) capturing features of the data relevant to the research questions

(“sacred grove as sanctuary,” “dominion theology,” “stewardship as abstract principle”).

- *Theme Development:* Collating codes into potential themes, refining them, and defining their essence. Key themes that emerged included “sacralised sustainability,” “theological ambivalence,” and “environmental moral vacuum.”

Comparative Analysis: This method was used to systematically juxtapose the ethical frameworks of ATR, Christianity, and Islam. It was operationalised by:

- *Identifying Focal Points:* Establishing specific points of comparison across the traditions, such as the conceptualisation of nature, the source of ethical authority, and the mechanisms for enforcing environmental norms.
- *Contrast and Synthesis:* Drawing explicit contrasts (immanent vs. transcendent sacredness) and identifying unexpected commonalities to illuminate the central paradox and its consequences.

Logical Argumentation: The core thesis and the paradox of faith were constructed through critical reasoning and logical synthesis of the evidence derived from the thematic and comparative analyses. To build a persuasive framework, the study constructed a chain of evidence, addressed counter-arguments, and maintained internal consistency.

Scope and Limitations of the Desk-Based Approach

While this methodological approach is effective for theoretical and normative inquiry, its limitations are explicitly acknowledged:

- *Lack of Primary Data:* The study does not generate new empirical data on the beliefs or behaviours of contemporary religious adherents, which limits direct claims about individual-level causality.
- *Dependence on Existing Literature:* The analysis is constrained by the scope, quality, and potential biases of the published scholarship it reviews.
- *Interpretive Nature:* As a critical analysis, the findings are inherently interpretive, though the systematic and transparent analytical strategy aims to ensure rigour and reproducibility.

These limitations are mitigated by the study’s focus on developing a theoretical argument that views galamsey through an ethical lens, addressing an overlooked area in academic and policy discourse.

FINDINGS

The desk-based critical analysis yielded findings structured across two interrelated domains: 1) the descriptive evidence from the literature regarding the operational frameworks of ATR and Abrahamic faiths and 2) the analytical interpretation of these frameworks in relation to the galamsey crisis. This structure clarifies the outcomes of the source analysis before they are synthesised within the study's theoretical paradigm.

Descriptive Findings from Document Analysis

The Institutional Framework of ATR's "Sacralised Sustainability": A critical analysis of the reviewed scholarly literature consistently documents ATR's institutionalisation of a comprehensive system of "sacralised sustainability". Across sources, this framework presents environmental conservation as an inherent consequence of its cosmological principles. The findings delineate three core, empirically supported mechanisms through which this environmental ethic was operationalised:

- *Cosmological Foundation*: Sources establish that ATR, particularly within the Ghanaian tradition, posits a worldview where deities (abosom) inhabit specific natural features, conferring sacred status upon rivers, forests, and groves (Asante, 2024; Arthur, 2021; Mbiti, 1990). Central to this, as evidenced in the works of Gyekye (1996) and Golo (2024), is the veneration of Asase Yaa (the Earth Goddess), the ultimate owner of the land. Sacred tenancy ensured that the needs of future generations were a fundamental part of the cultural outlook on land ownership. This sacralisation extended to specific topographical features, with deities (abosom) such as Tano and Antoa Nyamaa personifying rivers, while forests are perceived as the abode of nature-guarding spirits like the Mmoatia and sasa (Asante, 2024; Arthur, 2021). This ontology, described by Mbiti (1990), fostered a relationship of reverence and restraint.
- *Tangible Conservation Mechanisms*: The literature provides extensive evidence of formalised institutions such as sacred groves (Kwae Kronkron), which functioned as inviolable sanctuaries dedicated to deities and ancestral spirits (Cusack, 2011). Empirical studies consistently indicate that these sites maintain higher biodiversity, biomass, and soil quality compared to adjacent exploited areas, demonstrating their conservation efficacy (Campbell, 2005; Bofo, Lah, & Manteaw, 2025; Bhagwat & Rutte, 2006). Beyond groves, a

complex system of taboos (akyiwadee), such as the prohibition of farming on the earth goddess's sacred day and totemic practices that created kinship with certain species, encoded sustainable resource management (Appiah-Opoku, 2007).

