

Religion and Environment: A Christian Perspective

Abstract

Responding to environmental challenges in our contemporary time creates concern at both local and global levels. This is borne out of serious and wanton disasters that often accompany environmental crises. Several lives and properties of great magnitude have been lost during such crises. The need to respond to in terms of curbing, reducing or preventing such crises has gone beyond political scope to a more comprehensive and all-inclusive involvement of scientific and religious settings. The inclusion of religion in environmental discussion has often been seen as unwarranted until recently when religion is seen as a major contributor to such crises. If this, as alleged, is considered as an opinion in certain quarters, then, there is the need for religious response. This paper aims at discussing religious contribution to environmental crises in Nigeria, and suggesting some appropriate responses from Christian perspective.

Introduction

The Committee on Resources and Man of the United States National Academy of Science and the National Research Council in 1979 urged for the formation of a group to study the various social, psychological, legal, medical, religious and political aspects of the problem of resources and man. One question asked by the committee was “What is the effect of religion and religious difference on the nature of and demand for resources.”¹The question has opened a new vista in religious thoughts among religious philosophers, historians and

¹Ron Bent Elsdon, *World: A Christian Response to Environmental Crisis* (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1981), 10.

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theologians in formulating and developing an interactive forum for dialogue between religion and ecology. The call for such alliance becomes imperative because the attitudes and values that shape people's concepts of nature come primarily from religious perspectives and ethical practices.² Religions serve as links between humanity and the larger network of certain phenomena out of which issues of life arise. As a result, attempts in solving certain crises of life such as that of environment would require religious involvement.

Mary Tucker and John Grim have asserted that "one of the greatest challenges to contemporary religions is how to respond to the environmental crisis which some believed to have been perpetuated by the enormous inroads of materialism and secularization in temporary societies."³ In other words, the contemporary religious groups have been faced with the task of adapting their teachings in revaluing nature so as to prevent its destruction. The reevaluation procedure largely requires a new ethics that will not only be anthropocentric, but that will extend to accommodate environmental issues. However, one needs to understand that the traditional religious resources such as the Holy writings and the contemporary environmental crises are not the same in context, yet that does not deny the fact that valuable contributions can be made out of them. This paper looks at how Christians have been contributing to environmental degradation should respond to God's purpose of creation, and its implication on humanity.

Historical Overview of Alliance between Christianity and Environment

Christianity has been blamed greatly for negative attitude to the nature through exploitation due to its perspective on creation. It has been alleged that Genesis, where humanity is given dominion over the earth and charged to subdue over it is the

²www.fore.research.edu/information/about/cont. Accessed 24/07/ 2020.

³Ibid.

root all ecological crises. This has been taken to have encouraged a ruthless and selfish treatment of nature. Prominent among those people with this opinion was Lynn White through his address to the American Association for the Advancement of Science in 1966.

According to him,

“We are superior to nature, contemptuous of it and willing to use it for our slightest whims. . . We shall continue to have a worsening ecological crisis until we reject Christians axiom that nature has no reason for existence and on present technology are so tinctured with orthodox Christianity arrogance towards nature that no solution for our ecological crisis can be expected from them alone. Since the roots of our trouble are so largely religion, the remedy must certainly be religious whether we call it that or not.”⁴

In the same vein, Ian McHarg, a well-known environmentalist has said,

“In the history of human development, man has long been puny in the face of overwhelming powerful nature. His religions, philosophies, ethics and acts have tendencies to reflect a slave mentality, alternatively submissive or arrogant towards nature. Judaism, Christianity and Humanism tend to assert outrageously the separateness and dominance of man over nature . . . the same attitudes become of first importance when man holds the power to cause evolutionary

⁴Lynn White, “The Historical Root of Our Ecological Crisis” in *Science*, 155 (1967), 1206.

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regressions of unimaginable effect or even to destroy life.”⁵

The serious allegation which Christianity has received on the ground of ecological crises has led some people to react and call for various responses. In some quarters, the danger of succumbing to such spurious allegation to the extent of watering down the teaching of the Bible is dangerous. Rather, there should be a balance between the monarchical and ecological views of the Bible. In J. S. Macquairrie’s opinion, the monarchical model of God has become increasingly incredible to many people today.⁶

James A. Nash has fully highlighted certain alleged misconceptions about the view of nature. Some of these are as follows.

