

ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS IN A WORLD OF CHANGE: AN ETHICAL PERSUASION FOR BIBLE-BASED ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT

Onyemauwa, Veronica Uduak, Ph.D

Department of Religious Studies

Imo State University, Owerri

onyemauwaw@yahoo.com

Abstract

Economic growth, social progress and sustainability are dependent upon the health of the natural environment and ecosystems. The ecosystems and their environmental assets such as fertile soils, clean water, forests and biodiversity are God's gift to mankind, source of income and support for livelihoods. They provide services to the society, such as contributions to public health, help drive economic growth, and maintain the biological foundation for human and non-human life. Thus this imposes great responsibility for effective management and sustainability. In view of this, traditionally, Africans effectively protected and safeguarded their natural habitat and ecosystem based on sound African environmental ethics. However, in recent times, the reverse has been the case. Instead of effective management and sustainability of the ecosystem and environmental assets, there are frequent cases of abuse, mismanagement and exploitation. This makes one to wonder as to what has become of the old African environmental ethics and why Africans are now experiencing acute environmental challenges which have impacted negatively on humanity and the rest of the ecosystem. A sociological research undertaken reveals that the interplay of multiple variables such as overarching human greed, materialism, selfishness, capitalism, wasteful consumption patterns and reckless disposal of waste are the major recipes for environmental crisis in Nigeria. Aside all these anthropogenic causes of environmental crisis, a new dimension to the crisis has emerged. It revolves around some category of human beings who have lost their sense of human values, morality and decency. In their bid to 'dominate' and 'subdue' the earth has reduced the planet's ability to provide a healthy environment for the present and future generation. This calls for serious concern. Forestalling or mitigating further harm is the major thrust of this paper. Premised on Integrated Natural Resources Management (INRM) principles, the paper posits restoring effective environmental management strategy to forestall further environmental crisis. Eco-theology is advocated. It promotes accountability, positive lifestyle, and caution against wastage. It provides the key to abundance and absence of scarcity based on biblical principles. It is interdisciplinary and interreligious with a global perspective. It is revolutionary and engenders sustainable use and management of natural resources.

Keywords: Environmental, Ethics, Bible-Based, Management, Crisis, World, Change.

Introduction

Environmental concern remains one of the major focuses of national and international contemporary scholarship and this trend is bound to persist far into the future. This is because of the inextricable relationship between man and his environment, and the unpleasant abuse, exploitation, degradation and mismanagement of nature's gift to mankind in recent times. However, worth mentioning is the fact that, nature's gift to mankind calls for celebration, judicious use, preservation, protection and sustainability; not reckless exploitation and wastage, in due recognition of this fact, traditional Africans observed environmental ethics that help in regulating their interactions with the natural environment (Shastri et al; 2002:2). Thus, contributing significantly to the conservation, management and sustainability of natural resources.

Unfortunately, in recent times, reverse is the case as African nations, Nigeria inclusive are submerged in severe environmental crisis. This is as a result of man's desire to modify his environment to satisfy his needs and demands; heedless of any moral consideration. The process of achieving this implies an encroachment on the constituents of the ecological balance which breeds 'conflict' rather than 'peace'. Consequently, the earth which is our 'sister' cries out because of the harm inflicted on 'her' by our irresponsible use of the gifts God has bestowed on us. The situation is depressive and man (the architect) is in a moral situation.

The endemic challenge of environmental crisis in the world today and the general state of helplessness on the part of human beings have generated thought provoking questions of where religion (Christian religion in particular) has been and why so late in addressing the situation. Has issues of personal salvation superseded all others? Has divine-human relations been primary? Has anthropocentric ethics been all-consuming? Has the material world of nature been devalued by religion? Does the search for otherworldly rewards override commitment to this world? Did Christian religion simply surrender its natural theologies and concerns with exploring purpose in nature to positivistic scientific cosmologies? In beginning to address these questions, I make bold to say that, one does not need to underplay Christian religion's potential for ethical persuasiveness.

The role of religion in the quest to ameliorate environmental crisis cannot be overemphasized. This is especially because religion in a very crucial

way pertains to the question of existence and the nexus between religion and existence is inseparable (Mbiti, 1999:15). Religion has rules of conduct that guide life within a social group and is often organized and practiced within a community (Agbiji, 2013:1 cited in Amolo and Onyemauwa, 2017:76). In this regard, the rules about conduct relate to the ethical provisions that religion provides to society and which help to sustain the social group or society. In effect, these ethical provisions are connected to socio-political, economic and environmental concerns of the community and can be derived from the Christian faith.