- *Enforcement System:* Documented analyses of ATR highlight a complex system of taboos (akyiwadee) and totemic practices that regulated resource use (Appiah-Opoku, 2007). Scholarship indicates that compliance was enforced by the belief in immediate spiritual sanctions—such as crop failure, illness, or communal misfortune—for violations of these environmental taboos. This mechanism provided a culturally embedded deterrent, making ecological protection a matter of immediate personal and collective security (Watson-Nortey & Mensah, 2025).

Ambivalence and Action: Abrahamic Faiths in the Ghanaian

Context: The analysis reveals a significant ambivalence in the environmental ethics of Ghana's dominant Abrahamic faiths. Although Christianity and Islam possess strong theological foundations for earth-keeping, these have not been translated into a contextually embedded, communally enforced moral restraint against *galamsey*. The findings confirm that environmental attitudes within Ghanaian Christianity vary significantly, depending primarily on the specific interpretation of each denomination. The analysis identifies a prominent stream within influential Pentecostal/Charismatic circles. Here, a hermeneutic privileging human "dominion" (Genesis 1:28, New International Version, 2011) over the counterbalancing mandate to "keep" or "serve" the garden (Genesis 2:15, New International Version, 2011) has fostered interpretations that can marginalise ecological concerns (Golo & Yaro, 2013; Ofoe, 2019). An eschatological focus on the earth as transient and temporary in nature often reduces the perceived religious importance of conservation, further compounding the problem. Furthermore, the pervasive influence of the prosperity gospel, which equates divine favour with material accumulation, can inadvertently lend legitimacy to extractive activities such as mining. When wealth derived from *galamsey* is tithed or used for communal projects within the faith community, the destructive means may not register as a fundamental ethical breach, creating a dissonance between the act of ecological degradation and the perception of religious virtue. This finding extends White's (1967) classic critique by demonstrating its manifestation in a contemporary, non-Western,

Pentecostal context, where dominion theology merges with prosperity narratives to form a complex driver of environmental ambivalence.

Conversely, the findings also identify a significant counter-tradition within Ghanaian Christianity, exemplified by mainstream Catholic and some Protestant traditions. Drawing on global theological discourse, such as the encyclical *Laudato Si'* (Francis, 2015), these segments advocate for a “creation care” model rooted in stewardship, intergenerational justice, and the concept of “ecological conversion.” However, the practical and political influence of this ethical stream remains circumscribed. While present in official pronouncements from bodies like the Ghana Catholic Bishops’ Conference, this theology often struggles to permeate grassroots piety with the same compelling force as the prosperity or dominion narratives. The result is a fragmented Christian response: a theologically robust creation care ethic exists alongside a socially prominent ethic that downplays ecological concerns, leaving many adherents without a clear, spiritually compelling mandate to oppose *galamsey*.

A parallel, though structurally distinct, ambivalence is evident within Ghanaian Islam. The findings confirm that Islam provides an inherently systematic and powerful theological framework for environmental ethics. The core principles of *Tawhid* (divine oneness), which imbue all creation with sacred significance as *ayat* (signs) of Allah, and *Khilafah* (stewardship), which frames humanity as accountable trustees (*khalifah*), provide a formidable foundation for condemning the corruption (*fasad*) wrought by *galamsey* (Khalid, 2010; Ozdemir, 2024). The operational principles of prohibiting waste (*israf*) and the tradition of *hima* (protected zones) offer direct, actionable guidelines for conservation.

Yet the analysis reveals a significant gap in contextualization. As noted by Quaye and Oppong (2025), the dominant Islamic discourse in Ghanaian mining communities often prioritises themes of individual piety, social justice, and ritual observance, while explicit, frequent, and practical sermons directly linking *Tawhid* and *Khilafah* to the condemnation of *galamsey* are not a prominent feature. The environmental crisis is frequently perceived as a secondary or secular issue, rather than a fundamental violation of divine balance (*Mizan*) and a breach of the sacred trust (*amanah*). This suggests that while sound doctrine exists, it has not been translated into a local moral imperative strong enough to rival the economic incentives of illegal mining. This highlights the need for religious leadership to activate latent theological potential through focused teaching.