“Nature is seen as a composite of things, raw materials or capital assets and that it does not have instrumental value for human economic production and consumption . . . Humankind is viewed as an ecologically segregated species, designed for managerial mastery and possessed an ultimately sanctioned right to exploit nature’s bounty, with only restriction not to harm other humans.”⁷

Furthermore, the contemporary theological perspective has been seen to be full of dualism and Anthropocentrism due to the failure to understand the limitation of human conditions of

⁵I. L. McHarg, *Our Role in Nature: Environmental Decay in the Historical Context* (Illinois: Scott, Foreman and Co., 1973), 65.

⁶J. S. Macquairrie, “Creation and Environment” in *Expository Times*, 83 (1971), 4-9.

⁷A. James Nash, “Toward the Ecological Reformation of Christianity” in *Interpretation* 50, 1(January 1964), 6.

life, and the intricate and interdependent relation between humans and other creatures.

The dualistic connotation centers on the fact there is a wide gap between the material and the metaphysical realities; the bodily and the spiritual. In essence, the humans belongs to the spiritual while the entire ecosystem falls under the material. The painful implication of this dichotomy is that only the spiritual should be respected, valuable and honoured, while the bodily can be handled anyhow. In this instance, the environment bears the brunt of human impunitive characters. Anthropocentric on the other hand sees human beings as overwhelmingly superior to other creatures. In fact in all ramifications, all that exist in the ecosystem are meant for human satisfaction and enjoyment, and they have unquestionable right to exploit them.

These allegations have led to various responses from Christian groups and denominations to ecological crises. In 1972, the World Council of Churches (WCC) called a worldwide coalition of religious groups, which established itself as Working Group of Religious communities of the UNCED. It included not only Christian organizations concerned with the environment, but interfaith bodies and representatives of groups from other religious perspectives. Partners in this regard included the World-Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), World International, and about twenty other groups in addition to the WCC. The major responsibility of the WCC was to educate, assist and strengthen its own member churches in their awareness of the UNCED, and their local response to the global issues.⁸

To this end, the World Council of Churches produced series of resources for churches to help in reflecting Christian witnessing in the light of environmental crises and developments. This

⁸Wesley Granberg- Michaelson, *Redeeming the Creation* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1992), 51.

informed the call for the involvement of WCC during the Earth Summit in 1992. The summit was organized by the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development with the goal of establishing a new and equitable global partnership through the creation of new levels of cooperating states, key sectors of societies and groups.⁹ The summit discussed the need for churches around the world to be informed and strengthened in their responses to global environmental crises. Consequently, the ecumenical group at the summit later met at Baixada Fluminense in Rio, Brazil to deliberate on the involvement of Christian bodies in responding to global environmental crises.

The result of their deliberation is now known as “The Letter from Baixada Fluminense,” which was written during the Pentecost week. The letter was written with deep emotion and with a clarion call for urgent response from churches to environmental problems. A section of the letter says, “Dear Sister and brothers we write with the sense of urgency. The earth is in peril. Our only home is in plain jeopardy. We are at the precipice of self-destruction. For the very first time in the history of creation, certain life support systems are being destroyed by human actions.”¹⁰

In addition, several denominational and individual efforts have been taken to discuss the alliance between Christianity and ecology. A former pope of the Roman Catholic Church, Pope John Paul II, and Patriarch Bartholomew 1 of Constantinople jointly signed the Catholic Declaration on the Environment in 2002. It was entitled “Ye Are Still the Mandate God Has Given Us.” Part of the declaration says that:

⁹www.unep.org/document_multilingual/default.asp?documentID=78&articleID=1163. Accessed on 09/10/2020.

¹⁰Michaelson, 70.

