



RELIGION, CULTURE AND THE ENVIRONMENT IN AFRICA

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Introduction

The increasing level of environmental degradation, the frequent and intense natural disasters, pollution, global health challenges, and the spiralling effects of almost irreversible climate change have convinced many that the survival of humankind, cultures and the earth is at risk. Many people globally continue to live in poverty and are denied a life of dignity, and Africa records the highest data in all. Unemployment, particularly among the youth, has remained a major concern for policymakers across Africa. There are other challenges, which include spiralling conflict, violent extremism, terrorism, forced displacement of people due to herders/farmers clashes, the depletion of the lake Chad in Nigeria have reversed much the little development progress made in recent decades in Africa. There is no doubt that the social, economic and political upheavals have also accelerated the trend of environmental degradation in Africa.

The paper aims to interrogate the intersection of religion, culture and the environment in Africa. What roles are religion and culture playing or have they played, for environmental sustainability, and what roles have they played or are playing in the environmental crises of the continent? The interrogation will help to provide a religious and African perspective to the five critical areas identified in the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

1. How do we ensure that all human beings can fulfil their potential?
2. How do we articulate principles for everyone to respect and safeguard our common home?
3. What are the eco-piety or ecotheology strategies needed for all human beings to enjoy the fruits of economic, social and technological progress and live productive and fulfilling lives?
4. How do we mitigate the climate change challenges that have triggered crises and make a living peacefully and harmoniously without fear and violence?
5. As scholars of religions, the conference should help us to articulate an effective partnership for Sustainable Development. (Source: Preamble of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development)

In order to achieve ecologically sustainable societies, fundamental social and cultural transformations, which religion has the potential to foster in the required paradigm shifts in mindsets, behaviour and policy. There is no doubt that there is increasing engagement with questions of environment, climate change and ecological sustainability in our societies. It can be safely argued that the environmental crisis is both a spiritual and moral crisis and the

resolution of the crisis lies on radical change in the ways industrial capitalist and consumerist societies, in particular, relate to nature, which must involve fundamental changes in world views, attitudes, values, behaviours and institutions in respect of humans to the environment in more sustainable ways.

The Nature of Environmental Crisis

There is almost unanimity among scholars, apart from the few who belong to the denial group, that there is an alarming environmental crisis in the world, and the environmental crisis provides us with at least the following eight areas of acute concern:

- 1) Global climate/atmospheric change, which involves burning fossil fuels, releasing methane into the atmosphere, and destroying the rainforest, which threaten humankind with an unprecedentedly fast global warming.
- 2) Toxic wastes, which are chemical, heavy metal, biological, and nuclear wastes, have accumulated in staggering quantities.
- 3) Loss of land from overuse of chemical agriculture and the destruction of forests, contributing to the loss of land, which threatens the production of food.
- 4) Loss of species, which has become a “crisis of biodiversity” due to the decimation of a variety of habitats, as well as the killing of animals for sport, use, or food
- 5) Loss of wilderness due to serious human interference and intrusion into the ecosystems
- 6) Devastation of indigenous peoples whose environment are poisoned, they lose their land, culture and lives.
- 7) The unsustainable patterns and quantities of human consumption are depleting natural resources.
- 8) Genetic engineering which is promising miracle cures for everything from food shortages to inherited diseases (Roger S. Gottlieb, 2004:6-8).

The United Nations Population Fund report, *The State of the World Population 2009*, equally suggested that human practices and behaviour are central to both how the environmental crisis has come about and concluded also that human actions are needed to confront the monster. The behaviour and practices in question range from “what we consume, the types of energy we produce and use” to “whether we live in a city or on farm, whether we live in a rich or poor country, whether we are young or old, what we eat, and even the extent to which we enjoy equal rights and opportunities (Edward P. Antonio 2012: 142).

It is therefore apposite to submit that an intellectual discussion on the intersection of religion, culture and the environment underscores the fact that the Earth matter and as religious scholars we should not settle for less. All efforts must be made for the greening of religion in the ecosystem.



