

# Introduction

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The 2023 conference of the International Academy of Practical Theology (IAPT), held in Seoul, Korea, offered a profound platform to engage in critical reflection on the dynamic and interconnected challenges of our time. In the culturally and historically rich context of East Asia, the theme of the conference—Practical Wisdom in the Living Web of the Anthropocene—invited participants to grapple with the entangled relationships among technology, political and economic dynamics, and environmental crises. This introductory essay serves as a gateway to the collected works presented at the conference, framing the critical questions, insights, and aspirations that emerged during this remarkable gathering.

## Contextualizing the Conference: East Asia's Complex Terrain

The Anthropocene, a term that underscores humanity's profound impact on the planet's ecosystems, highlights the vulnerabilities intensified by globalization and industrialization within ecological and social systems worldwide. This global context sets the stage for examining the particular challenges and responses in East Asia, where the consequences of ecological neglect—such as cross-border pollution and the pre-COVID-19 normalization of mask-wearing—demonstrate both the opportunities and risks of our interconnected world. The region's rapid economic growth has showcased the benefits of globalization, yet it has also led to significant environmental degradation, demanding collaborative efforts to address climate change and biodiversity loss (Steffen et al. 2011, 842).

East Asia, with its intricate web of connections that are simultaneously enabling and fragile, provides fertile ground for theological reflection on humanity's relationship with Earth. The region's rich heritage in communal values, ecological harmony, and traditions of stewardship forms a valuable foundation for integrating cultural, ethical, and spiritual perspectives into frameworks for sustainable living (Shapiro 2016). Practical theology in East Asia responds to these pressing issues by promoting

sustainability and justice through theological inquiry and ethical practices.

In South Korea, a nation profoundly shaped by the lasting impacts of colonization, war, and the Cold War, these global and regional dynamics find a distinct echo (Cumings 2005). The complex interplay of historical memory with present-day resilience in Korea provides a nuanced backdrop for the IAPT conference. The selection of Seoul as the host city for this conference was a deliberate choice, aimed at confronting urgent global ecological challenges within a context that reflects both historical struggles and contemporary opportunities for theological and practical engagement.

## Thematic Core: Intersections of Technology, Economics, and Environmental Ethics

A central theme in the conference discussions was the growing recognition that technological advancements and economic imperatives often operate within a framework of neoliberal rationality, which prioritizes profit maximization over the common good. This tension is particularly acute within the environmental crisis, where urgent calls for systemic transformation clash with entrenched economic structures and political inertia (Klein 2014).





Speakers critiqued how technological innovations, while potentially offering solutions, are often driven by market forces that prioritize efficiency and profitability rather than long-term ecological sustainability or human well-being. For example, discussions highlighted how advancements in renewable energy technologies, such as solar and wind power, can be co-opted by large corporations that continue to exploit natural resources, undermining the very goal of reducing environmental harm. Similarly, the rise of greenwashing—where companies market themselves as environmentally friendly without making substantive changes—was discussed as an example of how neoliberal frameworks often dilute the potential of technological progress.

This tension between technological advancement and economic imperatives was explored through the lens of practical theology, which emphasizes the lived realities of individuals and communities and is committed to transformative praxis. Practical theology was positioned as a critical lens through which to interrogate the dynamics of neoliberal rationality, offering ethical and theological insights that challenge the assumptions of profit-driven models. One paper focused on how theological principles such as stewardship and solidarity can reframe the use of technology, urging faith communities and policy-makers to prioritize the common good over market-driven priorities. Another presentation examined how the concept of care in practical theology can inform economic practices that genuinely promote sustainable development, focusing not only on financial profitability but on the well-being of all creation—human, non-human, and environmental.

In addition to critiquing the dominance of neoliberal frameworks, the conference encouraged participants to move beyond Eurocentric and logos-centered approaches to practical theology. The sessions underscored the importance of seeking wisdom from diverse cultural and theological traditions, recognizing that solutions to the global environmental crisis are unlikely to come solely from Western-centric paradigms. This call to expand the horizons of practical theology resonated deeply within the East Asian context, where indigenous wisdom and communal values offer alternative perspectives on sustainability and justice. By expanding the conference's framework to include non-Western perspectives, the discussions also engaged with communal ethics that prioritize collective well-being over individual gain. Participants explored how communal values rooted in solidarity and shared

responsibility can offer ethical alternatives to the neoliberal model, which often emphasizes competition and individualism. This emphasis on community and interdependence resonated particularly with discussions on sustainability, where the focus is not only on human welfare but also on the welfare of the broader ecological system.