Positioning these findings within the broader theoretical discourse on religion and ecology, this study confirms and extends the “desacralisation”

paradigm. The ethical systems of the dominant Abrahamic faiths in Ghana, while theologically profound, have often functioned in practice as transcendent paradigms that, in their current popular interpretations, disenchant the landscape. The spiritually enforced, immediate, and tangible restraints of ATR, in which a specific river was the abode of a deity, have been displaced by ethical principles that, for many adherents, remain abstract, deferred (e.g., to a final judgment), and only weakly integrated into the daily moral calculus. This creates the identified “environmental moral vacuum.” The culturally embedded restraints against polluting the rivers like Pra, Ankobra, and Tano were arguably more potent within an ATR worldview that saw them as the abode of deities like the river god and goddess than within contemporary frameworks where their pollution may not be consistently framed as a desecration of Allah’s signs or God’s creation.

Analytical Interpretation: The Paradox Manifest and the Ethical Vacuum

The synthesis of empirical data on galamsey locations with the documented history of Sacred Natural Sites (SNS) and demographic religious shifts reveals a stark, analytically significant pattern. This juxtaposition indicates that the worst environmental damage occurs in ecosystems formerly protected by the sacred frameworks of ATR, within communities that are now mostly Christian and Muslim. This pattern underpins the study’s main analytical interpretation.

Case studies and analyses reveal that numerous active galamsey sites are located in or adjacent to areas previously designated as SNS under ATR jurisdiction (Sarfo-Mensah & Awuah-Nyamekye, 2014; Sinthumule, 2024). For instance, river systems like the Pra, Birim, and Tano—historically considered the abodes of powerful deities—are now among the most heavily polluted by illegal mining (Arthur, 2021). The literature suggests that the desacralisation of these rivers, a process concomitant with religious and cosmological change, has re-categorised them from sacred, spirit-inhabited entities to spiritually neutral “resources.” Where taboos once forbade certain activities, these areas are now subjected to mechanised excavation, with the fear of supernatural sanction no longer acting as a documented deterrent (Adu-Boahen et al., 2023). This erosion of restraint extends to forest reserves. The Ankasa Forest, traditionally believed to be inhabited by nature-guarding spirits (Mmoatia), is now a site of intense illegal mining activity (Asante, 2024). The literature implies that

the cultural and spiritual “immune system” against environmental violation in these locales has been weakened.

These findings critically extend the theoretical framework of sacralisation and desacralisation. They indicate that ATR’s “sacred canopy” (Berger, 2011) functioned as a highly effective form of environmental governance, creating what can be termed a “sacred ecological infrastructure.” The documented ecological benefits of sacred groves and rivers confirm the practical potency of such immanent worldviews in regulating human-environment interactions (Berkes, 2018). Consequently, the erosion of this system through religious conversion and modernisation is more than a theological shift; it represents the dismantling of a proven conservation framework.

Analysed through the theoretical lens of sacralisation-desacralisation, this empirical pattern supports the interpretation of an environmental moral vacuum. The descriptive findings suggest that, as predicted by Berger’s (2011) theory of the collapsing “sacred canopy,” the specific, immediate, and spiritually enforced restraints of the ATR worldview have been displaced. Concurrently, the analysis of context-specific religious scholarship indicates that the transcendent stewardship tenets of the dominant Abrahamic faiths have not been operationalised into a functionally equivalent, culturally embedded, and immediately actionable ethic against galamsey (Ampofo, 2025; Ofoe, 2019; Quaye & Oppong, 2025).

Therefore, the galamsey crisis, which frequently involves the desecration of formerly sacred rivers and forests, is interpreted as the physical manifestation of this desacralisation and the resulting vacuum. The ATR framework, therefore, is not a romanticised relic but a historical benchmark against which the current ethical and ecological challenges can be measured. This underscores that the galamsey crisis is, in significant part, a crisis of cultural and cosmological sustainability. The political and economic drivers of galamsey (Botchwey & Crawford, 2025; Osei-Kojo & Andrews, 2020) operate more effectively within this normative vacuum, where traditional prohibitions have vanished, and modern alternatives lack immediate force. This interpretive finding positions the crisis as fundamentally linked to the reconfiguration of ethical frameworks governing human-environment relations.

