

## Review Article

## Environmental Sustainability and Church Ethical Responsibility

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**Abstract:** Environmental problem is a moral issue which is threatening the existence of human on earth at this contemporary time. Human is to promote peaceful co-existence of all that is consisting in the environment. Ironically, it is the activities of humans that generate environmental crises. Investigations into the current situation of the physical portion of the earth or the environment indicate that globally, alarming news of environmental problems that destroy lives and properties abound. Obviously, the Bible reveals that God's intention for his creations include that they might dwell in the beautiful and good environment where God has placed them while human is in turn responsible for the care of the environment so the latter could sustain the other living creations and itself remained sustained. Various intervention groups including religious and indigenous depict that the church cannot keep mute on the issue of environmental sustainability. God's representative on earth, the Church should be not only care giver to the environment but also advocate of the gospel of environmental sustainability. The environment should be kept clean for healthy living of residents to continue so God would be happy with the habitants, remain as their God by dwelling in their midst and for the habitants to continue to dwell in safety and be God's people.

**Keywords:** Environmental, Church, Ethics, Sustainability, and Responsibility.

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### INTRODUCTION

Discussions on the environment have remained major concern of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century of which the church is not left out. Whether political, economic or socially based, issues on the environment must not be void of spiritual inclinations. This implies that genuine concern of the church for the environment must be informed by the word of God having its root from the creation story. "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth" (Gen. 1.1). Obviously the human who is made in God's image and saddled with the responsibility of caring and tending the God given environment appears to have performed below expectation in this regard. The abuse of the environment through exploitation, overuse and lack of conservations of the various resources has made the work of the environmental sustainability challenging,<sup>1</sup> and unless the church responds to her responsibility the situation may continue to degenerate. In this paper, the environment refers to the portion of the planet, earth which is habitat to both living and non-living creations to which the human is responsible to give care and ensure continuous survival. Sustainability is used as to keep in existence or to maintain. Thus environmental sustainability connotes continual enjoyment of resources

of the earth environment by all inhabitants through the effort of the church to curb factors that may prevent such. The role of the human at the creation is to keep the environment or the earth portion (Gen 2:15) to ensure its sustainability. The environment to which God put the human is that of beauty, goodness and abundance of resources. The wonderfully intricate and beautiful environment and all inhabitants in it including living creatures and nonliving, land, air, water supporting one another in an incredibly complex manner are threatened by various human activities such as excessive consumption of resources and explosive human population. The various process of environmental degradation feed on one another jeopardizing efforts to achieve a sustainable environment. In this situation, the church which is God's chosen generation through the redemptive act of Christ has a duty to respond appropriately in the bid to making the environment sustainable. Continuous damage to the environment eventually will affect humanity through increased conflict over scarce resources, decline in food security, and greater vulnerability to diseases.

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### **Contemporary Realities and Causes of Environmental Crises**

The genesis of the present environmental crisis is in part an ethics of the dominant society viewed as practical and anthropocentric. "It is considered that all other creations are to be at the service of human beings, which can use them as they please in accordance with their desires and excesses."<sup>2</sup> The twenty first century is witnessing environmental catastrophe for every living thing, especially, the weaker living things which are the first to go extinct in the struggle for survival in the midst of crisis. Environmental crisis is to each region or locality conveyed in a variety of forms a basis for which John Nash views it as a hydra-headed monster.<sup>3</sup> By implication environmental crises are not just scientific, technical, political or sociological but are also fundamentally moral because though they are human made, yet do not only affect human but perhaps more severely other creation in the earth environment. There are numerous factors responsible for environmental crises, however just a few could be enumerated here

### **Technological Advancement or Development**

The agitation of the society for technological advancement has brought about imbalance on earth system. Technology in the developing nations though still at a local level is found much destructive and at a polluting stage. It brings about systemic exploitation of natural resources, soil poisoning, deforestation, atmospheric contamination, chemicals and foods poisoning to mention a few.<sup>4</sup> In many of the developed countries like Nigeria for instance, most people like to drive their own cars. If everyone is to drive as many cars as there are people, there would be as much toxic emissions from cars resulting in toxic pollutions which to humanity may cause suffocations.<sup>5</sup> In developed nations where technology is highly advanced, the need for more energy to power the various technological developments continue to arise. The economic growth models have created imbalances between different segments in the society allowing for massive exploitations of the rural and natural environment for the benefit of the dominant classes. Much of the profit oriented innovations are found to enhance ecological imbalances in the society.<sup>6</sup> Obviously in vogue is the act of developed nations with high technology to send obsolete technology to the developing ones at high cost of royalties. Yet much of this technology is not environmentally friendly. In Nigeria, the crave for electrical plants is high because importation of these is economically favorable to a few of the general populace to meet temporary needs for electricity supply but leaves a long term problem of continually wanting places to dump the carcasses of these plants when they are no longer useable.

