

The Ambivalence of Religion in Environmental Issues in Africa: A Comparative Approach

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Abstract

The universe in its original state at creation was perfect and nature was at its best in the service of man. However, man's disobedience to God's command and his religious activities have impacted the entire ecosystem positively and negatively. Thus, this paper argues that religion plays ambivalent roles in environmental issues in Africa. The research adopted descriptive method and the use of secondary sources in addressing the issues raised. It was discovered that African Traditional Religion, Christianity and Islam, to a greater extent have contributed to environmental preservation and at the same time engaged in activities that led to the general interruption of the ecosystem in Africa. The work recommended that religious adherents should seek deeper understanding of their tenets as it relates to its interaction with nature. Until religion finds its true expression within the ecological space, and all are involved in addressing environmental issues, religion will continue to remain in the crisis of building and destroying the environment; which is capable of stunting economic, scientific and political growth.

Keywords: Religion, Environment, Degradation, Ecology, Africa

Introduction

Religion, has greatly impacted humanity in many respects. It is an indispensable fact of human nature, because it defines human outlook, especially, the Africans. Religion impacts the ethics and morality of the society. It influences key status changes witnessed in human development, from one stage of life to the other. It is intrinsically, good. Religion, to say the least is intertwined with nature and human environment. The two cannot be separated. God, at creation handed over to man a perfect, peaceful and serene environment. He gave man the responsibility to care for the environment, for man's good and the good of the entire created order. However, given man's disobedience to God and inordinate ambitions,

the environment was disrupted and nature began to work against man. Thus, the beauty which had illuminated the harmonious relationship of human beings with God and the rest of creation was destroyed (Obeka, 2012). As a result of this, man's attitude towards the universe changed automatically from that of the attitude of 'need', to the attitude of 'greed.' This has led to the ecological crisis witnessed around the world today, including African continent.

The rapid industrialization, development, consumerism and population explosion have pulsated the ecological balance (Dhameja, 2009). The ecosystems are destroyed, species go extinct, depletion of both biological and biodiversity and the

earth is ravaged by an insatiable human desire for wealth and material goods (Grosse, 2005). Man is no longer concerned about environmental preservation and the challenges posed by nature, rather has become numb to the ecological degradation occurring everywhere in the universe.

Religion as an institution in Africa, and a tool in man's hand, has its own share problem of environmental degradation, as the most devastating blow comes from it. Noise and air pollution, destruction and desecration of sacred objects and sites, are ways through which religion contributes to environmental degradation. Posas (2007, p.31) averred that, "religion should be held responsible for environmental abuse because it serves as a major part of human civilization, wisdom and guidance." It is obvious that there are many religious adherents in Africa, yet they contribute directly or indirectly to environmental pollution.

African region bears the brunt of climate stressors due to the high vulnerability of the people and their finite coping systems. Only very few of the African population have access to proactive warning mechanisms against the impacts of environmental crisis (Hatfield & Walthall, 2014). WHO (2021), estimated that about 250,000 people in Africa, may lose their lives each year to climate-related crisis such as hunger, infectious diseases, and overheating. Failure to avert climate change, failure to have early warning signals, natural disasters such as hurricanes, extreme temperatures, ecological imbalance, and habitat destruction will become threats to human well-being.

The aim of this research is to comparatively explore the ambivalence of religion on environmental issues

in Africa. The work examined how religion has played both positive and negative roles on African ecosystem. Descriptive phenomenological approach was adopted for this work. It focused on the lived experiences of the individuals and uncovers the fundamental nature of the issue as it appears and is experienced by the people. In this case, Africans and environmental challenges caused or otherwise by religion. The work challenged the religious leaders to re-examine the imports of their religious tenets as it relates dealings with the environment, so as to mitigate the negative impacts of religion on environment. Africans, according to Mbiti (1975, p.1), "are notoriously religious and religion permeates all spheres of their lives." And as such, Africans should rather tap from the benefits of nature in every form of their religious engagement, and not to destroy it.

