

Christian Response to Divine Creation and the Quest for Sustainable Environment in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

The alliance between religion and ecology has continued to be a point of scholarly research because religion plays significant roles in shaping people's understanding, emotion and philosophy. It influences people's attitudes and relationships among themselves and with the entire creation. Sometimes, certain religious teachings and orientations are capable of negatively influencing how people relate with their environment, especially when it is considered as a pool of resources to be exploited for human comfort and consumption. This perspective has resulted in environmental degradation, which has resulted in wanton destruction of lives and properties in form of diseases, tsunamis, flooding, etc. In other words, the environment which ought to be sustainable for human survival has turned to be a threat due to human carelessness and negligence. Through a qualitative design, using interpretivism as theoretical framework, this paper examines the relationship between religion and environment, how religions, especially Christianity has contributed to environmental problems and suggests ways of responding to all the things that God created toward achieving sustainable environment. It investigates how Christians in the Nigerian context understand their relationships with the environment and how they contribute to degradation or sustainability. Fifty (50) respondents, comprising 20 clergies and 30 church members were selected for interview on Christian contributions to environmental challenges and suggestion on how to respond to them. The findings reveals that few Christians in Nigeria have proper understanding of the synergy between church activities and environmental degradation. Also, many churches in Nigeria are ignorant of the impacts of their activities on the environment such as noise pollution, poor structural setting, poor sanitation and waste management. Their activities have had negative impacts on the environment sustainability such as flooding, building-collapse, epidemic, mental and emotional stress for the people. Christians as individuals and collectively as groups need to engage in environmental advocacy, modelling and integrating environmental concepts in biblical teachings and practices.

Keywords: Creation, Sustainable Environment, Advocacy and Modelling

INTRODUCTION

The creation accounts occupy an important aspect of Christianity. Apart from giving accounts of the beginning of all that exist, they also indicate the fact that there is a divine and purposeful Creator behind their design and formation. The creation does not share in this divinity, but reflects the divine attributes of God in power and in glory (Gen. 1-2). Certain incontrovertible facts can be gleaned from these accounts; creation was orderly (1:1-33); every creature was put in its conducive habitat (Gen. 1:11, 21-22, 24-25); every creature was to fulfil certain roles in its habitat (1:29-30); humans were created last (1:26), and are positioned to have dominion over all other creatures (1:26-27). The dominion capacity has however generated controversies especially in human relationship with the environment. This understanding empowers humans to exploit the environment and all its resources for their enjoyment and comfort.

This has resulted to environmental degradation in form of air, soil and water pollution, afforestation and desertification, loss of biodiversity and climate change which have been threatening human existence. Many of these misdemeanors do not exclude religious organizations through their indiscriminate building of structures, production of noise pollution, blockage of water ways and poor waste-management system. In the midst of these precarious contexts, humans still always desire for living quality life in sound health and prosperity. Most

especially among the religious gatherings, it is common to see adherents fervently praying for miracles and blessings without cognizance of the negative impacts of their environment on their total well-being. Therefore, there is the need to identify and discuss how to respond to creation from Christian perspective to enhance human relationship with the environment, maximize the utilization of environmental resources, and facilitate sustainable environment.

Sustainable Environment

According to the United Nations (UN), a sustainable environment is one that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future generation to meet their own needs.¹ This definition implies that human environment is endowed with abundant resources that are enough for all generations. Although this definition does not indicate how diverse resources are deposited in the environment, religious perspective will identify them as handwork of the Supreme Being, the Creator of all that exist, and the purpose is for human survival and comfort. Furthermore, sustainability in this definition implies maintenance, preservation and responsible utilization of environmental resources for the future generations. *The Oxford Learner's Dictionary* defines environmental sustainability as the use of natural product and energy in a way that does not harm the environment.² The emphasis of this definition is on responsible use of resources to avoid damaging the environment which will have ripple effect on human existence.