Ultimately, the conference called for a reimagining of practical theology's role in addressing the environmental crisis. By drawing from diverse cultural traditions and theological frameworks, practical theology can offer a deeper, more nuanced approach to the intersections of technology, economics, and environmental ethics. In doing so, it challenges the dominance of neoliberalism and points toward a more just, sustainable, and harmonious way of living in the world.

## Practical Wisdom: The Living Human Web and Eschatological Hope

The metaphor of the “living human web,” a long-cherished concept developed by Bonnie Miller-McLemore (1993), served as a unifying framework throughout the conference. This image powerfully encapsulates the complex, interdependent nature of human relationships, reflecting the interconnectedness of individual lives, communities, and the broader ecological and social contexts. Much like a web, each thread in this metaphor represents a relationship—whether human-human, human-nature, or even human-technology—that, when frayed or broken, sends ripples across the entire structure. A single action, positive or negative, can affect not only the immediate relational sphere but also larger environmental and societal systems. This metaphor emphasizes the fragility of our existence, reminding participants that even the smallest choices can reverberate widely, but it also highlights the resilience embedded within the web, suggesting that, despite its vulnerabilities, the web can also regenerate, adapt, and strengthen through collective care and action.

Central to the conference's discussions was the concept of “practical wisdom” (*phronesis*)—the ability to navigate complex, real-world situations with moral discernment and thoughtful action (Aristotle 1999). As participants examined the ongoing crises of the Anthropocene, they were invited to reflect on both the successes and failures of past collective efforts to address environmental and social challeng-

es. One session analyzed the practical applications of *phronesis* in environmental advocacy, drawing on case studies where communities had successfully resisted environmentally destructive projects by leveraging local knowledge, resilience, and collaborative wisdom. Another paper examined the failures of certain international climate agreements, questioning how theological frameworks could offer more sustainable and inclusive solutions that take into account the voices of marginalized communities. Participants also reflected on how *phronesis* could help theologians and activists untangle the complex “knots” within the human web—such as systemic inequality, environmental degradation, and political fragmentation—that obstruct efforts toward justice and collective well-being. The discussions focused on how practical wisdom, rooted in theological ethics, can guide the difficult work of fostering justice, solidarity, and long-term hope in the face of impending ecological and social crises.

Integral to the exploration of practical wisdom was the eschatological dimension of practical theology. Eschatology, the theological study of ultimate hope and the future fulfillment of creation, provided a vital counterpoint to the pervasive despair that often accompanies discussions of the Anthropocene. Many of the conference papers highlighted the importance of eschatological hope in motivating collective action. For example, one presentation proposed that an eschatological vision of redemption—seeing the world not as doomed but as being continually transformed toward healing—can energize faith communities to engage more proactively with the planet’s ecological needs. This perspective challenges the narrative of doom and helplessness, replacing it with a vision of renewed creation where human action can be a participant in divine restoration. In another paper session, scholars explored how eschatological hope fosters a long-term view of human flourishing, reframing current crises not as an endpoint but as part of a larger narrative of redemption that invites transformative action in the present.

The conference also featured dialogue on the integration of hope and practical wisdom, examining how these elements might complement one another in the face of societal collapse or ecological crisis. One particularly moving discussion focused on the role of religious communities in offering a vision of hope that resists both apathy and despair. Participants agreed that, while eschatology emphasizes the ultimate fulfillment of God’s creation, it also com-

pels individuals to act with urgency and care for the world, recognizing that the redemption of creation is an ongoing process in which humanity plays an active role.

Finally, the image of the “living human web” and its relationship with eschatological hope reminded attendees of the importance of cultivating a collective ethical consciousness. In practical theology, this means shaping lives and communities that not only care for one another but also for the earth and future generations. The conference ultimately suggested that through both practical wisdom and eschatological hope, theologians can guide society in navigating the Anthropocene’s crises, calling on communities to weave stronger, more resilient bonds and to act with the assurance that hope, grounded in divine vision, can empower sustainable justice and peace.