Religion and Environment

The term religion, has become many things to many people. Suffice it to say that to define some concepts like religion sometimes becomes a herculean task as the field is so universal and usually personalized. The difficulty in definition of religion arose partly from the uncertainty of the root. Obilor (2010) writing on the difficulty in defining religion observed that, "there is always a debate of the word 'religion.' The problem has become acute in our time with the growth of many small sects, cults, and movements all seeking the title 'religion'" (p.172).

Defining the concept of religion, Nigosian (1975, p.3), has this to say:

It is the outward act or form by which men indicate their recognition of the existence of a god or gods, having power over their destiny, to whom obeisance, service and honour are

due, the feeling or awe of some super-human and over-ruling, whether by profession or belief, by observance of rights and ceremonies or by the conduct of life.

Idowu, defined religion as, “that which results from man’s spontaneous reaction to his immediate awareness of a living power, wholly other, and infinitely greater than himself, a power mysterious because unseen, yet, a present and urgent reality.” Nmah said, “in religion there are man’s efforts in satisfying emotional needs by establishing and maintaining cordial relations between himself, the super sensible world, and his fellow man.”

Nwankwo (2018, p.1), affirmed that, “religion is an indispensable fact of human nature.” No human person can intrinsically resist the force of religion. The influence of religion on the entire universe either positively or negatively depends on perception. This is true of African continent too.

The Chambers 20th Century Dictionary, describes religion as “the surrounding external conditions influencing development or growth of people, animals or plants; living or working conditions.” as cited in Obasi (1998, p.82), Citing the Federal Environmental Protection Agency Decree of 1988, Obodo (1998, p.237), described environment to include, “water, air, land and all plants and human beings or animals living therein and the interrelationships which exist among these or any of them.”

In another perspective, the environment could be regarded as “the sum total of all external conditions which may act upon an organism or community to influence its development or existence: the

surrounding air, light, moisture, wind, soil and other organism are part of the environment or environmental factors” (Faniran, 1997, p.62). Daura (2007) simply defines the environment as “the sum of all external conditions affecting the life, development and survival of an organism. The external conditions in this context refer to living organisms or non-living such as plants, animals, water, air, land, etc.” All these organisms and their environment, according to Daura (2007), ‘do constantly interact and both are changed by this interaction.’ Faniran (1997) explains organism or community as a central element in the definition of environment and goes further to say that it exists in the midst of various living and non-living objects, happenings and influence (both natural and artificial), the aggregate of which forms its environment and on which it depends for life and survival of life (Obasola, 2013).

Theoretical Framework

Researches are based on theories for guide and proper focus. This work is framed by the theory of Eliade (1957) that discussed the concept of the sacred when he tried to make a case for the unique approach by which African traditional societies protect and conserve the environment, by using their conceptions of the sacredness of nature. He noted that it is uncommon in traditional African societies to find people talking about spirituality outside of religion. Religion and spirituality are enmeshed together. The religious person is at the same time a spiritual person since he or she is connected with the spiritual world.

Analysing his understanding of the sacred from African perspective, Eliade observed that “every sacred space implies an eruption of the sacred that results in detaching a territory from the surrounding

cosmic milieu and making it qualitatively different” (Eliade, 1957, p.26). Africa is replete with sacred spaces and objects that are treated in many traditional African societies as qualitatively different and therefore sacred. To the religious African, nature is never only “natural”; it is always fraught with a religious value. This is easy to understand, for the cosmos is a divine creation; coming from the hands of the gods (Amanze, 2024).

This theory is relevant to this research in respect of the emphasis it placed on the sacredness of nature as conceived by the Africans. Other religions have this view of sacredness of nature in their various theologies. However, this sacredness has been somewhat disrupted with emerging western views, globalizations and new theological concepts on environment. Thus, the same religions that have high regards for the environment, is seen to desecrate it.