From the perspective of Christian faith, Christian religion has shown itself capable of championing the environmental cause. Its attempt to articulate a systematic theory and praxis of human interaction with his environment is what is generally referred to as eco-theology. At the centre of this faith is the Bible seen as the record of God's self-revelation and intervention in human history. Hence, this paper presents Christian environmental principles as contained in the Bible to tackle environmental crisis in Nigeria. Integrated natural resource management (INRM) approach which demands the involvement of men and women in environmental management would equally serve the purpose. This is because in solving environmental issues and problems, people need to help and follow an appropriate "moral basis" for dealing with the environment.

An Ethical Appraisal of Environmental Crises in Nigeria

This section appraises the environmental condition of Nigeria nation due to man's 'relationship' with the environment; as every relationship goes with its challenges that of the human person and his environment are not devoid of challenges. Thus, the environmental degradation witnessed in recent times can be traced to man. A tour of some of the states in Nigeria shows the magnitude of the damage inflicted on the earth, ranging from pollution to deforestation. Human interaction with the physical environment in Nigeria has given rise to serious environmental concerns. The historical use of natural resources to meet various human needs and development have seriously depleted and degraded the resources and the natural environment as a whole. Among the most common environmental problems in Nigeria today are climate change, the persistent loss of biodiversity, deforestation, pollution of soil and land quality, desert encroachment, declining marine resources, water pollution and scarcity. For instance, the UN-REDD Report (2013) indicated that, Nigeria has lost

more than 50 percent of its forest cover since 1990 and currently less than 10 percent of the country is forested. The deforestation rate in Nigeria is estimated at 3.7 percent, one of the highest in the world. The increasing number of oil producing companies, gaseous emissions and toxic effluents from companies have led to the pollution of the atmosphere, streams, rivers and land. One will not fail to mention the uncontrolled poaching for wildfire otherwise called *bush meat* in Nigeria.

In today's Nigeria, urban areas have become big refuse dumps as unrecycled municipal and industrial wastes, both solid and effluent are competing for space with people. Poor sanitation and the general absence of appropriate sewage disposal systems in the urban centers as well as unsafe drinking water sources in most of the rural communities have contributed to the spread of many diseases. Many environmental experts and ethicists have warned against the dire consequences to humans and ecosystems should the quantity and quality of water continue to deplete. But unfortunately, they are overlooked. Paradoxically, blessed with abundance water resources yet thousands of Nigerians suffer from water scarcity and deadly pollution due to inability to properly manage, use and protect water resources for socio-economic development and environmental sustainability (Onyemauwa, 2018:4).

The menace of erosion and terrible landslide especially in the eastern part of Nigeria are also part of these increasing environmental crises. Gully erosion sites are almost everywhere around the southeast geopolitical zone but not limited to this area alone. Most of human activities which occur on daily basis tend to increase the occurrence of soil erosion and gullies in the various communities. Settlement patterns, the nature of housing and infrastructural development contribute to the propagation of gullies. According to Iwuoha (2017:266) settlements are not planned; houses are built indiscriminately without consideration to natural flood paths and drainage systems. Sand excavations are recklessly carried out by individuals along existing road sides by road construction companies. These excavated sites eventually develop into huge gullies as rainwater continues to impact on them. Large portions of the vegetation cover are cleared annually for farming purposes, thereby exposing the top soil. With the soil exposed, it is no longer capable of resisting the erosive actions of the rain water. These activities essentially result, in many ways, to the continued degradation of the environment. Other specific human activities that cause erosion include: poor solid waste management

practices; poor road construction practices; poor home construction practices; construction of undersized and inappropriate drainage systems; and poor infrastructural development practices.

These factors contribute to the rate and magnitude of soil erosion in Nigeria. The mono-sector economy has created an over dependence on crude oil with its environmental consequences. In the Niger Delta region of Nigeria for instance, environmental degradation has been compounded by the unethical explorative and productive activities of multinational oil companies in collaboration with corrupt and influential Nigerians. In the past sixty years the region has witnessed many cases of oil spills and gas flares with untold consequences like loss of productive land, surface and ground water pollution and soil contamination. The poor and dispossessed at times vandalize pipe lines in order to make ends meet, thereby leading to further environmental damage and more poverty. Therefore, as rightly observed by Nwagbara et al, (2012:6 cited in Naseri, et al, 2017:113), there is no basis of comparison between meagre and recyclable waste generated by the poor and the huge amount of good consumed and ecologically debilitating wastes generated by the rich class. For instance, the gas flaring and oil spillage in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria that have wrecked untold havoc on land, water and air, were the results of the activities of the rich Nigerians and their multinational corporation counterparts.