Religion, Culture and Environment in Africa

African conceptual frameworks demonstrate a deeply interconnected relationship between religion, culture, and environment, where these domains are viewed as inseparable components of a sacred whole rather than distinct categories. The evidence shows strong convergence across multiple studies. J. Amanze et al. (2024) demonstrates that African traditional religions treat the environment as sacrosanct, viewing spiritual and secular worlds as “two sides of the same coin endowed with divine power.” B. O. Igboin et al. (2012) confirm that in African belief systems, “the cosmos is conceived as a whole and subsumed under God, the creator.” Essien D. Essien et al. (2015) provide evidence that African culture contains “an in-built mechanism to protect human interactions with nature and environment.” It is largely true that religion is considered in many human societies and particularly in Africa, as the domain of the sacred.

Igboin (2022:19) captures the state of the environment in Africa thus: The sacrality of nature and the environment has been demeaned so practically that one questions whether the purposiveness of creation still holds sway. Environmental degradation, or rather, man’s de-creation of divine creation, is a global problem, which is threatening the continued existence of life, including humans. The case of the Niger Delta region in Nigeria is quintessential. No responsible person or government will feign ignorance of the deleterious consequences of environmental pollution that pervades that region. It is a stark reality that the incessant restiveness in that region is a characterization of the neglect of the consequences of environmental exploitation and degradation.

Understanding Religion, Culture and the Environment

Religion is the system of belief, ritual, institutional life, spiritual aspiration, and ethical orientation which are premised on an understanding of human beings as other or more than simply their purely social or physical identities and with teachings that people are essentially connected to a Supreme Being whose authority is distinct from worldly powers. Religious attitudes in no small measure turn on a sense of “ultimate significance as they seek to orient us to that which is of compelling importance beyond or within our day-to-day concerns (Gottlieb 2004:8).

Religions provide norms of conduct for the familiar interpersonal settings of family, community, and world. Religious moral teachings presuppose a spiritual foundation and are meant to root our everyday behaviour in a spiritual truth about who we really are. Religions also provide rituals—acts of prayer, meditation, collective contrition, or celebration—to awaken and reinforce a personal and communal sense of our connections to the Ultimate Truth(s). These practices aim to cultivate an impassioned clarity of vision in which the world and the self are “charged with the sacred.” The goal of this paper is to interrogate how religion shaped our understanding of and our conduct towards the environment and how the environmental crisis challenged and transformed modern theology and spiritual practice.

Religion signified the scrupulous observance of pious duties towards a Superior Being, in line with ancestral traditions. This underscores religion as fundamentally involving a relationship between humans and a higher power or deity. Religion addresses ultimate questions about human existence, offering solutions to why we fail or succeed, and why we die. Religion dictates behaviours and acceptable ways of thinking within a culture, thereby shaping societal norms and values. This explains why it can be safely said that religion migrates and

liberates, producing both change and continuity in its interaction with culture. Religion in Africa is not merely a set of beliefs but a lived experience that permeates every aspect of life. It shapes moral values, social norms, and community structures. The religious practices of Africans are a testament to their worldview, one that sees the divine as intricately involved in the affairs of daily life.

Religion is often viewed as a subset of 'culture', that is, the two terms are often used interchangeably. At the same time, it is possible to view religion and culture as clearly distinct, perhaps even opposed to each other. According to Ifeanyi (2024:2), religion, as a non-material facet of culture, operates as a central institution characterized by rituals, beliefs, and communal practices, addressing existential questions concerning life, death, and purpose. Conversely, culture provides the contextual framework within which religious beliefs and practices develop and are expressed, reflecting the values, norms, and traditions of a particular society. Ifeanyi submitted that in African societies, the intertwining of religion and culture is particularly evident, where traditional beliefs coexist alongside the influence of Christianity and Islam. This cultural fusion exemplifies the adaptability and resilience of African cultures, wherein religion serves as a conduit for cultural continuity and adaptation (Ifeanyi,2).

Religion operates as a social institution characterized by rituals, sacredness, and persistence, addressing ultimate questions of human existence, such as success, failure, and death and in the same vein, different cultures create distinct religious systems, yet all share a fundamental belief in the supernatural. This explains why understanding any religion necessitates an understanding of the culture in which it developed. In its interaction with culture, religion plays a role in purifying, preserving, and promoting cultural norms and values. This dynamic is evident in African societies where religion is a cornerstone of cultural identity. Scholars of African religions like Mbiti (1969) articulate that, the African's deep religiosity permeates all aspects of life, making religion a vital promoter of culture (Ifeanyi,4).