Religion and the Preservation of African Environment

The role of religion in the preservation of the ecosystem, cannot be overemphasized. Under this sub-heading, the researcher considers the three dominant religions in Africa: African Traditional Religion, Christianity and Islam and how they have contributed towards environmental preservation.

African Traditional Religion and Environment

Ekeopara and Ekpenyong (2016, p.19), averred that, “African Traditional Religion (ATR) is called ‘African’ due to certain reasons. First, it is called ‘African’ because it is indigenous, aboriginal, and foundational or handed down from generation to generation.” It is the resilient, intrinsic and natural religion of the African man, which forms major

influence in the life of a good number of African people (Nana, 2016). African religion, to say the least, has been a source of environmental preservation and protection.

Furthermore, Nana (2016, p. 164), affirmed that, “in African cosmology, God is the creator and owner of man, the land or earth and all its constituents.” The sacredness attached to the earth is based on the fact that it serves as the abode of divinities, deities, spirits as well as the medium through which the sovereign or Supreme Being (God) can be reached. In the same line of thought, Obasola (2013) quips that, “traditionally, religion plays an integral role in linking people to the natural world, imbuing them with the knowledge and values that make caring for the environment a priority.” The Indigenous people recognize and understand their place in the local environment bearing in mind that nature or the environment has a spiritual dimension attached to it. Thus, environmental care is not a strange concept in Africa.

The physical world in African traditional concept is made up of the earth, populated by humans, animals, birds, reptiles, and material surroundings, others include, forests, mountains, lands, valleys grasses, seas, oceans, and lake among others. There is little or no difference between the physical and the spiritual worlds (Gbende, 2010).

According to Okedairo (2006, p.184), “Africans were exceptional in eco-conservation. In fact, some natural habitats like the forests, rivers and streams were dedicated to deities, and so were fearfully preserved, and human prohibited from hunting or fishing in them.” This accounts for the continuous existence of various species of wildlife in Africa, as against other

climes, where they have gone into extinction. Ucheawaji (2016) noted that, “Africans are known for their high regard for nature. Sin is seen not only as an offence one commits against God or his fellow man, but widely as a desecration against the land, even animals are sacred and are revered.” People can be slammed with heavy penalties on the ground that they desecrated the sacred forest by cutting down a sacred tree. Rituals and appeasements are carried out to ensure peace and productivity in the environment. To this end, man has no right over nature either to exploit or destroy but to mutually co-habit the ecosystem. Instead people are one with nature, responsible toward nature, able to communicate with nature, and the chief priests of nature. Therefore, African cosmology is ecologically friendly (Mbiti, 1969).

Christianity and Environmental Care

Christianity, as a religion has contributed immensely towards ecological preservation since inception. It is an upshot of Judaism. Christianity shares the same Biblical interpretation, outlook and view with the Old Testament theology, as it concerns the environment. In this line of thinking, Olusakin and Udoh (2018), mentioned that, “it recognizes the relationship between God and creation. God is both close and distant to creation.”

Christian theology of the environment is based on God’s concern for nature. The instruction given to man to keep and have dominion over nature is a testament of God’s concern for nature (Gen. 2:15). Although this verse has been erroneously interpreted. Many Christians believe this means “to take control in order to protect”, and supports a need to protect the environment (Grasse, 2016). A few verses following the scripture reads “The Lord God took the man and

put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.” The image of God in man according to scholars, implies that man is expected to represent God in his concern and interest for creation (Davies, 1999). Abogunrin, (2009, p.6)), noted that “this image of God in man implores him to keep and rule over; this has two sides- care, love and responsibility and on the other hand, creative power.” Human is to rule over creation the same way the moon rules over the day and night. That is, it is not harsh and destructive but purposeful.