Mike Weistein's definition of sustainability is also instructive in this context. He defines sustainability as "ensuring that human society operates within ecological borders."³ These borders are the natural limits that can accommodate human activities and still maintain ecological equilibrium. In other words, the environment will not be threatened all human activities by recognizing the strength and limit of ecological borders. This gave rise to the Planet Boundary Concept which suggests a model that defines the limit of disturbances of the earth system without causing danger.⁴ Stockholm Resilience Center defines the planet boundary as the safe limits for human pressure on the nine critical processes (areas) which together maintain a stable and resilient earth.⁵ The nine critical areas are: Novel entities (synthetic chemical and radio-active material production); Climate change (excessive release of carbon); stratospheric ozone depletion; atmospheric aerosol depletion; ocean acidification; biogeochemical flow; freshwater change; land use system change; and biosphere integrity.⁶ Environmental sustainability can be achieved if human activities are responsibly carried out within these boundaries without any threat. Sustainable environment will enhance human wellbeing and facilitate preservation and accessibility of resources.

Alliance between Christianity and Ecology

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 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 Professor 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 Christian axiom that nature has no reason for existence and on present technology are so tainted 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."⁷

In the same vein, Ian McHarg, a well-known environmentalist 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 regressions of unimaginable effect or even to destroy life.⁸

The serious allegation which Christianity has received on the ground of ecological crises have led reactions various responses. 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. 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.⁹

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 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 honored, while the bodily can be handled anyhow. In this instance, the environment bears the brunt of human destructive characters. Anthropocentrism on the other hand sees human beings as overwhelmingly superior to other creatures. 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.¹⁰

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 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.¹¹ 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.¹²

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."¹³

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:

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 moral and spiritual... We have not been entrusted with unlimited power over creation; we are only stewards of the common heritage.¹⁴

In addition, the Catholic Church issued Cornwall Declaration on Environmental Stewardship through the Inter-faith 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 asserts:

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.¹⁵

Bill Jacobs of the Catholic Conservation Center has however criticized Cornwall Declaration on its third concern. He asserted that the declaration “went too far” by 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.¹⁶

This view does not represent 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 programs that are geared toward synthesizing Christianity with ecology. In other words, such programs are geared toward a meaningful interaction between Christian teaching and respect for the nature. An example of such is Sacred Earth Ministry (SEM), a non-governmental organization (NGO) in Nigeria that was founded by E. A. Faniran in 2000. In his book, *Nature in the Bible: Commentary on God's Revelation in His Creation*, Faniran declared, “... that of viewing nature or the entire creation, as sacred, demanding of all the respect honor, care and awesomeness due to its creator, God Almighty. What is being offered is an attitudinal change contingent on human obligations to their maker and to themselves, for perpetual habitation of the earth and at optimum levels of living standard.”¹⁷

Christianity, Divine Creation and the Quest for Sustainable Environment in the Nigerian Context

Through a qualitative research design which focuses on examining and understanding phenomena within their natural contexts, aiming to interpret them through the meanings individuals assign to their experiences.¹⁸ The population sample consisted of 50 pastors comprising of mainline, Pentecostal and African Instituted Churches. They were selected through purposive sampling. Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling method that involves the selection of participants based on specific criteria, such as their expertise or experience related to the research topic.¹⁹ This methodology involves the researcher intentionally choosing specific samples from the overall sample size, guided by their judgment. The pastors and leaders selected have been in the ministry for ten (10) years and above. The instrument for data collection was semi-structured interview flexible and open-ended questions. The questions focused on Christian understanding of environmental degradation and sustainability;

Christian contributions to environmental degradation with particular reference to Africa, using Nigeria as a context; and how the church should respond to environmental degradation to facilitate sustainability. The responses were transcribed and used for discussion.

Out of 50 respondents, 30 which represents 60% of the respondents affirmed that churches in Nigeria do not have proper understanding about the meaning and impact of environmental degradation and sustainability. The remaining 20 respondents which represents 40% claimed proper understanding of the nexus between the environment and church activities. Some of the reasons for the lack of proper understanding is borne out of their emphasis on spirituality. Many pastors and leaders focus more on prosperity and spiritual gifts in their sermons and teachings. Majority of the leaders asserts that for the past five years, none of their sermons or teachings specifically focused on either church or personal environment. Thirty-five (35) respondents which represents 70% claimed ignorance of Christian contributions to environmental degradation. They asserts that the church is a spiritual house and has nothing to do with environment. Fifteen 15 respondents which represents 30% were of the opinion that Christians through church activities are contributing to environmental degradation through noise pollution, poor structural setting and poor sanitation. Each of these shall be discussed extensively.

