

## THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT

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### Abstract

Religion and Environment are presented as vital aspects of the life of a nation. This is because they both affect the life of the people of the nation. The environment has witnessed severe decimation and change as a result of anthropological activities. These anthropological activities have created a great ecological imbalance thus degrading our God given environment. Organisms and their environment constantly interact and both are changed by this interaction. Like all other living creatures, humans have clearly changed their environment, but they have done so generally on a grander scale leading most often to degradation. This paper believes that religious practices if adopted would address the present environmental crisis. This is because most religious practices have demonstrated a high sense of love and care for the environment. The paper further

corroborates that a cohesion between religion and environmental management practices is needed in order to help maintain an eco-friendly society. The paper therefore concludes that religious practices are important in the advancement of environmental management strategies. As a way of recommendation, the paper suggests that religious institutions should contribute to a proper response to environmental issues by teaching about the environment in their regular gatherings. This is achievable through Environmental education, environmental preaching and education for the environment.

**Key Words:** Religion, Environment, Environmental management, Sustainability, Ecology

### Introduction

The Environment has become a major issue in the world, as a result of its importance as a major factor not only in development of nations, but also in the all-important issue of sustainability. Several attempts have been made globally in managing our God given environment scientifically and politically; however, these approaches have failed in recent years. A religious dimension to this approach was neither thought of nor included. This paper argues that these two approaches have been very inadequate in man's quest to save the environment from abuse. There has to be a religious dimension to it since man is a religious being; thus,

environmental management goals will remain unachievable without a religious approach. Akinjide (1998, p.3) believes that religion should urgently address these problems if we are to bequeath to future generations of Nigerians a safe and habitable environment. There is a religious dimension to our present ecological crisis. It has long been understood by indigenous peoples that our relationship to the Earth is spiritually as well as physically sustaining. This is often included in our way of life, and expressed through rituals and prayers. The contemporary environmental movement, in the main, follows the path of empirical science, rational thinking, data collection and external action. This is good as far as it goes but it does not go far enough. There is need to include religion or spirituality as a part of care of the planet. Krueger (2008, p.27) posits that

A basic lesson of history is that vision is an outgrowth of religion. It unites the spiritual and the physical and provides a compelling and integrative direction into the future. The material perception of environmentalism never had sufficient clarity to see into the spiritual sore of the problem.

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Because the vision was not whole environmental activism never became a widespread movement. It did not encompass blue collar, it did not embrace minorities, instead the environmental movement acquired an elitist reputation because its ecological vision never translated into goals which all society could understand. If there is any clear lesson from over three decades of environmental activism, it is that technological and legislative approaches by themselves are not adequate to the task of healing creation. There must be an ethical and moral dimension. Infact there must be a religious approach.

The Nigerian Government's response to environmental issues is in line with that of the United Nations. Both failed to take into consideration the fact that environmental problems have a religious origin and dimension. Alokwu (2007, p.66)laments that it is sad to note that a careful study of these environmental initiatives over the years indicates that much emphasis had been placed on the techno-scientific options in dealing with these challenges to such an extent that they seem to ignore and undermine the role of cultural and religious heritage in environmental protection and sustainable development in general. Alokwu (2007, p. 67) further argues that religion has a definite role to play in conservation and environmental protection. In this regard, therefore, a religious understanding and attitude contribute and shape people's conception of the world and the dynamics of its institutions and social arrangements. This development has necessitated the need to draw science more closely and fully into a working relationship with religion. In its interplay with religion, Hultkrantz (1987, p. 581) believes that the environment enters as a central concept by way of a movement for the preservation of nature and also as a perspective and methodological approach in the study of religion. Environmental challenges and issues the globe is presently being confronted with have never been complex in terms of magnitude before as now. Gottlieb (2003, p.12) opines that

Soon our Planet will have more than Nine billion people who will share in the planet's limited resources. Increasing demands for food, water energy and infrastructure are pushing nature to its limits. The impact of climate is touching down everywhere, and environmental degradation is not only a health danger, an economic catastrophe, or an aesthetic blight but also sacrilegious, sinful, and an offense against God. The indiscriminate application of advances of science and technology which resulted in global pollution of common resources and self destruction from an indiscriminate genetic manipulation, which, left unchecked, leads to the rejection of the respect for life and the integrity of creation. Man's greed and selfishness are the major causes of the environmental crisis, both at an individual and corporate level thus there is need for internationally coordinated approach to the management of the Earth's goods and a religious approach has become imperative.