Nuclear power technology has its own contribution to environmental problems. The experiences of gas leakages in Bhopal (India), Chernobyl (former USSR), the Three Miles Island (USA) and

Fukushima (Japan) in 2011 caused by earth quake and Tsunamis subjected the environment to serious threats of leakage of radioactive substances into air resulting into contamination of food, water and air. The aftermath of which pose serious health hazards on human and all living creatures. While these developed nations were able to address the situation as quickly as they could, developing nations do not have such rescue operations for their citizenry neither could they avoid the spillover of the problems in their own environment. Hence, there is the need to focus on how to avoid creating risky technologies such as Nuclear power technology. Genetic engineering is another technological development that is at the detriment of environmental sustainability, first that technology requires fallible human beings who are prone to error. For example a skilled staff can engineer transgenic animals by introducing foreign characteristics into the genotype of a creature to produce particular trait that an animal would not otherwise have.<sup>7</sup> The problem is that such creations distort natural order and process of all other creatures. In genetic engineering technology, bacteria produced by means of genetic engineering cannot be retrieved once they are let loose. This can have serious effect and heavy burden on the ecosystem as it severely affect the environment against natural sustainability.

### **Economic Development**

All societies have been held hostage to a myth that relates to economic progress of un-interrupted and unlimited growth. Countries must show higher rates in the productions of goods and services every year.<sup>8</sup> This is the average to size if a country is developed or under developed or is moving regressively. For instance, overuse of fertilizers is turning the farmlands into deserts and killing the fish in seas and rivers. This is a systemic assault that has been raised on wealth in the soil, the subsoil, the air, the sea and the outer atmosphere. The relationship between economic exploitation and environmental degradation is openly obvious in deforestation. Massive destruction of forest is due to materialism and greed on the part of human, when trees are felled for lumber, charcoal and construction of different kinds atmospheric changes are the results.<sup>9</sup> Forest is left bare and unable to prevent wind breaks. As a result of this, the poor are driven out of their habitat for the sake of economic development. The economic resources of the poor people are harshly plundered under the disguise of development. In Brazil, ecological crime was sanctioned by their government, as fifty two million acres of land were offered to business people, and the resulting farm projects led to the clearing of 5.12% of the total area of the Brazilian Amazon.<sup>10</sup> In India a massive fish epidemics caused by the pollution of water from pesticides has led to refusal of people to buy fish, making the fishermen jobless. This is similar to the Niger Delta oil spillage experience in Nigeria which has subjected many farmers and fishermen to abject poverty. According to Miglore, the damage done to the environment is already severe and some are irreversible,

hardly a day goes without a report of oil spill, chemical leakage from dump site, increase in rain acidity and the reckless pollution of streams, fields and forest<sup>11</sup> in the name of economic development which is never evenly distributed.

### Religious Development

The inability to balance or blend harmoniously the spiritual dimension and the natural environment is a regrettable development in the teaching and doing theology in the contemporary world. Traditions that see things as having basic connectedness with the creator as well as with the whole of the universe are highly applauded by virtually all religion of the world. Human greed toward the natural environment is characteristics of the modern era and found precisely in most monotheistic religion such as the Christian tradition and their scriptures. The teachings that human beings were created in the image of God and that God commanded human to have dominion over all other creations have been accused of giving the Western civilization the religious justification for treating or exploiting the natural environment in a ruthless and brutal manner. Gen 1: 26 says “let us make human in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule or have dominion over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move on the ground.” The human factor of the state of the environment is certified in the name of fulfilling the divine mandate of dominion-ship. Furthermore, the belief in the fall of humanity reflects that the fall doctrine refers to the belief that the whole universe has fallen under the power of the devil due to the original sin introduced by the human being.<sup>12</sup> The indication of this is that the sacredness of the universe is lost to the corrupt, sinful harvest of demons. The demonization of nature because of the fall has led people to have little appreciations for the natural world. Christianity, viewed as the Western religion of modern times is perceived to encourage the way for secularization of nature. For instance Abraham says,