The Concept of Culture

The concept of culture, first defined by Edward B. Tylor in "Primitive Culture" (1871) and reprinted in 1958, encompasses "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs, or any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society." Hiebert (2006: 374) defines culture as "the more or less integrated systems of beliefs, feelings and values, and their associated symbols, patterns of behaviour and products shared by a group of people". Zunini (1969: 145) says, "...no culture has appeared or developed except together with religion." In line with this assertion Iwe (1992: 146) affirms that culture is inseparable from religion and Iwe (1992: 146) adds, "...consideration of religion as a culture 'product' is therefore only comprehensible in the sense that every culture possesses a religious sense. But this does not mean that culture and religion are one and the same thing." (Udoh 2017).

Culture embraces a wide range of human phenomena, material achievements, norms, beliefs, feelings, manners, and morals. It is the patterned way of life shared by a particular group of people who claim a common origin or descent. Bello (1991:189) describes culture as "the totality of the way of life evolved by a people in their attempts to meet the challenge of living in their environment, which gives order and meaning to their social, political, economic, aesthetic, and religious norms, thus distinguishing a people from their neighbours." Culture serves to distinguish a people from others. Aziza (2001:31) asserts that culture includes



everything that makes a group distinct, such as greeting habits, dressing, social norms, taboos, food, songs, dance patterns, rites of passage, traditional occupations, and philosophical beliefs. Culture is passed from generation to generation through socialization and this explains while in traditional society, culture is "caught" rather than taught, as children observe, mimic, and participate in cultural activities.

Culture is dynamic and constantly changing through contact with and absorption of others, as culture that remains static and resistant to change would not be a living culture. This is because people change their social patterns, beliefs, values, and tools and hence culture adjusts in response to internal and external influences.

What is the environment?

Environment is understood as humankind and his surrounding, including the life support provided by the air, water, land, animals and the entire ecosystem of which humankind is but a part. In other words, the environment is the sum total of all living and non-living factors which include air, water, soil, and organisms that surround and influence an entity. It acts as the surrounding conditions where organisms live, including natural, social, and built contexts. Juongwa (2023:114), quoting Efobi (1994), defined the term environment as:

total set of circumstances that surrounds an individual or a community, these circumstances are made up of physical conditions such as air, water, and climate and land form; the social and cultural aspects such as ethics, economics, aesthetic and such circumstances which affects the behaviour of individual or a community.

The environment is partly a human-made phenomenon but it also makes humans. Humans make the environment in light of their needs, wants, and desires. In Africa, strong connections exist between people, their livelihoods, and the natural surroundings which provide the context for those livelihoods. Humans survive by manipulating, exploiting, making use of, and mastering the environment, and the latter either succumbs to or resists human encroachment.

When the environment becomes less valuable or damaged, environmental degradation is said to have occurred. This degradation can occur naturally or through human actions, in which the earth natural resources like water, air, soil, are depleted. The activities of humankind due to technological advancement accentuated the 'conquer' of the environment. In the quest for dominion and control over the natural environment, humankind has destroyed the well-designed symbiotic relationship that was meant to exist between humans and other beings, living and non-living.

Some religious traditions like the African Traditional Religion hold a pantheistic view of nature and hold nature in high reverence while Judeo-Christian doctrine is believed to promote anthropocentrism based on the reading of the book of Genesis 1:26, "*Then God said let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that moves along the ground*".

This passage has been interpreted by people that humankind is commanded by God to subdue nature, to procreate, and to have dominion over all living things. This view was first postulated by Lynn White in his thesis published in 1967. This anthropocentric view of nature runs through the Judeo-Christian doctrine, places humans at the pinnacle of development and encourages humans to use nature as we see fit. The activities of humankind due to

technological advancement accentuated the 'conquest' of the environment. The quest for dominion and control over the natural environment, humankind has destroyed the well-designed symbiotic relationship that was meant to exist between humans and other beings, living and non-living.