This and other reasons form the fulcrum of this paper.

### **Conceptual Clarification Religion**

Besides the family, Bouma (1992, p.32) believes that religion is believed to be one of the largest social institutions in the history of mankind as religion has been a central part of all known human societies. There is hardly any universally acceptable definition of religion as religionist definition is a controversial and complicated one as a result of scholars failing to agree on any single definition. Religion is a social institution involving beliefs and practices based on the sacred as well as a matter of faith, or belief based on conviction rather than scientific evidence. The French sociologist Durkheim (1915, p. 45) described Religion as “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say set apart and forbidden, beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community, all those who adhere to them”. Durkheim is generally believed to be the first sociologist to analyze religion in terms of its

societal impact. Durkheim also greatly believed that religion is a community because it binds people together, promotes behaviour consistency, and offers strength for people during life's transitions and tragedies. In another development Weber (1928, p.145) believed that religion is best understood as it responds to the human need for theodicy and soteriology. McKinnon (2005, p.17) corroborated Weber's idea that religion offers people soteriological answers, or answers that provide opportunities for salvation, relief from suffering, and reassuring meaning thus, the pursuit of salvation, like the pursuit of wealth, becomes a part of human motivation. Religion has emerged as a political force and, in some cases, believes itself to be an independent source of truth about the nature of the material world. Barkan and Greenwood (2003, p.117) opined that religion is a set of beliefs concerning the cause, nature, and purpose of the universe, especially when considered as the creation of a superhuman agency or agencies, usually involving devotional and ritual observances, and often containing a moral code governing the conduct of human affairs. With these there is no doubt that religion is a force that can influence environmental conduct and thus the management of our environment.

### The Environment

The environment means many things to many disciplines and people. Ibrahim (2003, p.2) explains that the perception and application of the term differ from one discipline to another. Oyeshola (1995, p.12) explains that the environment as a concept has been used in many ways to connote physical behavioural, operational and meta-physical setting. Keller (1972, p.19) in another development defines the environment as the overall set of circumstances or influences that surround and affect an individual or community; which include physical or natural conditions and socioeconomic features. In this definition according to Ibrahim (2003, p.4) both the two systems of biophysical and socio-cultural are viewed interactively, which gives a much broader meaning and understanding of environment. Broadly speaking, Strahler (1973, p.67) admits that the environment consists of three basic components which are the physical environment, biological

environment, and the social environment. The interplay among these three components dictates and determines the nature, behavior, and status of each of the sub-components operating within or outside these major components. **The physical environment** according to Ibrahim refers to all non-living parts of the earth and its atmosphere. Based on the natural composition and functions to man, the physical environment can be classified into three major sub-components. These are atmosphere, land and water, animal, and forest. **The Biological environment** comprises living organisms on the planet earth which include man, animals, vegetation, microorganisms, and vectors of diseases. The social environment is a man-made environment, which comprises all human cultural activities. Ibrahim (2003, p.8) broadly classifies it into three major groups: social, political, and economic environments. The social environment consists of individual behaviour, family, village, community, society, and cultural beliefs and attitudes. The political environment, however, is made up of environment politics, and laws, while economic environment comprises economic systems, transport, communication, production systems, and social services such as education and health care.

### Environmental Management

Like Religion, Environmental management is not easy to define. Conceptually, Hornberry (1986, p.45) envisages it to be a continuous process designed to find solutions to environmental problem. Environmental management therefore involves many stakeholders and requires a multidisciplinary perspective including religion. It also involves many, diverse goals, including the desires to control the direction and pace of development, to optimise resource use, to minimise environmental degradation and to avoid environmental disaster. Essentially, environmental management focuses on resource consumption and waste generation and therefore is the management of the interaction and impact of human societies on the environment. According to Thampapillai (2002, p.51), environmental management aims to ensure that ecosystem services are protected and maintained for future human generations, and also to maintain ecosystem integrity through