*Churches in India have been heavily influenced by Western missionaries, with the result that, at least among protestant, little thought has been given to linking faith with ecology. Indeed, we are inclined to view with suspicion any talk of nature in theology. Occasionally churches have adopted symbols and customs from our natural environment, but seldom have these been integrated into mainstream thinking and practice.*<sup>13</sup>

### Towards Environmental Sustainability

Environmental sustainability is the idea of preserving the earth which houses humans and other creatures from degradation for as long as the earth exists. The understanding that the earth resources are limited and must serve the increasing population of all especially human is a great concern. Kolawole has rightly observed that if the earth resources are not maintained properly there will be a serious threat to the survival of the whole creations on the surface of the earth.<sup>14</sup> Awareness

campaigns from different areas of life, groups launching increasing campaigns against environmental crisis are becoming more pronounced because the effects of environmental crises are felt on both human and other creatures. The purpose of the awareness exercise is to create mobilization of human in taking steps to reduce the causes of environmental crisis. Environmental crisis is not a single separate problem but it is a massive variety of intertwined problems that is adversely affecting humans and every living thing of which earth sustainability is essentials. Faniran quoting Brodhang says that;

*Sustainable development is the setting within which social and economic development can find common ground with the limits imposed by the environment. This does not mean that what most people understand today by sustainable development will solve the problem, but does mean that the mental attitude of searching for solutions is an essential prerequisite .... The task is to change people's perception of the world and their vision of what constitutes human progress.*<sup>15</sup>

### Indigenous Methods on Environment Sustainability

The acceptance of the existence of the mythical world provides and guided the indigenous people on their relationship with the environment. The myths on how the earth or the environment came to be are woven with such deep consciousness of their spiritual responsibility to mother earth. Mythical ideas of the indigenous people were conceived and projected to ensure that the deities are not provoked by the people's abuses of the deities bounties which are the earth resources particularly the land. The deities represent not so much entities focused toward the outside of but powerful centers on human life and nature with which human must coexist and which they confront, internalize, heed and follow.<sup>16</sup> The experience of interconnectedness and integration with nature is part of indigenous religion of Africa, Asia and Near East and in all ancient cultures which are centered on mythical sacredness or the religious and spiritual environment.<sup>17</sup> The sacredness and conscious reverence accorded to the environment are translated into symbolic languages evident in taboos and abominations. The concepts of spirit in some of the sacred places have been destroyed to civilization, development or advancement. The contemporary world view has pronounced that many of the sacred places possess evil spirit and must be lost. Many ancient trees that serve as wind breakers have been destroyed in the cities and towns because constructions have to take place. With this development, environmental degradation has become major threat facing the earth. In order to prevent the eminent extinction of created beings the indigenous religions have various ways by which they manage their environment for their sustainable development and living. Sacred grooves, sacred rivers and trees were means adopted for environmental protection and sustainability. Ogungbemi, buttresses on how indigenous Africans regarded nature with awe:

*In our traditional relationship with nature, men and women recognize the importance of water, land and air management. To our traditional communities the ethics of not taking more than you need from nature is a moral code. Perhaps these explain why earth forest, rivers, and the other natural objects are traditionally believed to be both natural and divine. The philosophy behind this belief may not necessarily be religious, but a natural means by which the human environment can be preserved. The ethics of care is essential to traditional understanding of environment protection and conservation.*<sup>18</sup>

This shows that the indigenous people and their environment relatedly had peaceful co-existence. The indigenous environmental ethics is thus a stable foundation of instructions and attitudes of responsibility embedded both in the indigenous natural and spiritual life. The practice of religion is best characterized by the search for the divine which assumes the cultural dictate of the environment that one is conditioned. Consequently, the religiosity or spirituality of the indigenous is evident in their cultural beliefs portrayed in superstitions and practices. However, some of these acts were labeled as paganism, fetishism, idolatry and superstitions in contrast to the reality of their deeply religious experiences and communion with the divine.<sup>19</sup> The indigenous religious practice provides understanding and throws light into solving or reducing the environmental problems.