Increasing population growth in some Nigerian communities means reduction in the number of arable land per capita. As farmers cultivate a parcel of land longer than necessary with little or no fertilizers or even alternative lands to farm, the soil fertility of the available farmland continues to dwindle thereby increasing their poverty level and degrading the land further. The same can be said of other natural resources like non-timber forest products, water quality and availability, air quality.

Furthermore, the biting poverty in most local communities does not allow for a sustainable use of the environment, neither does the excessive materialism of the affluent and rich encourage a lifestyle that is eco-friendly. As earlier pointed out, over concentration of basic amenities and jobs in the urban centres, has brought rapid urbanization with its undue strain on the urban environments. The changing patterns of land use to provide food for and accommodate the infrastructural needs of an increasing population has also brought about significant changes in the

land cover in many areas with various forms of ecological implications. Environmental degradation has made it impossible for many poor people who depend directly on the land, the forests and the rivers/streams for their livelihood to break out from their circle of poverty. In the bid to make ends meet, the poor also engage in unsustainable use of these resources that tend to worsen their degraded and depleted state. The link between power, wealth, institutional and market failures working side by side have been shown to compound these environmental problems in Nigeria.

The Integrated Natural Resources Management (INRM) Principles

In today's world, there is a broad spectrum of initiatives, activities and advocacies geared towards maintaining the vitality of nature's gift to mankind; this is known as sustainable natural resources management. The sustainable use and management of natural resources therefore demands the optimal use of these resources, especially through increased efficiency in exploration, extraction, production/processing or manufacture, consumption, reuse, recycling and decrease in their demand (Chiras, 1995:23).

The quest for the sustainable use and management of natural resources has been pursued from the multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary perspectives of the physical, social sciences and the humanities. However, in this paper, the Integrated Natural Resources Management (INRM) approach is adopted; it has been defined as an approach to managing resources sustainably by helping resource users, managers and other stakeholders accomplish their different goals by consciously taking into account and aiming to reconcile and synergize their various interests, attitudes and actions. These goals include increasing production, enhancing food security, creating value, maximizing profitability, minimizing risk, building up and maintaining various natural and other assets, and conserving the natural resource base (Frost, et al, 2006: 30).

According to Attah-Krah (2006: 6-9) the INRM approach seeks to meet human needs for survival and development while at the same time maintaining environmental balance and sustainability. Human needs, their livelihoods and their rights, and how these needs interact with management of the natural resources lie at the heart of INRM. This approach emphasizes the finitude, the interrelation, the depletion and

degradability of natural resources in the ecosystem. It also emphasizes the involvement of many stakeholders. These stakeholders include government, private sector, and the individual prospector of these resources, the immediate communities where these resources are found as well as the global/international community. The local communities for instance must be made to feel a sense of ownership and responsibility in the management of the resource, and in the benefits that accrue from its use. Whatever management and control system is put in place is likely to face barriers in implementation, if it ignores the community role and benefit-sharing mechanisms. Oftentimes this creates conflicts situations in the management of natural resources.

Integrated Natural Resource Management also takes into account the need to reduce the rate of exploitation of these natural resources, the need to avoid wasting the resource through efficient production and consumption patterns and the need for proper disposal of the final waste arising from the use of the resources. Consequently, there is need to manage these natural resources in a holistic and integrated manner. Such holistic management must pay attention to all dimensions of the ecological crises. The Integrated Natural Resource Management shares conceptual affinities with the Integral ecology approach proposed by Pope Francis (*Laudato Si*, art. 139-162).

Eco-Theological Principles for Sustainable Natural Resources Management

In Christianity, as a theological discipline of the Christian faith, practical theology engages by 'focusing on global, local and particular issues with the intention of doing something about the reality and problems confronting society' (Hendricks, 2010:284). In order to respond adequately to the current environmental threats and injustice, Christianity has applied the ecological wisdom latent in Biblical tradition. She has also reinvestigated, rediscovered and renewed this tradition in the light of the challenges posed by these environmental crises. This double attempt at offering theological critique of the values, culture and habits underlying the destruction of the ecosystem by human activities as well as a critique of the Christian tradition in the light of the contemporary global environmental crises, awareness and consciousness, is what is referred to as 'Ecological Theology'. Eco-theology seeks also to review every aspect of the Christian faith. It seeks to make the entire life of the church to

include an ecological dimension and vision. It draws its general principles on environmental sustainability from the Bible and Christian tradition and applies them to contextual situations of different environmental problems (Conradie, 2006 3-4 cited in Naseri, 2017:120-121).