The conference particularly emphasized the pursuit of “critical hope” in the midst of the Anthropocene, marked by environmental crises and sweeping social changes (Kim 2015). Critical hope is not passive or merely optimistic; it is dynamic and engaged, challenging the status quo and prompting actionable change. Critical hope was seen as essential for navigating the complexities of the Anthropocene, where globalization simultaneously offers the promise of global awareness and the peril of a pervasive culture of fear. The conference highlighted how theological education and pastoral practice must not only confront these global crises with a clear-eyed recognition of reality but also inspire a hopeful commitment to transformative action. In doing so, it sought to redefine religious education and pastoral practice to foster social justice, cultural unity in diversity, and global responsibility—thus moving from a paralyzing fear to a mobilizing, critical hope that empowers individuals and communities to act for the common good.

With this theme and vision, the conference explored key themes at the intersection of economics, politics, peace, and environmental ethics. Discussions focused on the challenges of managing shared environmental resources in a neoliberal context, questioning how economic systems and socio-economic inequalities intersect with the environmental crisis. Participants also examined the role of faith communities in advocating for economic and political justice in the face of climate change. Another focal point was the relationship between peace, war, and environmental justice, particularly in Korea’s geopolitical context, considering the environmental



consequences of military activity and the potential for ecological restoration in conflict zones. The conference further called for a reimagining of practical theology, encouraging engagement with diverse cultural and theological traditions, including indigenous wisdom, to enrich the field and offer alternative frameworks for understanding the human-earth relationship.

## Synthesizing Insights: The IAPT Conference Series on Theological Responses to Contemporary Challenges

The essays in this collection offer spirited explorations of contemporary theological responses to diverse global challenges, ranging from ecological crises to social isolation and racial justice. The synopses below depict the wide-ranging expositions of the conference theme, with interdisciplinary application and praxiological implications.

“A Theological Anthropology of the Undead: Did We Fail to Decay?” is Hee-Kyu Heidi Park’s evocative essay connecting modern cyber “zombies” with decomposing mythic dema deity. Pondering a theology of resurrection in (the cosmic) light of a theological anthropology of the undead, Park draws on cyberethnographic inquiry to trace the non-material, non-relational, anti-democratic linguistic and economic practices of reclusive *hikikomoris*—or “loners in reclusion”—found in Korean and Japanese society. Park suggests that the virtual spaces to which these socially marginalized and politically expunged individuals retreat for “decay” may very well be where we witness expressions of suffering and alternative political agency and subjectivity. If this zombie state is a radical affront to the consuming neoliberalism of the offline reality, it is not unlike the regenerative decomposition of northern Indonesia’s mythic Hainuwele, whose excrements produce riches and whose corpse fertilizes life-giving crops.

In “Spiritual Resources and Religious Leadership in Times of the Anthropocene: A Practical Theological Reflection,” Ian Nell insists that faith communities have a responsibility to protect the environment in the Anthropocene era. He identifies the Anthropocene as a geological period in which dominant human activities have been the primary influence on the Earth’s environment and climate. Focusing on the stewardship of the planet, Nell argues that a spiritual leader as a storyteller, moral compass and

symbolic worker should guide a faith community to a greater awareness of climate crisis. Addressing Resource Mobilization Theory (RMT), the essay claims that the congregational leader should mobilize its members to alleviate climate change by employing the spiritual resources of the faith community—that is, a shared narrative about climate, shared values, and shared practices and symbols.

In his essay, “Is Eco-Anxiety Racial Anxiety? Harnessing Eco-Anxiety for Practicing Racial and Climate Justice,” Eunil David Cho addresses the pervasive occlusion of communities of color in scholarship on climate concerns and climate activism. Arguing that intersectional analyses of race and ecology are essential for understanding such systems as environmental racism, Cho points to how BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) communities are not only disproportionately impacted by ecological degradation due to structural disparities, but they are also falsely perceived to be either ill-informed or apathetic to such existential threat. Amplifying the long traditions of racial resilience and ecological phronesis of historically marginalized communities, Cho discusses the legacy of US Civil Rights leader Fannie Lou Hamer and the framework of her “ecowomanism.” For Cho, Hamer’s writings and activism connect the dots between racial injustice, colonialism, and environmental violence in the “wilderness” that is the United States and serve as a model of holistic ecowomanist praxis for contemporary efforts toward climate justice.