DISCUSSION

Interrogating the Paradox: Between Transcendent Affirmation and Immanent Praxis

The central paradox illuminated by this analysis resides in the dissonance between theological affirmation and ecological praxis. Communities in Ghana that predominantly adhere to Abrahamic faiths, which doctrinally assert a transcendent creator and a human mandate of stewardship (khalifah, creation care), are demonstrably implicated in the large-scale despoliation of creation through galamsey. Conversely, the indigenous ATR worldview, often marginalised within the contemporary religious landscape, historically institutionalised a system of “sacralised sustainability” with documented efficacy (Bhagwat & Rutte, 2006; Sarfo-Mensah & Awuah-Nyamekye, 2014). This dissonance prompts a critical interrogation: what constitutes the operationalisation of religious knowledge if not its embodiment in practices that sustain the community of life? The findings suggest that the galamsey crisis reveals a gap between the theological tenets of Ghanaian Christianity and Islam and the development of a practical, local environmental ethic capable of curbing destruction.

This analysis extends Lynn White Jr.’s (1967) and Bouma-Prediger’s (2010) thesis on the historical roots of ecological crisis into a contemporary, non-Western context. While White critiqued the anthropocentric interpretation of “dominion” within Western Christianity, the Ghanaian case indicates a parallel dynamic, yet one mediated by distinct local theologies. The research points not merely to a hermeneutic issue but to a crisis of functional application. As evidenced in the literature, even where robust “creation care” theologies exist—informed by texts such as *Laudato Si’* (Francis, 2015) or Islamic principles of *Mizan* (balance) and prohibition of *fasad* (corruption)—they constitute a minority discourse (Ofoe, 2019; Quaye & Oppong, 2025). This discourse often struggles for salience against the potent synergy of prosperity gospel narratives, an eschatological devaluation of the material world, and a hermeneutic emphasis on dominion detached from its correlative duty of “keeping” (Genesis 2:15), particularly within influential Pentecostal/Charismatic circles (Golo & Yaro, 2013). This dynamic indicates a compartmentalisation in which the confessional understanding of God as Creator is preserved through ritual. However, the persistent degradation of creation is not recognised as a serious rupture in the relationship between the divine, humanity, and the cosmos.

The paradox is further clarified through a comparative analysis with the ATR framework, which embodied a praxis-based epistemology. In ATR, knowledge of the divine was inextricably linked to prescribed interaction with the natural world. To know Asase Yaa was to honour her sacred day; to acknowledge Tano was to observe taboos protecting his riverine abode (Asante, 2024; Arthur, 2021). This cosmology fostered what Berkes (2018) terms “sacred ecology,” where environmental ethics were enforced through beliefs in immediate spiritual sanctions (Watson-Nortey & Mensah, 2025). The high levels of biodiversity and biomass recorded in sacred groves provide empirical evidence of the functional effectiveness of this traditional system (Campbell, 2005). This contrasts sharply with the present, where adherents may perceive the ethical restraints of transcendent Abrahamic paradigms as abstract, theologically contested, or as having consequences deferred (e.g., to a final judgement). This perceived lack of immediacy often fails to counteract potent short-term economic incentives.

Engaging Berger’s (2011) theory of the “sacred canopy,” the religious shift in Ghana can be interpreted as a process of cosmological desacralisation concerning the natural world. The ATR canopy, which sacralised specific topographical features as abodes of the divine, has been largely dismantled. Although Christianity and Islam offer structures for spiritual meaning and ethics, the findings indicate that their primary expressions in Ghana have failed to restore a sense of sacredness to the environment. Consequently, they lack a communally enforced, spiritually compelling deterrent (Ampofo, 2025). The resultant condition, theorised here as an environmental moral vacuum (Babalola, Lawal, Opü, & Oso, 2014), emerges from this incomplete cosmological transition. The old, place-based, and immediate sanctions have eroded, while the new ethical principles remain inadequately integrated into the daily moral calculus, creating a permissive normative landscape.

Consequently, the galamsey crisis is interpreted as a severe manifestation of a deficit in ecological discipleship. If the natural world is understood as God’s creation—a testament to divine power and wisdom (*Qur’an* 2:164; Romans 1:20)—then its wilful degradation represents a profound disjuncture between creed and conduct. This indicates a broader institutional and pedagogical shortcoming: a failure to prioritise, contextualise, and effectively communicate ecological ethics as a constitutive, non-negotiable element of religious identity and duty (Rahmat, 2025). The crisis, therefore, serves as a revealing litmus test, exposing the gap between latent theological potential within Abrahamic

texts and their activated, practical influence in shaping environmental behaviour amidst socio-economic pressures.