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 cases 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.²⁰ This often result as a result of hasty engagement of quacks contactors and the use of sub-standard materials. In such cases, such church environment cannot be considered as an ideal one. According to Olugbenga Oyekola “In an attempt to cut cost of materials, many churches engage members of the congregations, who are less experience and required expertise. They even go to the extent of dodging getting required documents from designated offices and agencies.”²¹

According to Olu Onafeso, an ideal and sustainable church environment is one “that contributes to the sustenance of the earth and its resources.”²² He bluntly declares, “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.”²³ 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. Oyebamiji Adewuyi corroborated this by saying “Land around the riverside and marshy area usually offered at cheap price, and this serves as a bait to some churches. Again, acquiring land in marshy areas is not inherently bad if there are requisite expertise and fund to handle construction requirements. Unfortunately, many of the churches that rush to purchase such areas do not have what it takes to build in such areas.”²⁴

Poor Sanitation

The second 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 as follows:

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
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.²⁵

A synopsis of these ideas suggests a parochial mindset toward the environment from the church, which has translated into its poor environmental care. 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.²⁶ 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. According to Mary Olugbade, “the amount of waste materials generated through various programs, revival services and crusade gatherings is enormous, but many of the churches have no proper means of disposing them. After such programs, the venues are littered and left for heavy rainfalls to clean those venues. Many of these materials end up in culverts and drainages blocking water ways that will lead to flood.”²⁷

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 that are tantamount to noise pollution. According to *Encyclopedia Britannica*, “Noise pollution refers to unwanted or excessive sound that can have deleterious effects on human health, wildlife, and environmental quality.”²⁸ 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. Sound is measured in decibels, and sounds that range between 85dB to 140dB can damage human ears. Such can be termed as noise pollution.²⁹ Unlike the churches of the 70s – 90s, which valued solemn worship pattern, the contemporary church as exemplified by the Pentecostal and charismatic groups, has changed its worship style to demonstration of excessive exuberance and excitement. In other words, the church has become noisier in praying and singing. This has also been enhance 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 neighborhood.

Sometimes, there is the misconception that such unsolicited church programs being aired through megaphones and giant audio-speakers amount to noise and disturbance in the neighborhood.³⁰ 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. The respondents of the interview four steps for the church to respond to facilitate environmental sustainability-environmental advocacy, environmental modelling, and encouraging research on eco-theology, and integration of environmental stewardship in biblical teachings.

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 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. 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 bottom-line of such advocacy is that the voice of the church must be heard on environmental issues. Practically, they can engage in cleaning the drainages, planting of trees and construction of water ways.

Environmental Modelling

Religion plays an important role in shaping human attitudes and behaviors. 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 neighborhood 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. The church environment should be a beauty to behold. This will have resultant effect on the neighborhood. 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.³¹ An efficient demonstration of this will not only attract people to the church, Christian will be able to transform the society by emulation. The church can embark on tree planting projects to serve as models for the community.

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 should be involved. Also, theological institutions and societies need to engage in encouraging and sponsoring research, projects and studies on eco-theology and environmental stewardship. In this case, students should be encouraged to study the environment from biblical point of view and draw out implications for its sustainability. Although tedious in nature, more of such research will go a long way to shape and transform people's opinion about their environment. Research grant and fellowship can be established for prospective scholars.

Integration of Environmental Stewardship in Biblical Teachings

Christian needs to be fully involved in integrating environmental stewardship their teaching and preaching programs. Christians must do away with the misconception that heaven is their home; and so, be less concerned with the earth. 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. Strong emphasis on some of these teachings is capable of eliciting positive response to the environment. For example, sermons can made on the divine instruction to man to cultivate the land in (Genesis 2:15); interpretation of the concept of dominion (Genesis 1:26-27); and discuss the Noahic covenant from environmental perspective (Genesis 8:20-22).

CONCLUSION

Responding to divine order of creation is an imperative that must be obeyed with a strong sense of urgency. The chapter identifies the fact that Christianity has been at the center of discussion on matters of environmental challenges. Apart from suffering from a strong indictment as the major cause of the crises, it has also been identified as the one with solution to them. This will come with how Christians respond to divine purpose of creation. Responding to these crises will include strong advocacy, exemplary modelling and encouragement of research in Christian eco-theology.

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