### **Biblical Teaching on Sustainable Environment**

The concept of environmental care or sustainability has gained much attention since the challenge of Lynn White that care of our environment is neglected by Christianity. Prior to such challenges discussions about environmental issue were viewed as fringe or as a New Age ideology. However, since the comment of Lynn White on human dominion ship<sup>20</sup> expressed in his writing "The Historical Root of our Ecological Crisis," biblical scholarship have examine critically the concept of dominion-ship. In simple and positive term dominion has been interpreted in various forms including stewardship. Reading the Bible from environmental eyes reveals that the Bible is very much alive in dealing with and addressing of environmental issues. According to Samitre quoting Lampe that the Hebrew writers are in a sense wholly anthropocentric thus, having human stand at the Centre of the whole picture. He explains further that "the" rest of the animate and inanimate world is seen as a kind of backcloth for drama of human history.<sup>21</sup> Nonetheless, the Bible affirms and expresses the goodness of creation, affirming value to all creations. There are some Bible passages that support the goodness of creations and what the inter-relationship must be between human and the rest of creation. For instance Psalm 8 and Psalm 104 indicate God's activeness in nature and human's intimate involvement in every aspect of natural order.

The Bible categorically affirms that the earth is God's creation and teaches about the strategy or guidelines on sustainability of the earth. According to Kolawole, there are various ways through which sustainability of the earth may be accomplished for humans to recognize the sacredness of the earth. However, the mechanistic view of the universe as an object to be studied, explored and used has created a distorted understanding of the world.<sup>22</sup> Understanding has negatively prevent human appreciating the earth as God's special creation which is dear and sacred. The sacredness of the earth means that human need to understand the divine origin and treat the earth in awe, adoration and understanding not just for the sake of the earth but also and more for the glory of God. The human needed to appreciate the nature and prevent the destruction of it through various forms. The emphasis must be placed on tending and caring for the earth to glorify God and sustain the earth and all in it.<sup>23</sup> Another biblical approach cited by Kolawole to sustain our environment is by living in obedience to God's injunction. This would allow human to enjoy their sojourn on earth through optimum use of the earth resources. God gave specific regulations and injunctions in the Bible including that human beings are free to eat from any tree in the Garden of Eden but not of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. When they eat it they will surely die (Gen. 2:16-17). God further gave another instruction on forest conservation in Deuteronomy 20: 19-20 that, trees should not be destroyed because their fruits can be eaten but any trees that do not bear fruits must be cut down.<sup>24</sup> In the biblical plan for a sustainable environment, the Sabbath day and the year of Jubilee are to be strictly observed as in the fourth commandment, "remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy" (Ex.20:8). The command on Jubilee and Sabbath are given for the conservation and preservation of land and natural resources.

There are several biblical texts relating to God's plan for sustainability of the earth and care for the environment.

1. Genesis 1:12; 8:19-10b reveals as creator of all things in such an order to maintain biodiversity.
2. Deuteronomy 22:6-8 shows the protection of birds
3. Deuteronomy 14- enumerates animals the Israelites were prohibited from eating and the kinds they could eat. This means maintaining appropriate population of animals.
4. Proverb 24:30-31- Gives suggestions for providing diligence farming management.
5. Isaiah 5:2 encourages farm husbandry and crop care techniques.
6. Exodus 23: 4-5- emphasize concern and care for animals
7. Deuteronomy 22: 9- suggests crop specialization in farming.
8. Leviticus 11:32, 34- shows water pollution consisting of health hazard.

9. 2 Kings 2:19-22- shows water is therapeutic and necessary to be pure.

These are indications that the Bible provides ways by which God's creation would be sustained. God the Planner of the environment is sustainability conscious and has given mandate for the care and protection of same to human.

### **Church Responsibility for Sustainable Environment**

The need to salvage the environment from destructions and for a renewal of human religious or spiritual traditions in relation to the integral functioning of the bio-systems of the environment is paramount. There is need to move from a spirituality of alienation from the spiritual world to a spirituality of intimacy with the natural world.<sup>25</sup> The Church, especially in Africa needs to intensify and broaden effort to the challenge of environmental crisis from the biblical perspective of environmental sustainability. All Church responses to environmental crisis should be developed in the light of commitment to care, preserve and sustain the earth. The church of Christ has to be concerned about these and wake up to what Faniran called "Divine injunction and God given stewardship responsibility,"<sup>26</sup> all of which stress that it is time to allow God and the scriptures into the center of our transformation in this important dynamic church assignment of fulfilling the mission of God on earth.<sup>27</sup> Emphasizing the roles of Christian leaders in particular, Gananakan insists that as spiritual and administrative heads of the church, Pastors "must motivate the congregation to demonstrate the right attitude toward the care of creation"<sup>28</sup> through the following ways-