Drawing on the philosophical roots of a different religious tradition, Havva Sinem Uğurlu explores how Islamic theology’s understanding of humanity, and the application of wisdom can provide insights into the Anthropocene age. In her essay, “Understanding Practical Wisdom in the Anthropocene Age in Terms of Islamic Religious Education from a Koran-Centered Interpretive Perspective,” she argues that practical wisdom, as conceptualized in the Koran, encompasses existence, knowledge, and values, centering on the human being while emphasizing their responsibilities toward the Creator, themselves, and the universe. Uğurlu further posits that wisdom, as a Koranic concept, can serve as a theological foundation for religious education in the Anthropocene. This is achieved by focusing on the Qur’an and its accompanying literature and interpreting it through an interpretive perspective.

Pivoting attention to the material reality of the South Korean context, Boram Lee’s essay, “Ecological Injustice in the Anthropocene: Flooding in

*Banjiha*, ‘Parasite’-style Basement Housing in Seoul,” examines the interrelationship of ecological injustice and socioeconomic disparity, delving into the tragic event of Seoul’s flood in 2022, particularly its effect on *banjiha* (basement housing). In this work, Lee claims that the impact of climate crisis of the Anthropocene era has more severely afflicted marginalized people in society. According to her, the 2022 floods of Seoul demonstrated that the increased extreme weather events have deteriorated the vulnerability of disadvantaged residents who have often lived with disabilities or in extreme poverty. She argues that practical theologians and faith communities should address the immediate needs of those affected by ecological crises, while also confronting the structural injustices that perpetuate their vulnerability. Incorporating the framework of Pamela Couture’s social ecology of care, the chapter proposes a comprehensive approach to mitigating the detrimental effects of the Anthropocene challenges.

Querying the social situations of yet another context, Felix Roleder explores the phenomenon and nature of loneliness from the various perspectives of social science and presents findings in his chapter, “Fractures in the Living Human Web: On the Challenge of Loneliness and Social Isolation in Individual Life, Society and Pastoral Care.” He suggests ways in which religious resources can contribute to assuaging undesirable and destructive forms of loneliness. Roleder acknowledges the double nature of loneliness: one is the positive function of being alone for personal maturation and the other is the negative function of being alone resulting in structural exclusion or sociocultural marginalization. Paying careful attention to unwanted and chronic loneliness affecting the quality of life negatively, he suggests the integrative approach of pastoral care to intervene to restore the individuals and the societies suffering from detrimental loneliness in multiple dimensions.

In contrast, Simon Linder and Michael Schüßler examine the interplay between individual and collective approaches to climate action, reflecting critically on this divide from a German perspective, as presented in their chapter, “Christian Climate Activism: The Wisdom of Urgence ‘In-Between.’” Confronting the human-made climate crisis of the Anthropocene, they seek to uncover the theological wisdom of urgency “in-between.” By critiquing Christian anthropocentrism and sovereignty and drawing on Donna Haraway’s concept of “staying

with the trouble,” they challenge traditional theological frameworks. Linder and Schüßler move beyond theological engagement with ecological and social transformation, advocating for an open discussion on whether to foster green capitalism or pursue radical shifts in Being-in-the-world that embrace interconnectedness with non-human agency.

Meanwhile, in his essay, “Nomadic Ecclesia Praxes as an Eschatological Movement in, with, from the Margins of Oppression: A Practical Theology of Freedom and Justice,” Gordon Ernest Dames seeks to advance the concept of nomadic ecclesia praxes as an inherent eschatological movement embodied by Jesus Christ. He argues that this framework challenges the conventional theology of the church as an institutional system. Dames further contends that western theological traditions should be critically re-examined through the lens of the African context to envision an eschatological model for nomadic praxes. Drawing on indigenous cultural praxes, he attempts to articulate an eschatologically “not-yet” vision of nomadic praxes characterized by justice and freedom.