No one cares for the safety and preservation of what one does not have concern for. God’s covenant in the Old Testament shows his concern for creation. God entered into covenant with Noah and by extension all lives on earth. He promises not to destroy the earth totally again with flood and use a non-human entity (rainbow) as a witness. In God’s covenant with the Israelites at Sinai, he reassures his of continuous ownership of the earth (Olusakin & Udoh, 2018).

Furthermore, God gave land to Israel and gave her both Jubilee and Sabbath principles. The essence of this was to remind the Israelites that He has concern for the land, the downtrodden and even non-human creation. Jubilee year is a time of release and rest for the Israelites, their land and cattle (Mbonu, 2011). It forbids degradation, exploitation and it is a time of rejuvenation and renewal to enable human live long in the land. This ensures peaceful coexistence, justice and harmony with God, self, one’s neighbour and one’s environment, (Deut. 22:6-7).

Gitau (2000, p.69), observed that, “the New Testament continues the covenant and makes it available for all God’s creation.” Here, the theology is to be based on the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. In

Colossians 1:16-17 creation finds its underlining place alongside Christ authority over the church. All things were created by him and he has pre-eminence over all creation. The identity and existence of creation consist in him. Jesus sustains creation and upholds it (Heb. 1:3). Jesus restored the image of God tampered with at the fall and then in the church as it matures (Col 1:15, Eph. 4:13). Creation is also restored through Jesus. At redemption, full humanity is restored to human. There is therefore, a total restoration of relationship. Redemption involves creation and creation awaits the final salvation of humanity (Olusakin & Udoh, 2018).

Islam and Environmental Preservation

One of the major religions that has influenced the culture of African people, is Islam. As a religion, Islam, to a large extent has played a positive conservative role in the ecological sphere of the African society. Scholars of Islamic religion have made a lot of input on the subject matter under consideration, to underscore how Islam as a religion has become an agent of environmental preservation.

Omer (2004), affirmed that the Islamic Law outlined various rules on environmental preservation, expected of adherents to observe. The Islamic law (Sharia), says, it is the sacred duty of a true Muslim to protect the environment from deterioration and degradation, as nature is a given from 'Allah' (Hafiz, 2010). As the Prophet (pbuh) declared: "The Universe and the created order, is just like the family of Allah" and thus Islamic adherents are expected to behave well with creation and in a good manner (Hafiz, 2010).

The abuse and misuse of natural resources, destruction of nature or pollution of environment are entirely prohibited in Islam. The Muslim scholars and

Jurists treated such kind of conduct as sin and every one might be punished for such misconducts. Islamic ethical and moral principles in relation to nature attest to all these (Muhammad, 2004). Surely Islamic thought and civilization is far above others, where it emphasizes that the almighty Allah wants for His creations a peasant life and a purity and environment, which is not polluted. It must be noted as well that Islam emphasizes on humanism. That means all Muslims must have the quality of well-wishing for all the created and living beings (Hafiz, 2010).

Religion and the Disruption of African Ecosystem

African environment, culture and practices have been negatively influenced by western views and ideologies. Most of the ecological imbalances witnessed in Africa today are as a result of these incursions on her religion and culture. Africa, as a continent bears the negative impacts of environmental crisis caused by the West (Ekpenyong 2012, Dhameja 2016). Suffice it to say however, that while the three religions (African Traditional Religion, Christianity and Islam) were seen to as encouraging environmental sustainability, they have equally contributed in many respects to its abuses, in areas such as: noise pollution, air pollution and deforestation and the general deterioration of the environment. This assertion has been substantiated by the essays and views of many scholars in what follows.

African Traditional Religion and practices, though indigenous and rooted in the soil, is no exception in the environmental degradation experienced in the continent today. Uwineza, (2017), noted that, "in matters of ecological depletion, Africans are no exception. There are many instances of abuse and misuse of natural resources of land, water, gas,

animals and forests because of excessive greed, intensive farming, overgrazing and deforestation.” A substantial number of Africans relies on forests for their livelihood and subsistence farming for survival.