“If we examine carefully the social and environmental crises which the world community is facing, we must conclude that we are still betraying the mandate God has given us: to be stewards called to collaborate with God in watching over creation in holiness and wisdom. What is required is an act of repentance on our part and a renewed attempt to view ourselves, one another and the world around us within the perspective of the divine design for creation. The problem is not simply economic and technology; it is floral and spiritual ... We have not been entrusted with unlimited power over creation; we are only stewards of the common heritage.”¹¹

Eventually, the Catholic Church issued the Cornwall Declaration on Environmental Stewardship through the interfaith council for environmental stewardship. The declaration grew out of a meeting of theologians, economists and scientists in West Cornwall, Connecticut in October 2009. The Declaration is made up of three major concerns, seven beliefs and seven aspirations. The third belief has it that:

Men and women were created in the image of God, given the privileged place among creatures, and commanded to exercise stewardship over the earth. Human persons are moral agents for whom freedom is an essential condition of responsible action. Sound environmental stewardship must attend both to the demands of human well-being and to the divine call for human beings to exercise a caring dominion over the earth. It affirms that human well-being and the integrity of creation are not only compatible, but also dynamically interdependent realities.¹²

¹¹www.conservation Catholic.org/corn-wall-declaration, 2002.

¹²www.conservation Catholic.org/corn-wall-declaration, 2002.

The Cornwall Declaration has been accused on its third concern by going too far in denying some environmental issues as contained in Concern 3, which has that:

“While some environmental concerns are well-founded and serious, others are without foundation or greatly exaggerated. Some well-founded concerns focus on human health problems in the developing world rising from inadequate sanitation, widespread of primitive biomass fuels like wood and dung, and primitive agricultural, industrial and commercial practices; distorted resource patterns driven by perverse economic incentives; and improper disposal of nuclear and other hazardous wastes in nations lacking adequate regulation and legal safe guard. Some unfounded or undue concerns include fears of restructure man-made global warming, overpopulation, and rampant species lost.”¹³

This view does not present a balanced perspective on environmental crises. To consider global warming, overpopulation, and loss of species as unfounded is an attempt to downplay vital aspects of environmental problems because; global warming and others have become enigmatic issues to humanity at global level. At individual level, certain Christians are now coming up with programmes that are geared toward synthesizing Christianity with ecology. In other words, such programmes are geared toward a meaningful interaction between Christian teaching and respect for the nature. An example of such is Sacred Earth Ministry (SEM) that was founded by E. A. Faniran in 2000. In his book, *Nature in the Bible: Commentary on God’s Revelation in His Creation*, he declared:

¹³Ibid.

“. . . that of viewing nature or the entire creation, as sacred, demanding of all the respect, honour, care and awesomeness due to its creator, God Almighty. What is being offered is an attitudinal change contingent on humans obligations to their maker and to themselves, for perpetual habitation of the earth and at optimum level of living standard.”¹⁴

Christian Contributions to Environment Crises

Not minding Lynn White’s allegation and all its attendant side – comments, environmental crises in the contemporary time result from diverse tributaries, with humans as its focal point. The human involvement transcends cultural and religious dimensions. Important in this line is Christianity. Those of these contributory factors will be discussed here

1. Poor Structural Setting

While the proliferation of churches in the contemporary African settings deserves to be appreciated as a welcome development, its adverse effects are enormous under diverse nomenclatures. All in the name of soul winning and church growth, Christianity is greatly contributing to the increase in flood disasters. Many drainages and water ways are being blocked in the name of multiplication. Moreover, many of these structures are poorly constructed in form of make-shift houses; or sometimes, they are built up with poor materials, which make them vulnerable to disasters. The incessant care of building collapses has spread its tentacles to church buildings. A vivid example is the collapse of a structure belonging to the Synagogue of All Nations Church in Lagos in 2014; and its associated loss of lives. This often result as a result of hasty engagement of quacks contactors and the use of sub-standard materials. In such cases, such church

¹⁴Faniran, A. *Nature in the Bible Commentary on God’s Revelation in His Creation* (Ibadan: MOBA Printers, 2001), 6.

environment cannot be considered as an ideal one. According to Olu Onafeso an ideal and sustainable church environment is one “that contributes to the sustenance of the earth and its resources.”¹⁵ Bluntly he said, “an ideal church environment is one under which worshippers can make tremendous program in the worship of their God, and relate meaningfully with humanity and the rest of God’s creation.”¹⁶ While worship and spirituality represent the hallmark pursuits of an ideal church, it must out of necessity see to the well-being of all its members. This largely depends on the environment where it is located. A church that is located in a marshy, messy and dirty environment, irrespective of its spiritual fervency will end up in edification of the spirit and at the same time annihilating the body through plagues, epidemics and depletion.