Redirecting our attention to the fecundity of the Earth, Heilim Choi pivots from human-centric to Earth-centric perspectives to lay out a foundation for a practical theology that is responsive to the voice of the Earth in her essay, “Mutual Care Based on Earth-Centric Empathy in the Living Ecological Web.” Extending pastoral care’s paradigm of intersubjective empathy, Choi describes and analyzes two case studies from Norway and Mongolia in which responses to specific ecological concerns were possible through effective human-human (intraspecies) and human-Earth (interspecies) empathy. If ecological research has shown the Earth’s resiliency and capacity for repair despite human acts of devastation, so can we find biblical witness attesting to God’s salvific intervention in response to the cries of the land. The implication for humans as co-creators with God is to sustain “holding environment” for symbiotic, interspecies understanding and empathy.

In the final essay, “Revitalizing Ecological Vocation: Transformative Ecological Practices in South Korean Churches,” Eunjin Jeon suggests that the Cold War-era exponential growth of evangelical Protestant Christianity in South Korea has been besieged by a prosperity gospel and privatized spirituality that is aligned with global neoliberal values, rendering many churches less engaged with climate concerns than the wider public. Drawing on biblical scholarship, Jeon contrasts the theology of “human



vocation as priesthood” based on Genesis 1 with the “ecological vocation of humans as farmers” as extrapolated from Genesis 2–3. Inspiration for a vision of “sang saeng” (mutual, co-living), ecological, agrarian faith is found in the teaching model of Beautiful Presbyterian Church of Gimpo City near Seoul, where creative practices of sustainability, mutual living, and earth justice include such initiatives as sustainable architecture, food waste collection, food hubs for interreligious hospitality, and restorative interventions with microorganisms.

All in all, these essays collectively illuminate the critical role of theology in addressing pressing issues such as climate change, social inequality, and the increasing sense of alienation in modern societies. Authors employ various academic disciplines and cultural perspectives to advocate for a more just and empathetic world, urging both faith communities and individuals to rethink their roles and responsibilities in fostering sustainable and inclusive environments. Through these insights, the series presents a compelling argument for the necessity of integrating theological insights with practical actions to confront and mitigate the adversities of our times.

## Toward a Practical Theology of Hope and Justice

The 2023 IAPT conference in Seoul was a milestone in the ongoing effort to articulate a practical theology that responds to the urgent needs of our time. By grounding theological reflection in the lived realities of East Asia, the conference offered a unique perspective on the global challenges of the Anthropocene. The essays collected in this volume represent a rich tapestry of insights, questions, and aspirations, weaving together diverse strands of practical wisdom.

Practical theology envisions hope and justice not as abstract ideals but as tangible practices woven into the fabric of daily life. Hope, rooted in eschatological and critical vision, provides resilience in the face of crises, affirming that human action can contribute to divine restoration. Justice emerges as a call to dismantle structures of oppression and inequality, fostering ecological care, economic fairness, and human dignity.

This vision promotes a renewed commitment to solidarity and interdependence. It highlights the importance of building communities that embrace diversity and mutual care, modeling relational networks that resist fragmentation and isolation. Such a vision challenges neoliberal individualism, offering an alternative ethos grounded in cooperation, humility, and shared responsibility.

Furthermore, practical theology’s emphasis on hope and justice invites interdisciplinary collaboration. By engaging with scientific, economic, and political perspectives, it broadens its capacity to address systemic challenges. This integrative approach positions theology as a transformative resource for social change, capable of bridging divides and promoting sustainable solutions.

Ultimately, practical theology must continue to evolve, responding creatively to the complexities of the Anthropocene. Its commitment to hope and justice serves as a prophetic voice, calling humanity to envision and enact a more equitable and sustainable future. This collection of essays stands as both a testament to the conference’s contributions and an invitation to further reflection, action, and collaboration in pursuit of a world where ecological and social flourishing are intertwined.

Final note: The cover art for this book was especially designed and inspired by the Korean Jogakbo (조각보), a traditional patchwork technique symbolizing resourcefulness and unity. Just as small fabric pieces form a larger textile, the design reflects the global and communal effort of practical theologians from diverse backgrounds in addressing the environmental crisis and offering hope and justice. And just as each strand of fabric retains a measure of distinctive identity and integrity while woven into others, the editorial approach of this collection is to honor as much as possible the cultural-religious worldview, theological perspective, and rhetorical voice of each author.

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