People cut down the forests in order to extend their farming space to feed their growing families. Some collect firewood or make charcoal, timber to build their shelters and storage bins, and to make utensils. Others use some herbs and trees for herbal medicines. The local hunters and fishermen, go all out in their killing spree of wild animals and aquatic lives for food. This is even done without moral and ethical qualms and care of preserving their young. It goes without saying that these, when not properly controlled, deplete resources upon which humanity depends for its existence (World Bank, 2012).

Discussing the role of Christianity in environmental crises in Africa, Simeon (2020, pp.337-339), identified three ways through which Christianity contributes negatively, namely: poor structural setting, poor sanitation and noise pollution. The environmental degradation crisis seen in Africa today, is as a result of the misinterpretation of the concept of ‘subdue and explore the earth’ by many Christians. This has produced the ripple negative effects of deforestation, as forests and fields are being converted completely into massive buildings, spacious auditorium and arterials. Thus, the earth dynamism exchange systems have been changed into the harmful condition of biodiversity, toxifying the environment, and contaminating the soil and water systems of the world. Habel and Peter (2008), strongly argued that for the fact that humans are recipients of a long anthropocentric, patriarchal and androcentric approach of reading the Biblical text, this approach has tremendously devalued the earth.

Christianity is greatly contributing to the increase in flood disasters. Many drainages and water ways are being blocked in the name of expansion, coupled by poor sanitation. This stems from the notion that the church exists only for spiritual purposes, and that engaging in any earthly endeavour is of no significance. Again noise pollution have deafened many ears in the society today. The contemporary Christian church has been characterized by production of high tone music, prayers, and worship patterns and this has contributed to the environmental mess caused by the Church (Simeon, 2020).

Islamic religion on the other hand, has its own blame on the environmental degradation experienced in Africa today. Given its teaching on the preservation of the eco-system, it bulges the mind on where comes the theology of disturbing the neighbourhood with ear-breaking noise and shouts during prayer and worship seen in Islam today? Facts abound that many people are experiencing impaired hearing challenge on daily basis and it is traceable to high pitched noise and shouting, by using powerful public address system that blares the ear. Indeed, noise pollution has been identified as the source of hearing impairment, sleeplessness, stress, high blood pressure and other cardiovascular problems and nervous disorders (Miller, 2020).

Environmental pollution is also caused by religious festivals. Despite Islam’s emphasis on modesty in everything, Muslims continue to celebrate festivals in lavish and extravagant ways. Abdur-Raheem (2010), described a scenario using the Islamic annual Mawlid Nabiyy celebration. He observed that the religious festival, causes traffic congestion and hardships to people. During this festival, the environment is totally disrupted to the detriment of human beings.

The grazing lifestyle of some Moslems is another area of environmental hazard caused by supposedly religious group. The current farmer-herder clashes, insecurity and reckless rapes recorded especially within Nigeria were carried out by Moslems who insist that they must graze anywhere they see grasses.

It has become increasingly clearer that beyond scientific pollution, the major contributory agent of ecocide and environmental degradation, is religion and unfortunately the ripple effects are gradual, progressive and devastating on the general environment and global economic sphere.

Towards the Restoration of the African Ecosystem: The Role of Religion

The African environment is in danger, and if decisive action is not taken immediately, the implications will be dire (**Dorsouma, 2024**). The restoration of the African ecosystem is an effort to help recover degraded ecosystems and conserve intact ones. The economic, social and environmental value of the African ecosystem have come to the forefront of the collective consciousness, thus warranting a deep desire to its restoration for the wellbeing of the African people.