considering ethical, economic, and scientific variables. *Daily and Huang (2001,p.432) further buttress the point that* environmental management tries to identify factors affected by conflicts that rise between meeting needs and protecting resources. Thus, it is linked to environmental protection, sustainability and integrated landscape management. The process of environmental management is related to the rational adjustment of man with nature involving judicious exploitation and utilization of natural resources without disturbing the ecosystem balance and ecosystem equilibrium. If the natural resources are over exploited, it will affect socio-economic development of a nation. Thus, environmental management must take into consideration the ecological principles and socio-economic needs of the society. *Costanza (1991, p. 82) agreed that* the functions of environmental management consist of a combination of integrated processes, plans, and activities that are being pursued together in line with developmental needs. These among others are development, environmental interactions, environmental management programmes, policies and implementation mechanisms as well as institutional and decision-making procedures. Environmental management can be promoted through well prepared programmes of development and activities that offer appropriate solutions to environmental problems and religion has a significant role to play here.

### **Perception of Some World Religions on Environmental Management**

All of the Earth's religions speak of an ethical responsibility to care for the natural world and the best asset religion offers is the moral framework by which practitioners must abide. Tucker (1993, p. 16) believes that religious communities are well positioned to shape environmental values due to their influence over personal moral development as religions carry *moral capital* in their ability to project moral authority.

Christianity believes that all creatures created were given to man in trust according to Psalm 24:1 and 115:16. The most characteristic feature of the Old Testament attitude towards nature is the admiration of its beauty and the great wisdom of its design, which finds expression especially in the

prayers of the psalms and the entire scriptures. The book of Genesis clearly reveals that the entire human race is saddled by God with the responsibility of being stewards of the environment. Christianity apart from uplifting our sense of holiness also rejects any form of abuse of nature thereby being highly significant and relevant in our techno-scientific world characterized by indiscriminate exploitation of nature. Ammerman (2007, p. 21) demonstrates that humanity is created to share a personal relationship with God and therefore is called to represent the creator in sustaining environmental order. Rajotte and Breuilly (1992, p. 17) say that the Old Testament amply demonstrates the belief that the creatures of God individually maintain a definite relationship with him. The Bible thus holds everything under the control, care and when necessary the judgment of God as demonstrated in Psalm 104. Helfand (1985, p.13) posits that the relationship between man and his environment is unequivocally homocentric; as such the Bible depicts additional relationships and interactions within nature which human beings do not figure, and this centres upon the needs of other living creatures. Sorrel (1988, p. 49) also establishes that when it comes to exhibiting religious attitudes towards nature, St Francis of Assisi stands out as probably the most well-known figure in Christian history. His religious thought concerning nature draws on both the ecologically positive fecundity and migration Christian metaphors of nature. Schuenemann (2006, p. 45) in another development highlights that Saint Augustine demonstrated a deep reverence and compassion for the natural world. In his teaching and in the nature-based mysticism he originated within the Christian tradition, he clearly showed that Christianity has ecological concerns.

For Judaism, the natural world plays a central role in Jewish Law, literature, and liturgical and other practices. A central belief in Judaism is that the Man should keep the Earth in the same state as he received it from God; thus man should avoid polluting it but keep it clean for the future generations. Hiebert (1996, p. 89) asserts that the conservative Jewish activists have recruited principles of *halakhah* for environmental purposes, such as the injunction against unnecessary destruction of the environment. Kay (1998, p. 56)

agrees that in contemporary Jewish liturgy, ecological concerns have been promoted by adapting rituals for the holiday of trees. Biblical and rabbinic texts have been enlisted for prayers about the environment. Judaism is clearly in line with the principles of environmental protection and sustainable development. Any discussion of the Jewish view of natural world, the ecological principle underlying natural processes and the obligation to the natural must begin with the concert and specific complements of building upon all practicing Jews. Many Jewish festivals are agricultural in origin. This shows that they are in love with flora and nature; thus, Judaism is ecologically friendly. Aubrey (1992, p.53) corroborates the view that in Talmudic and other rabbinical sources, several commandments in the Jewish Torah are concerned with the preservation of trees and arable land, the conservation of water and protection of animal welfare.