Ecotheology or Ecospirituality in Environmental sustainability

The role of religion in environmental conservation and degradation gave birth to the term 'ecotheology' or 'ecospirituality' which simply addresses the nexus between religion and the environment. Ecotheology is characterised as a vigorous theological response to ecological concerns, aiming to construct or reconstruct religious commitments in light of environmental issues. Ecotheology is adaptive, addressing emerging issues and problems, and includes concerns such as climate change. It is distinguished by its focus on redefining religious teachings in response to ecological challenges. Ecotheology is an interdisciplinary religious movement that critiques ecological destruction from theological perspectives while simultaneously examining and reforming religious traditions' complicity in environmental crises to promote ecological responsibility and creation care. Ecotheology is defined as religious thought and action concerning the human-nature relationship that offers both a critique of ecological destruction from religious perspectives and a critique of religion's complicity in environmental crises. Ecotheology manifests across diverse religious contexts, including Christian traditions and Islamic frameworks, each developing distinctive emphases while sharing core commitments to creation care and ecological responsibility. The core theological principles include rejection of anthropocentrism, understanding humans as co-partners with God in creation, and reinterpretation of classical religious doctrines like sin in light of ecological concerns. Ecotheology addresses environmental issues, including climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution, and resource use. Within Islamic contexts, ecotheology is defined as constructive theology explaining the relationship between religion and nature in environmental contexts, providing guiding principles for environmental management based on the unity of creation, trustworthiness, and responsibility.

Religious Traditions and the Environment

The role of religion and the environment have been debated for some decades, and a core point of contention has been Lynn White's assertion, made in the 1960s, that the anthropocentric nature of Christianity laid the ground for the global environmental crisis. "Christianity," in his view, "not only established a dualism of man (sic) and nature but also insisted that it is God's will that man (sic) exploit nature for his (sic) proper ends" (Lynn White, 1967:1203). In 1967, Lynn White, Jr., claimed that the "historical roots of our ecological crisis" were the Abrahamic religions. White attributed a core responsibility for ecological destruction to Western society's anthropocentrism, which he considered to be shaped by its Judeo-Christian religious heritage and culture, despite increasing secularisation. Consequently, White argued that, as the root of the ecological crisis lies in religion, it can also play a significant role in remedying it: "More science and more technology are not going to get us out of the present ecological crisis until we find a new religion, or rethink our old one."

Scholars of religion and culture coming from the claims that religions can promote environmentally destructive attitudes and behaviours, are now asserting that religions and

cultures are becoming environmentally friendly. The major religions in Africa will now be considered in respect of their theology as it relates to the environment.

Islam, Human Stewardship and the Environment

Islam has a rich tradition of environmental ethics, emphasising the concept of '*khalifah*,' or stewardship. This principle dictates that humanity is responsible for the protection and preservation of the Earth. These teachings promote respect for nature, conservation of resources, and sustainable use of the environment, aligning directly with the goals of environmental sustainability. The concepts of '*halal*' and '*tayyib*,' which refer to permissible and wholesome products, are integral to Islamic dietary and consumption practices. These principles advocate for ethical and environmentally responsible choices in food and consumer goods, making them a natural fit within sustainable development efforts. In a nutshell, Islamic ecotheology grounds itself on maintaining the earth's natural balance (*mizan*), the human responsibility and stewardship (*Khilafah*), *Amanah* or trustworthiness and moral leadership and protecting the environment rather than exploiting it, responsible consumption and preservation for future generations and conservation, which advocates against wastefulness and destruction of natural resources (Makinde 2018).

The teaching of Islam is that God created humankind and placed him on Earth as a successor and God's authority therein. A creation that was perfect in its form and placed in an environment perfected for its inhabitation, created by a perfect Creator (Qur'an 40:64). The prohibition against causing pollution and harm to the environment in Islam is clear, in particular against the cutting of trees and vegetation unnecessarily and polluting the pathways. Muslims are strongly encouraged to contribute positively towards improving the environment by removing harm from around us and cultivating the lands for the benefit of all of creation. Prophet Muhammad(saw) said:

There is none amongst the Muslims who plants a tree or sows seeds, and then a bird, or a person or an animal eats from it, but is regarded as a charitable gift for him." (Bukhari)

Islam has seen the development of an eco-theology and engagement with the environment since the 1960s. A recent key point of reference for this movement is the "Islamic Declaration on Global Climate Change," which seeks to "create greater awareness for climate change and calls on decision-makers in the Muslim world and beyond ... to take sound actions." There is also a "rising field of Islamic environmentalism," and activism, which is represented in the emergence of the "Eco-Jihad" movement, as a global Muslim environmental initiative (Öhlmann and Swart 2022).