2. Poor Sanitation

The second contributive factor to the environmental degradation is poor sanitation. This often stems from certain misconception that the church exists only for spiritual purposes, and that engaging in any earthly endeavor is of no significance. L.O. Oladimeji has highlighted some common church misconceptions namely;

1. This world is not our home
2. Christian are spiritual people and should only attend to spiritual matters
3. Taking care of creation and environment may be mistaken for political favor.
4. Christians are meant to dominate over creation, and not to care for it

¹⁵Olu Onafeso, “The Church, Environmental Degradation and the Challenges of Climate Change,” *The Church and the Environment*, Edited by Adetoye Faniran and Emiola Nihinlola, Sacred Earth Ministry Monograph Series 4 (Ibadan : Penthouse Publication , 2012), 19.

¹⁶Ibid.

5. Taking care of people is much more important than taking care of the environment
6. Caring for the creation is not a New Testament idea.¹⁷

A synopsis of these ideas suggests a parochial mindset toward the environment from the church, which has translated into its poor handling. A survey of many church premises reveals a gory picture of poor sanitation as characterized by debris of human and animal feces, which make such environment and people vulnerable to diseases. Moreover, such premises are characterized by overgrown bushes which serve as abode for pests, rodents and snakes. It is worrisome to see some churches located very close to rivers and ponds. Members of such churches after dissipating much of their time in praying and worshipping, would only return home to be treated of all kinds of diseases.

3. Noise Pollution

As a congregation of people, not minding denominational affiliation, the contemporary Christian church has been characterized by production of high tone music, prayers and worship patterns. While this could be said to be meaningful and enjoyable among the worshippers, it often translated to noise within the implication, majority of church activities that is projected outside the church environment would fit into that categorization. Unlike the churches of the 70s – 90s, which valued a solemn worship pattern, the contemporary church in it's entirety, and as championed by the Pentecostal and charismatic groups, has changed its worship style to

¹⁷Oladimeji, L. O. "The Church and Christian Stewardship of the Environment Case Study of Ibadan and Environs," in *The Church and the Environment*, Edited by Adetoye Faniran and Emiola Nihinlola, Sacred Earth Ministry Monograph Series 4 (Ibadan : Penthouse Publication , 2012), 29.

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exuberance and excitement. In other words, the church has become noisier in all ramifications. This has also been enhanced by availability of high-powered sound systems and gadgets. As a result, the effort to be heard by vast majority of people with a given church location has become a competition, especially, when there are many churches within a given location, regardless of its adverse effects on the neighbourhood.

Many a times, there is the misconception that such unsolicited church programmes being aired through megaphones and giant speakers amount to noise and disturbance in the neighbourhood. And yet, such will be done out of arrogance and impunity. Unknowingly to many church pastors and members, they have succeeded in sending many souls they assumed to be winning into untimely death and paralysis. It has also led to hatred and development of resistance to church message and ministry.

Christian Response to Environmental Crises

If Christians, as alleged by Lynn White play major role in causing environmental crises, they also have great responsibility in addressing it. Four major areas will be discussed in this write-up, namely; environmental advocacy, environmental modelling, and encouraging research on ecotheology, as well as integration of environmental stewardship in biblical teachings.

1. Environmental Advocacy

There is the dire need for the Christian to be fully involved in the campaign for sustainable environment. It must be noted that adoption of arm-chair approach on environmental issues is capable of spelling doom for all the people irrespective of religious affiliation. Therefore, campaign for sustainable environment should not be left out in the hand of secular or non-religious groups, who often times introduce selfish and

political agenda into their activities. In the light of this, Christians need to congregate themselves into groups, committees and associations, whose main aim would be to pursue the realization of sustainable environment. The tasks of such committees would be to serve a leading voice in the promulgation of environmental laws, passing of environmental bill and implementation of environmental policies of the government. In fact, such groups should serve as environmental watchdogs for government, industries, and individuals who may decide to abuse the environment.