In the case of Islam, Nasr (2003, p. 23) believes that Islam has a powerful and persuasive spiritual teachings about nature and the relationship of humanity to it. Through the tradition from the Quran and the prophets, Islam believes the environment was made sacred. Islam believes that God did not create the environment for a random reason, but rather as a reflection of truth. One can gain profound knowledge from nature; thus, human beings are to preserve it and look after it. According to Izzi-Deen (1990, p. 12) many chapters in the Quran refer to the beauties of nature. The headings of many chapters as well indicate the importance of it, such as: "The Sun", "Dawn", and "Morning Hours". Thus man is God's representative on this planet. If he is not charged with sustaining it, then at least he must not destroy it. Man has been granted stewardship, but nature belongs to God. Islam draws our attention to this sacred and spiritual dimension of nature by teaching that we are created by God and that we shall return to Him in order to give account for our actions. This means that we are answerable for all that we do, both the good, and the evil. Muslim scholars have observed that the illness of a person occurs due to the disturbance of natural balance between internal and external environments of a person. Deuraseh (2009, p. 526) concludes that it becomes impossible then for one to know God without observing and knowing what is

our environmental surroundings. Islam promotes protection of the environment and call for a balanced use of the available natural resources in the Holy Quaran. Islamic ethics evolved the idea of Al-Israf, wastefulness for the protection of environment from destruction and wastage, and elaborated strategies for environmental conservation and pollution prevention. Since God is the entity behind the diversity of nature, human beings must not waste natural produce. Al-Mizan is the Islamic term for balance, a term that has gained currency in environmental movement and the problem of climatic change. Richard, Frederick and Azizan (2003, p.49) attest that the Holy Qur'an is against destruction, abuse, over exploitation, and pollution of natural resources. In early Medieval Islamic literature, climatic effects came to be identified as one of the major causes of ill-health and disease. Muslim scholars accurately observed that the illness of a person occurs due to the disturbance of natural balance between internal and external environments of a person. Creation, which is a sign of God (yat Allah), is a book of which God is the author. Deuraseh (2009, p.527) admits that in Islam it is impossible to know and relate with God without observing and knowing what is in our environmental surroundings.

In Buddhism, Krznaric (2007, p.29) opines that in stark contrast to the general anthropocentrism of the Abrahamic religions, the Asian religions give us a more biometric view of the world. For instance, the concept of interconnectedness of all living beings is central to Buddhism, and loving kindness is extended to both human beings, animals, plants and the earth itself. Krznaric (2007, p. 30) further explains that, Buddhist environmentalists assert that the universality of '*dhukkha*' suffering and '*tanha*' pain engulfing the whole of creation has produced a compassionate empathy for all forms of life. Furthermore, the concepts of karma and rebirth found in Hinduism, Buddhism and the whole of Eastern mysticism provide a link between humanity and other forms of life including nature, since during the sojourn of a person on earth, he could be transformed into a bird, toad, or tree in the cycle or wheel of birth, death and rebirth. Krznaric (2007, p. 33) in another development explains that another benefit of Buddhist practice to the environment is the compassion that drives all

thinking towards the harmony of nature. This habitual striving for harmony and friendship among all beings creates a more perfect relationship between humanity and nature. It is therefore imperative to conclude that the Buddhist mindset relies on striving for balance and eventually concluding that a balance must be established between self-destruction and self-indulgence.

Taylor (1994, p.71) expressed that Hinduism teaches that all living beings are sacred because they are parts of God, and should be treated with respect and compassion. This is because the soul can be reincarnated into any form of life. Hinduism is full of stories that treat animals as divine, such as how Krishna used to herd cows, or how the monkey Hanuman was a faithful servant of the Rama. Tucker and Grim (1993, p.56) infer that most Hindus are vegetarians because of this belief in the sanctity of life. Even trees, rivers and mountains are believed to have souls, and should be honoured and cared for. According to Richard (2002, p.14), Hindus revere sacred rivers, mountains, forests and animals, and love to be close to nature. For example, Tucker and Grim (1993, p.97) explain that many Hindu villages have a sacred lake, and around it a grove of trees to catch rainfall and protect the banks from erosion. The lake and its grove store rainfall to irrigate surrounding fields and supply village wells with drinking water. These lakes and groves are places of tranquility and sanctuaries for wildlife.