Furthermore, as rightly observed by Bisong (2015:165-181), eco-theology has become a viable option in the quests for answers to the contemporary environmental challenges for the following reasons: it appeals to religious sentiments in the care for environment, it is an extended theology, it is interdisciplinary, it is pluralistic, it is interreligious with a global perspective and it is revolutionary.

The Biblical Principles about creation/environment

- i. Human beings and non-human creation are all creatures of God, therefore “brothers and sisters” in the broader sense. They all together build the ecosystem where the parts depend on the whole. The Christian view is not anthropocentric nor bio-centric but God-centred. Therefore, as God’s creatures together, all have a sacred and inviolable dignity and bear the blessing of God for eternal life.
- ii. Taking care of the creation is an integral and important part of Christian faith. Human beings as created “in the image of God” (Gen 1:27) are called by God “to have dominion ... over every living thing that move upon the earth” (Gen 1:28). They then have the ability to transcend other creatures and the right to use resources. But at the same time, it combines with a special responsibility “to take care of it” (Gen. 2:15)! This combination demonstrates the “dominion” as servant- management that is to accomplish the will of God the Creator, not the people themselves. The good King in the Old Testament was the King who served the people. The incarnation of Jesus Christ and his obedience to the Father has set up a model of taking care of the creation. Exploitation and destruction of the environment violates God himself and his name and is opposite to the Christian faith. Environmental protection is for Gods glory, but also for the -interest of human beings who cannot survive without clean air, drinking water, fruitful soil and existing forests.
- iii. A key instrument to increase respect for creation and caring for the resources is to worship and praise God by songs, prayer and dancing, such as the song. With the image of God is the prerequisite

and guarantee for men to take care of the creation. In worship and praise to God, men are in God and God is in men and then the task of caring is accomplished.

Characteristics of Bible-based Environmental Protection

- i. **Sustainable Development:** Human and non-human beings are all guests on earth. The guests who are invited by God to attend the wedding banquet in the eternal life do not include only human beings, but also non-human beings; not only the current generation, but also the future generations. Therefore, we should use resources with an attitude of God-fearing and respect for all of other guests (present and future). On the one hand, like the “good servant” (LK 19: 11--27), we keep the earth resources prolific; on the other hand, according to the principle of manna (Exodus 16), we consume resources in a sustainable way so that the future generations can also benefit.
- ii. **Green Economy:** Christian Environmental ethics can of course not be separated from Christian economic ethics and both of them work on the shift of economic model from modern to ecological based on the duty of taking care of the creation. In ecological economy, the environment will become one of the decisive factors. At the same time, the stimulating economic leverage will be shifted from human consumer demand only to the needs of all creatures on earth. In ecological economy, the dignity of life and well-being of existence for all creatures will become the basic framework and behaviour guidelines of human economic activity.
- iii. **Be Hopeful:** Compared with the eco-pessimists. Christians believe that the covenant of God with his believers and his creation is not broken and still exists in Jesus Christ: God wants to do everything to save the earth as his garden and gift to humankind. Therefore, it is never too late to take part in God’s actions to save the planet earth. However, compared with eco-optimist, the earth in history is a land standing up the cross of Jesus Christ so that there is no any possibility for human beings to build an ecological paradise. Because of it, Christians put their hope on the second coming of Jesus Christ and then have more courage in struggling for the dignity of all lives.
- iv. **Trustworthy in a very small matter:** Christianity as a way of life is characterized by doing little things with big love, which is based on

the greatest commandment of Jesus Christ. In environmental protection, this feature is reflected in all levels and directions in the relationship between people and environment. The financial and personal means are often little, especially for small and medium enterprises SMEs. But God knows that we have limitations. But we can do the small steps that we can: waste recycling, healthy food, reducing air pollution in transport and selecting clean energy etc.

- v. Pursuit of Ecological Justice: The purpose of environmental protection for Christians is not just to comply with existing laws and regulations related to the environment, but to focus on the promise of God for all of creation. Meanwhile, ecological justice for Christians is not based on people's own view of the ought-to-be of the relationship between men and environment, but in the relationship between men and God. Therefore, in the function of the society as a whole, Christians should represent all creatures to pursue their right of existence and the dignity of life; and in the daily life, Christians should become the Good Samaritan of their various neighbours (human and non-human).
- vi. Peaceful and Joyful: The presence of God determines the characteristics of orderly and joyful in Christian life. In Old Testament, Jewish people lived in a rhythm of Sabbath and Jubilee according to God's commandment which means work and rest, production and relief; debts and forgiveness. Jubilee (Lev 25:8-54) has a social and also an environmental meaning: every seventh year and every fifth year (the year after 7x7) should be a year of jubilee where financial and other debts are forgiven and the soil should rest, without agricultural work so that the "tired" soil can recover. Also on the seventh day of the week, the Sunday, animals should rest as workers in order to get new strength. Therefore, in biblical terms the wellbeing of human and non-humans beings was never separated but always seen as two sides of the same coin. In Christian life, Church Year and Lord's Day become the basic rhythm and order. However, in modern world, because of the pursuit of profits in an isolated way we have brought the earth into modern ecological crisis; and also because of the belief "time is money" we brought ourselves into a disordered and non-cease fast-food life. Christians believe that wealth is attributable to God and the responsibility of every entrepreneur just takes part in the management of God in the given share. Thus, there is nothing too much on shoulder and there is nothing in mergence for feet. What