The Ethical Vacuum and the Erosion of Cultural Sustainability

The findings compel a reframing of the *galamsey*, shifting the perspective from a mere governance failure to a deeper crisis of cultural sustainability. This concept, aligning with Berkes' (2018) work on social-ecological systems, denotes the capacity of a cultural system to reproduce the values, knowledge, and institutions necessary for the long-term viability of its ecological base. The mass religious transition in Ghana represents a profound disruption to this capacity. The displacement of ATR's immanent, nature-sacralising worldview has involved an active process of desacralisation, effectively dismantling a pre-existing, functionally effective environmental governance system (Sarfo-Mensah, Owusu-Bi, Awuah-Nyamekye, & Amisah, 2014). The intricate system of taboos (*akyiwadee*) and sacred groves constituted a body of Indigenous Ecological Knowledge (IEK), a form of culturally embedded regulation with low-cost, spiritually undergirded enforcement (Appiah-Opoku, 2007). Its erosion represents the loss of a critical pillar of Ghana's historical environmental governance infrastructure.

The theoretical construct of the environmental moral vacuum serves as a lens to understand how cultural erosion facilitates political-economic drivers. This vacuum is far from neutral; it is a normative state that enables exploitation. The study shows that *galamsey* is driven by powerful factors: rising gold prices, lack of rural employment, and entrenched networks of competitive clientelism (Botchwey & Crawford, 2025; Asuamah Yeboah, 2023)—achieve their devastating effectiveness precisely because they operate within a landscape stripped of its most compelling cultural and spiritual deterrents. A *galamsey* operator, even if devoutly Pentecostal or Muslim, does not typically confront the same culturally ingrained, supernatural fear of retribution for violating a deity's abode as their ATR-adhering ancestors might have. This interpretation suggests that state-centric, often militarised responses (Ayelazuno & Aziabah, 2025) address symptoms while overlooking the underlying cultural and ethical void that empowers and legitimises destructive behaviour in the eyes of local actors.

Positioning this within the broader discourse on sustainability, the Ghanaian case suggests that the traditional tripartite model—comprising environmental, economic, and social dimensions—necessitates the explicit incorporation of cultural sustainability as a fundamental pillar (Okyere,

2024). A society can exhibit economic activity and vibrant religious social life while being culturally unsustainable if the knowledge systems and value frameworks that historically ensured ecological balance are eroded without being functionally replaced.

Beyond Indigenous Romanticism: Towards a Critical Synthesis

While ATR is established as a historical repository of effective ecological governance, advocating for its uncritical revival risks indulging in an unproductive romanticism that ignores the complexities of a modern, pluralistic Ghana (Mawere & Awuah-Nyamekye, 2015). The path forward, therefore, lies not in wholesale return but in the principled extraction and adaptation of its core functional elements for contemporary ethical and governance frameworks.

This process involves critical appropriation, emphasising transferable principles rather than specific mythologies. First is the principle of ecological subjecthood and sacred immanence: ATR's ontology conferred intrinsic value and sacred status upon natural entities, challenging a purely instrumentalist view. This principle aligns with international discussions on the rights of nature and the frameworks of deep ecology (Zurba & Papadopoulos, 2023). Second is the principle of tangible, locally embedded restraint: the efficacy of taboos highlights the need for conservation norms that are locally legible, collectively upheld, and perceived as legitimate. This supports models of co-governance for legally recognised Sacred Natural Sites (Sinthumule, 2024). Third is the principle of intergenerational equity as a sacred trust: The Akan concept of land held from Asase Yaa for future generations (Gyekye, 1996) philosophically underpins the modern sustainability imperative and can be mobilised across religious and secular discourses (Okyere, 2024).

This approach navigates beyond the polarisation of “traditional” versus “modern” knowledge systems. It acknowledges that ATR's functional ecological intelligence is conceptually separable from the totality of its past social structures. The process can be understood as a strategic, contemporary re-sacralisation: not a literal re-population of forests with spirits, but the deliberate reinfusion of the landscape with a sense of sacred value, integrity, and inviolability, derived from a synthesis of indigenous wisdom, Abrahamic stewardship theology, and ecological science.

CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Summary of Key Findings

This explored the contradiction of widespread environmental decline in Ghana, despite the nation's shift toward a majority following of Abrahamic religions. By synthesising scholarly literature, religious texts, and empirical data through the theoretical lens of sacralisation and desacralisation, the study argues that the galamsey crisis is rooted in a profound shift in the nation's moral and cosmological landscape. The analysis indicates that the historical displacement of ATR's immanent, nature-sacralising worldview has eroded a functionally effective system of "sacralised sustainability," institutionalised through sacred groves, taboos, and beliefs in immediate spiritual sanctions. Concurrently, while Christianity and Islam possess rich theological traditions of stewardship (khalifah) and creation care, the findings suggest that these principles lack consistent translation into culturally embedded or communally enforced environmental practices. This discrepancy has fostered what is theorised as an environmental moral vacuum—a normative landscape in which the potent political-economic drivers of galamsey operate with diminished cultural restraint, thereby positioning the crisis as a fundamental failure of cultural sustainability.

Theoretical Contribution and Advancements in African Religious Philosophy

This study's primary contribution lies in integrating the sacralisation-desacralisation paradigm with political economy, introducing the environmental moral vacuum as an intervening variable that explains how eroded ecological ethics exacerbate governance failures. It reframes galamsey as a symptom of disrupted cosmological and value systems, moving beyond singular politico-economic explanations.

The study also advances African religious philosophy by engaging ATR as a coherent intellectual system with a praxis-based epistemology. It demonstrates that ATR's ontology—conferring intrinsic value and subjecthood on nature through Asase Yaa and abosom—constituted a sophisticated ecological philosophy that sustained socio-ecological equilibrium. By framing the current crisis as a consequence of marginalising this worldview, the paper argues that African cosmological insights are essential to global ethics, ecology, and sustainable

development, challenging the peripheral status typically assigned to indigenous knowledge.

Policy and Praxis Implications: Pathways for an Earth-Keeping Syncretism

The diagnosis of an environmental moral vacuum and the value of Indigenous Ecological Knowledge (IEK) point toward the necessity of a syncretic, multi-stakeholder response. The following recommendations are designed to be pragmatic, focusing on dialogue, integration, and capacity-building.

For Religious Leadership and Interfaith Engagement:

- *Contextualised Theological Praxis:* National religious bodies should develop pastoral letters, sermon guides, and educational materials that explicitly link Christian stewardship and Islamic Khilafah and Mizan to the condemnation of galamsey as a moral and spiritual violation.
- *Structured Interfaith and Cultural Dialogue:* To foster ethical synthesis, religious institutions should establish regular dialogues that include ATR custodians and traditional authorities to foster mutual learning and integrate the functional principles of ATR's sacralised sustainability into Abrahamic environmental ethics.

For Governmental and Environmental Governance:

- *Recognition and Co-Governance of Sacred Natural Sites (SNS):* The Ministry of Lands and Natural Resources, in collaboration with the Forestry Commission and traditional councils, should initiate a process to formally recognise and map SNS through legislative instruments, employing co-governance models that empower traditional custodians as legal partners in site protection and monitoring.
- *Mainstreaming Indigenous Ecological Knowledge (IEK):* The Ministry of Environment, Science, Technology, and Innovation (MESTI) should allocate resources for the systematic, scientific documentation and validation of IEK related to conservation and resource management. This knowledge should be actively integrated into national strategic documents, including the National Biodiversity Strategy, National Climate Change Policy, and district-level development plans, affirming IEK as a critical asset for national environmental governance.

For Education and Future Research:

- *Curriculum Reform for Cultural Sustainability:* The Ghana Education Service and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NaCCA) should integrate content on ATR's environmental ethics, sacred groves, and intergenerational equity into school curricula (e.g., Our World Our People and Social Studies) to educate future generations on indigenous sustainability heritage.
- *Empirical Research on Religion and Ecological Behaviour:* Research institutions should be supported to conduct empirical, mixed-methods research on environmental attitudes within religious congregations to identify effective theological messaging and communication strategies for promoting pro-environmental behaviour.

CONCLUSION

Ghana's environmental devastation reflects a deep dislocation between faith, culture, and nature. Sustainability requires not nostalgia or uncritical adherence but a deliberate synthesis: an earth-keeping syncretism that weaves Abrahamic stewardship with ATR's immanent, place-based reverence. By synthesising the Akan concept of Asase Yaa—the Earth as a sacred trust—with the nation's dominant faiths, this integrated ethic creates a culturally rooted framework to resist uncontrolled extraction. Resolving the galamsey crisis ultimately demands an ethical and spiritual renewal that transcends religious and cultural boundaries to forge a unified commitment to ecological integrity and intergenerational justice

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