Richard (2002, p.243) asserts that Confucianism is distinguished by its concern for the cultivation of human relations towards a harmonious society rather than one's relations with the supernatural or nature. However, it would be a mistake to regard the civilizational legacy of Confucius as purely humanistic. Confucianism is a philosophy which also contains profound environmental ethics through its inclusiveness of Heaven, Earth and the Human order. Relations between people and the natural world are therefore of intrinsic interest to those who profess Confucian ethics. Confucian thinkers according to Hultkrantz (1987, p.37) characteristically regard nature itself as holistic, all things in nature depending on each other and forming an organic whole. Confucianism considers human beings as part of nature, an existence within it, emphasizing that people and nature are closely bound in a harmonious, not conflictual, primary

relationship. Therefore, 'saving' the environment requires more than physical preservation; it calls for reverence and duty to the environment's greater self, and nature. This extension of humanity carries ethical concerns for the environment. Kaushik and Kaushik (2008, p. 41) say Confucians oppose the idea which takes human beings as the centre of the universe, nor do they approve of the view which takes nature as the centre. The distinguishing feature of Confucian ecological ethics is that it does not give humans dominion over nature, nor does it sacrifice human development at the altar of pristine nature. Hultkrantz (1987, p.38) affirms that in handling relations between the human and natural worlds, people need to observe the principle of 'equilibrium', so that the vitality and harmony in nature, the ecological balance of the natural environment, can be maintained properly. To act according to the requirements of nature in preserving and perpetuating itself and to economise in the use of natural resources are essential commitments in Confucian ecological ethics. Humankind's knowledge of protecting and making rational use of natural resources originated from the agricultural policy of ancient China. Confucians maintain that human beings should control and restrict their desires so that natural resources can be rationally exploited and utilised, and their production and consumption kept in balance. Sittler (2002, p.17) confesses that Confucius himself resolutely opposed the misuse of resources, hence the Confucian view holds humans to be part of nature and believes that they should respect and act in accordance with the laws of nature.

African religion has helped the people of the continent to develop ecological concerns out of their religious beliefs and values. This is demonstrated in reverence and piety for sacred places and the environment. This gave birth to a balanced ecosystem, with people and nature interacting in such a way that harmony was maintained (Omari 2003, p.99). Most aboriginal people in Africa hold a strong belief in conceptualizing land as sacred. Consequently, many Africans believe that their autochthonous tribesmen emerged from the ground. In this realm, land is a sacred entity, not a property or real estate to be sold, bought or resold, but she is the mother of all humanity. There is a definitely a relationship

between humans and the environment because the environment gives birth to human beings, fauna, flora and all inanimate organisms

According to Idowu (1997, p.112) Africans are in constant consciousness and acknowledgement of God's divine lordship over the whole earth, and the fact that 'man is a tenant on God's earth. Idowu (1997, p. 122) corroborates that this keeps them in regular check that they ought to be careful how this earth is treated. For instance the myriad of spirits which populate the worlds of the African people are associated with hills, mountains, rivers, rocks, caves, trees, brooks, lakes, and thick forest. As noted by Idowu (1997, p.185), natural resources and management have always been part and parcel of the African way of life. All of these go a long way in curbing environmental abuses.

### **Religion and Its Roles in Environmental Management**

Since many environmental problems have stemmed from human activity, it follows that religion might hold some solutions to mitigating destructive patterns. Religion has emerged as a political force and, in some cases, believes itself to be an independent source of truth about the nature of the material world. Religion plays out its role in environmental management by its beliefs and teachings as it guides the relationship between man and nature and also offers moral framework. Krznaric (2007, p. 45) opined that there are common grounds shared by the world's major religions in their approaches to environmental issues in general and climate change in particular. This claim is hinged on the fact that religion plays a major role in raising public consciousness concerning environment and mobilising people to act positively towards the environment. Religious institutions can be useful in galvanizing global coalitions from the diverse institutional frameworks to tackle environmental problems. Adesiyan (2005, p.196) corroborates this view that religion has the capacity for developing greater cooperation and unity around environmental management as a part of interfaith and collaboration. All world religions agree according to Krznaric (2007, p. 56) that: first, the natural world has value in itself and does not exist solely to serve human needs but the needs of other beings as well. Secondly, humans are an