we should do is to learn in the participate process to enjoy the peace and happiness in God being with us. Therefore, the life itself of Christians will become light and salt in construction of ecological life model.

Conclusion

From the face value, this paper reveals God's attentiveness to human needs as well as his divine provisions of abundance resources. This attest to God's loving and caring attributes to mankind. However, the present ecological situation is an indication that there is great danger; this definitely calls for solutions to deliver ourselves from the spiral of self-destruction which we have entrapped ourselves with. As a way out, this paper proposes appropriate moral basis for action. God's word found in the Holy Bible becomes imperative, as it provides moral principles that guide human conduct. Environment is God's creation, special gift of God to mankind, owned by God and not by humans. Although human beings are in the center of the environment, it does not mean they can use them in an anthropocentric way. Rather, in our use of it, we have responsibility towards God (the creator), the earth, the future generations and towards humanity as a whole. Hence, the dominion granted to man by the creator is not an absolute power to "use and misuse," or to dispose of things as one pleases. Rather, it is for good usage, maintenance and preservation. The seemingly inescapable inference from all this is that environmental care is embedded in the heart of biblical faith: it is a responsibility imposed on us all from time of creation. Environmentalism is not one among many priorities or options, but an obligation laid on all-and one which demands a response. Looking after creation is an integral part of religious commitment. Let the revolution begins!

References

- Agbiji, O.M. (2012) Development-oriented church leadership in post-military Nigeria: A sustainable transformational approach; Doctoral Dissertation, Stellenbosch University, Stellenbosch.
- Amolo, H. and Onyemauwa, V. (2017), Environmental crisis in Nigeria: A religious approach. *International Journal of Religion and Culture (INJOREC)*, vol. 2, No 1.
- Attah-Krah, K. (2006) "integrated Natural Resources Management and Genetic Diversity: Two Sides of the Coins for Sustainable

- Livelihoods and Development," in *Integrated natural resource management in practice: enabling communities to improve mountain livelihoods and landscapes*, T.Amedeet. al, (eds.) Kampala: African Highlands Initiatives.
- Bisong, K. (2015) "Anthropocentric Castles and the Imperatives of Eco-Theology," in *Shepherd and teacher*, U.Njoku and S.Anyanwu (eds.), Owerri: APT Publications.
- Chiras, D. (1995) *Environmental science: a framework for decision making*. Merlo Park: The Benjamin/Cumming Publishing Coys).
- Conradie, E. (2006) *Christianity and ecological theology: resources for further research*, Stellenbosch: SUN Press. Available: <http://www.africansunmedia.co.za>. (Accessed May 28, 2018).
- Frost, P., Campbell, B., Medina, G. and Usongo, L. (2006). "Landscape-Scale Approaches for Integrated Natural Resource Management in Tropical Forest Landscapes," *Ecology and Society* Vol. 11 No. 2, 30. Available: <http://www.ecologyandsociety.org/vol11/iss2/art30/>. (Accessed May 28, 2018).
- Iwuoha, C.M. (2017) The theology of nature and erosion quagmire in Nigeria. In L. Ijezie, S. Audu and A. Acha (eds.), *Theology and ecological issue* (pp. 265 - 266). Port Harcourt: Cathan Publication.
- John Paul 11, *On Social Concerns [Sollicitudo rei Socialis...]*, no.34.
- Mbiti, J.S. (1999) *African religion and philosophy*. Oxford: Heinemann
- Naseri, C., Bassey, P. and Owol, O. (2017) "Biblical paradigms for the sustainable use and management of natural resources in Nigeria: interpreting John 6:1-15 from an eco-theological perspective," in *Theology and Ecological Issues* L.E. Ijezie, S. Audu and A. I. Acha. Port Harcourt: Cathan Publication.
- Pope Francis *Laudato Si*, art. 139-162.