Writing on how African religious taboos can help in the restoration of the ecosystem, Kanu (2023), notes that African taboos are principally known as the guardians of the environment. They are described so because they control and guide the people on how to relate with their environment. These taboos include but not limited to: prohibiting hunting in particular forests; felling trees, like the Iroko tree; killing animals like owls, vultures, or snakes; hunting on specific market days; fishing on specific market days; visiting bodies of water on specific market days;

taking more than one needs from nature; washing clothes inside a stream; bush burning; and urinating or defecating into bodies of water. The primary principle that underlies the African taboos' prohibitions regarding the environment is justice. This is based on the understanding that the environment ought to be given the respect that it deserves. It should be treated not as a voiceless aspect of nature, but as one that inhabits great spirits (Kanu, 2023).

Nana (2016), affirmed that, "all over Africa, sacred grooves are found." Discussing the importance of grooves in African ecosystem and the importance of protecting them, Gbenda (2010) asserts "that originally, sacred grooves were based on religious and cultural beliefs, but they have since made significant contributions to the protection of wild life and other biological resources." Some of the sacred grooves serve as water sheds for catchment areas where they protect sources of drinking water.

In recent times, Christian theologians, ethicists and environmentalists have seen the need for the formulation of a Bible based theology that is ecological and environmentally friendly. This is premised on the damage human activities have inflicted on the environment and the invitation to Christianity to join the force for the reduction of the effects of environmental issues experienced in Africa (Udo & Olusakin, 2018).

The foregoing shows theologians' and church's concern to formulate an appropriate Christian outlook to nature. It is in formulating a Bible based eco-friendly theology of the environment that Christianity can contribute its quota to the current attempts to ameliorate ecological crisis. It is important to note

that stewardship of God's creation and environmental cum ecological conditions are the central concerns of the Biblical message (Gnanakan, 1999, p.7).

Ethics in Islam seeks to achieve and establish the wellbeing and ensure the welfare of the entire Creation. This ethic is increasingly making its way into the actions and daily life of Muslims, in the building of mosques, in the discharge of charity, in the way that food is being produced. Thus encouraging the much needed efforts in this era of climate and environmental breakdown (Moustapha and Najma, 2022).

Tawhīd is often put forward as the key principle underlying the green ethic of Islam. This principle, which centres upon the Oneness of the Creator. This Oneness infuses the entire environmental worldview of Islam with the recognition that nature originates from Him, is purposive, and functions in accordance with His will (Khalid, 2022).

Islam advocates for the restoration of nature by acknowledging that humans have only been appointed as trustees on earth by Allah, and as such should hold it in trust, and be answerable for the just and responsible discharge of this trusteeship in accordance with Divine Laws. This trusteeship, or *khilāfah* is further shaped by the belief that humans, in their servant-hood, are accountable for all their actions. True *khilāfah* (stewardship) is thus not about dominion, mastery or control over any part of creation, but is centred on responsible trusteeship, cherishing and carrying out the capabilities entrusted to human beings with humility and obedience to the laws of the Creator in all human endeavours (Moustapha and Najma, 2022). Doing these, human

environment will be at the verge of restoration in the teachings and views of Islam.

Conclusion

The place of religion on African environment has been examined in this work. The religious traditions, beliefs and practices of African Traditional Religion, Christianity and Islam have contributed immensely in the preservation of African environment and the shaping of human values and behaviours towards the environment. However, with the infiltration of divergent views, teachings and interpretations of the religious tenets, these same religions have become agents of environmental crisis and degradation experienced in Africa. Today, the African environment is steadily becoming uninhabitable due to the activities of man, a religious being. The destruction of environment for massive structures, noise and air pollution, the desecration of sacred objects, cutting of trees, hunting, fishing, bush burning and defacing of the environment by cattle owners and the general destruction of human live and property, are all the activities of a religious people on the environment. Nature is part of the created order and is related to man, hence all hands should be on deck to care for it. The work recommends that the ecosystem should not be disrupted, plundered, exploited or used for one's selfish end, but for the good of all. All religious leaders have a role in educating their adherents on how to treat the environment for the good of all.

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