integral part of the natural world, and are dependent upon it for their survival. Thirdly, the natural world, including animals-, plant life- and inanimate objects, is a sacred creation of God or the cosmic order, and as such, humans have a special duty to respect and conserve it for their use today and for posterity or future generations. Fourthly, moral norms and the ethics of justice, compassion and reciprocity apply both to humans and non-humans, and are therefore subject to or governed by the law of the creator, among other ethical verdicts. Ibrahim (2003, p.8) attests that most environmental problems are mostly human-induced and that they can be tackled; thus, humans owe God as a part of their religious obligations and responsibility a duty to save the environment from further degradation. Harper (2008, p.28) explains that the contributions of religion to environmental management transitions can be basically systematized along three potential functions: Firstly, campaigning and intermediation in the public sphere, secondly "materialization" of approach; and thirdly, the dissemination of values and worldviews that empower environmental attitudes and actions.

The first function refers to the public sphere where Harper (2008, p.30) believes that religious actors can have a strong presence and impact in the public spheres of modern western societies. Thus, they may shape debates on environmental management strategies through public statements and activities. Religious organizations are in a good position to communicate their positions regarding poor environmental management practices within the public. Richard (2002, p.189) corroborates that apart from media statements, religious organizations may further contribute to public debates on environmental management by bringing together different actors in the form of round table and debate forums.

The second function, Harper (2008, p.123) contends, is that religious organizations can have an active stance in "materializing" sustainability transitions. For example, religious leaders launch campaigns encouraging local congregations to avoid unsustainable practices. In some cases, religious actors even assume a leadership role for initiating local transition activities by launching and building pro-environmental local coalitions with actors from different environmental spheres.

The third function comprises the dissemination of religious values and worldviews that foster environmental attitudes and behaviour. It also involves non-organizational forms of value transmission, such as subliminal proliferation of religious values and worldviews in the course of religious socialization. There is a strong belief by Tucker (1993, p.45) that religion orientates human behaviour towards the environment, particularly in the form of ethical teachings. Gottlieb (2003, p.19) contends that religion rather than science could act as messengers of the sustainability of the environment by promoting an "ethic of responsibility" that advances changes in lifestyles. Religion is expected to encourage people to promote environmentally friendly behaviour and policies and the dissemination of these values and worldviews occurs through organizational and non-organizational forms of religion. Religious organizations should contribute to the bandwagon of environmental management by transmitting pro-ecological values in church services, Sunday-schools, Friday Juma'at and Tafsirs lessons during the Ramadan. They should regularly engage the followers of respective religious beliefs and sects in a wider discourse on the preservation of the creation.

### Conclusion

This paper reiterates Wilkinson's (2005, p.140) idea that environmental problems cannot be addressed by shallow environmentalism of technical fixes; rather, they are the result of physical, socio-economic, and spiritual problems and thus; must be met by double approaches of science and religion for solution. Richard (2002, p. 191) also corroborates the view that the sciences have shown us an understanding of creation as nature and now Theology must show sciences how nature is to be understood as creation. All world religions teach that humanity will one day account before the Creator. It must be emphasized that religion has a role to play in the diverse environmental management strategies. Every activity that degrades our God-given environment must be stopped and religious institutions like churches and mosques should champion this environmental crusade as the campaign for sustainability of our environment is not attainable without a religious

approach.

### Recommendations

This paper recommends that religious institutions should contribute to a proper response to environmental issues, by teaching about the environment in their regular gatherings or meetings. Religious stake-holders have a duty to not only preach about environmental mismanagement, but should also be involved in environmental legislation and collaboration with other stakeholders in the quest for the sustainability of our environment. Religious Fathers should deliberately create environmental enlightenment initiations where their followers should be taught to be good custodians of our environment as it is rebellion to religious tenets to abuse the environment. Supporting this view, Kinoti (2006, p. 175) points out that God commanded human beings to care for and protect his precious creation. It is therefore not merely destructive but rebellion against God's commandment to abuse the environment. Thus protecting the environment religiously is achievable through environmental education and also education for the environment.

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