1. **Christian Education:** The churches' action or response to the environmental revolution is to provide access to what God is saying to the church through what is happening to the natural world. There is need to have a forum of Christian Education that will build environmental ethics. Thoughtful concern for the creation across the congregation from the children to the adult must have a focus consistent with the mission of the denomination.<sup>29</sup> Discipleship training is a unique part of the church educational ministry. It should focus on equipping God's people for the work of Christian service to sustain our environment. A call for a renewed relationship with our environment should be encouraged in Bible studies, prayer meetings and worship life of the church. The overall goal of training programs would be to gain biblical understanding of Christian roles in sustaining our God given environment.
2. **Secular Education Promoting Environmental Sustainability:** the family, church, school and institutions are the educational agencies that could work together to combat environmental problems and get people adequately saturated in environmental education. The Nigerian educational system in the mid/ late 20<sup>th</sup> century had school

subjects such as nature study and geography included in the curriculum right from the primary school level providing valuable information to pupil at an early stage of education. Courses like these should form part of educational curriculum at all levels to accommodate design, planning and management of resources in the environment. The emphasis on environmental education should also extend and be incorporated in Bible schools or seminaries. The church in Nigeria has always included secular education in its mission program. Most churches have schools run by the denomination. This could be utilized to teach subjects and courses on environmental sustainability.

3. **Development of Appropriate Theologies:** The search for answer to the present environmental crisis has become a major concern of people from different fields. According to Osuigwe, politicians, scientist, and environmentalist among others have become involved in the search for solutions to environmental crises.<sup>30</sup> (Osuigwe 103). Christian theologians need to be more involved in sustainable environmental advocacy. Although there are some Christian related organizations such as the Sacred Earth Ministry who advocate and promote social, scientific and theological awakening of people for better understanding of human and other creature's interrelatedness, more of these have to come up. The Sacred Earth Ministry is involved from the local grass root levels to re-address the negative concept many people have had about the sacredness of the creation through teaching, conferences, publications etc. Such organizations should be encouraged and similar ones should be developed.
4. **General Moderation and Environmental Course:** Christian should join in the discipline of reducing the present rate of consumption of earth resources. Capitalism and consumerism are two problems of the world today. The Christian ought to be prudent, temperate and moderate in terms of family size, food consumption and waste of energy or power, use of water and just any other natural resources that is around them. Moderation goes as far as reducing the number of cars in one's garage however rich one is.<sup>31</sup> The environmental crisis demand explanations that are accurate, radical, and persuasive, just as an illness requires that the causes be identified, for it is only by attacking the causes –not the symptoms that the patient can be cured.<sup>32</sup> The same is true of the environment if it must be sustained. There is a need for specialist on environmental issues even in the church to begin to diagnose the problem with environment and prescribe useful solutions that can save our world<sup>33</sup> from Christian perspectives. The solution for sustainability would come from the environment itself when the church rises to her responsibility. This would include a reconsider action of quest for use of technologies that are detrimental to environmental sustainability.

## CONCLUSION

The environment is God's blessing to humanity. The Bible establishes that God entrusted to human the responsibility to care for and sustain the environment. God demonstrated this through his provision of favorable bio-diversified environment for humankind consisting both nonliving things; land, water, air and living things; plants, animals and humans to maintain their distinctive characteristics. Therefore, it is the responsibility of every Christian to live in the expectation of God by keeping the environment clean tidy and conductive. The harmony between the forces of nature has been destroyed, by so many factors all of which are human made. Environmental sustainability need to be taken up as a common cause of people of all faith, to protect creation's

common home. The Church must pioneer and take the lead to mobilize the people of all religions into living responsible lives in care of our environment. The church must arise to the task of earth ethics. Sustaining the God-made and given earth requires orientation and habits of ecological sustainability. The church must know that as an important part of creation, she is entrusted with the stewardship of this little but significant fragment of creation called earth, our environment.<sup>34</sup> If the purpose of the church is to promote harmonious co-existence of all creation, then, this divine role expected of the church for sustainability of the earth becomes imperative.

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