Such advocacy also needs to go beyond speaking for or against environmental issues, it must be coupled with deliberate social actions and involvement. For example, Christian architects within a given locality can form an organization to foster sustainable environment in their area. Lawyers, surveyors even landlords can also do the same to safeguard the environment from degradation. The bottomline of such advocacy is that the voice of the church must be heard on environmental issues. They can engage in cleaning the drainages, planting of trees and construction of water ways.

2. Environmental Modelling

Religion plays an important role in shaping human attitudes and behaviours. As a result, religious adherents will replicate what their religion considers acceptable as presented by their leaders. For instance, the fact that a particular color is cherished by a leader of a congregation, sooner than expected, his followers will be seen with such. The same goes for other aspects such as style, decoration, mannerism, etc. Such contagious orientation should be spread into sustainable environment by Christians through deliberate modelling. This should begin with location and the nature of church environment. The church environment must be clean and be located in a serene atmosphere. Such a setting must be void of dirt, debris, and other hazardous elements that are capable of

endangering human lives. Such would serve as a model not only for worshippers but for outsiders.

Secondly, the church should also lead in showing its neighbourhood good examples of cleanliness and maintenance of aesthetic beauty. The surrounding environment should reflect serene and well-organized landscaping and horticultural design. There should be flowers and deliberate tree-planting. In fact, the church environment should be a beauty to behold. This will have resultant effect on the neighbourhood. Olu Onafeso is of the opinion that an ideal church environment should meet the standard space requirements. Vital elements in these requirements are: predictability, clear aisle, space for ample mobility, enough and wide doors (and windows), and many more. An efficient demonstration of this will not only attract people to the church, Christian will be able to transform the society by emulation.¹⁸

3. Encouraging Research in Environmental Theology

While it must be noted that issues of environment are always considered secular, the alliance between religion and ecology deserves strong attention. In fact, several groups and organizations are coming up with emphasis on the synthesis between the two disciplines. This does not limit itself to Christianity alone; virtually all religions are now becoming involved. A few examples suffices to be mentioned here; Also, more institutions and societies are moving toward encouraging and sponsoring research, projects and studies on ecotheology and environmental stewardship. Few examples include the Sacred Earth Ministry (SEM); Man and Nature Center (MANASC); more of these should be encouraged. Moreover, theological institutions should encouraged research in ecotheology. In this case, students should be encouraged to study the environment from biblical point of view to draw out implications for sustainable environment. Although tedious in

¹⁸Onafeso, 20.

nature, more of such research will go a long way to shape and transform people's opinion about their environment. Examples of this are: "Evaluation of Solid Waste Generation, Categories and Disposal Options in Developing Countries: A Case Study of Nigeria," in *Journal of Applied Sciences & Environmental Management*, 13, 3 (Sept. 2009), by Babayemi, J. O., and Dauda, K. T., and "Ecotheological Exegesis of Genesis 1-2 in the Quest toward the Solution of Environmental Problems in Oyo State," written by Kehinde Simeon Folorunsho (2010).

4. Integration of Environmental Stewardship in Biblical Teachings

Christian needs to be fully involved in integrating environmental stewardship their teaching and preaching programme. As adduced by Oladimeji, Christians must do away with the misconception that heaven is their home; and so, be less concerned with the earth. The 2015 International Conference on Climate Change (ICCC) has reiterated that the future of humanity lies on how the environment is handled. This calls for the involvement of all and sundry. In environmental stewardship, churches stands a better chance of bringing positive change because the Bible is replete with numerous lessons and teachings on the environment and stewardship.

It also talks about the divine intention on every creature as well as human responsibility. Christian's leaders need to help more on these lessons from the word of God. Moreover, certain misconceptions and misinterpretations of some biblical passages about the environment need to change. Oladimeji has discovered that many pastors, either borne out of oblivion or mere ignorance, have not been engaging in teaching or preaching about sustainable environment. Strong emphasis on some of these teachings is capable of eliciting positive response to the environment.

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