Christianity and Environmental Nurturing

According to Igboin, Christian attitude towards nature is two-dimensional, namely, that the world is "essentially for man's sole instrumental use; and another in which we have duties of stewardship to the natural world" (Igboin,25). The exploitative interpretation of the Genesis account has been viewed by scholars as the basis of the wanton destruction of the environment by humankind instead of nurturing it as stewards. There is a general notion that humankind has been given dominion over the earth with the capacity to subdue it, as humankind likes, but according to Watson and Sharpe as quoted by Igboin(2012:26):

Stewardship is today the generally accepted understanding within Christianity...of the role given to humanity in creation, in its relation with the rest of nature. This can be interpreted as co-worker with God in creation, but in no sense as co-equal. For it signifies that humanity's position is that it is tenant and not owner, that it holds the earth in trust for God and for the rest of creation, present and to come.

African Traditional Religion and Sacredness of the Environment

Traditional religions are, quite often, oriented towards the divine, or sacred, and permeate all facets of life. They focus on how the spiritual affects such mundane realities as agricultural cycles, birth, death and developments within the community (Okesson 2007, 40). In Africa, most people believe that religion is the domain of the sacred and that the numen, or supreme value, orients the rest of life. According to Olupona, there is no clear and fixed line of demarcation between the sacred and the profane:

African spirituality simply acknowledges that beliefs and practices touch on and inform every facet of human life, and therefore African religion cannot be separated from the everyday mundane ... It is a way of life and it cannot be separated from the public sphere. Religion informs everything in traditional African society including political art, marriage, health, diet, dress, economics and death. (Olupona 2015)

The concept of the sacred in African traditional societies stems from their perception of God and his role in creation. It is believed that since God is the Creator of the physical earth as we perceive it, the various aspects of the universe are permeated by the sense of the sacred. It is essentially a religious mindset that affects how African people view the world. The sacredness of nature is not imputed by human beings. It is intrinsic ontologically and derived from the Creator God (Amanze 2024: 451). Human life is inseparably bound to nature in the same way that human beings are defined by their connection to the totality of the community of life. There is an inseparable nature of reality in the African notion and kinship of all creatures. There is emphasis on the bond and interconnectedness between people and the environment. There is a sense in which God is perceived as their Supreme Being whose life force is imbued in all creatures, and that the vital force permeates and connects the interrelated web of dynamic and intricate relationships within the web of life (Amanze,451).

In Africa, the spiritual world and the physical world are not enemies but soulmates, and they complement one another, with the spiritual world determining the affairs of human beings here on earth and shaping their destiny in the spirit world. African spirituality as well as the African conceptions of the sacred, is integrative. They do not allow dichotomies. Secular and spiritual actions are two sides of the same coin. Thus politics, economics, the environment, social behaviour and the like are as spiritual as they are secular (Amanze 2006). This explains why the sacredness of nature is upheld by most traditional African societies.

The Nexus of Religion with the Environment

In his book *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, Eliade has expounded succinctly the phenomenon of the sacred which provides the glimpse on the nexus between religion and the environment. According to Eliade, the sacred is "the manifestation of something of a wholly different order, a reality that does not belong to our world, in objects that are an integral part of our natural 'profane' world" (Eliade 1957, 11). Eliade has



postulated that the sacred can, for example, be manifested in stones or trees. What is important to note is that such objects are not revered as they are but precisely because they are the manifestations or physical appearances of the sacred or the holy or the revelation of the sacred. In other words, the sacred or the holy shows itself in the object in which it is manifested. Eliade has intimated that for those who have a religious experience, all nature is capable of revealing itself as cosmic sacrality. The cosmos as a whole can become a hierophany or manifestation of the sacred (Eliade 1957, 12). Eliade puts it succinctly thus:

For a religious man, 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, the world is impregnated with sacredness ... The gods did more; they manifested the different modalities of the sacred in the very structure of the world and of cosmic phenomena ... The cosmos as a whole is an organism ... it simultaneously reveals the modalities of being and sacrality. (Eliade 1957, 116)

According to Eliade, for religious people, nature is never only natural but also religious. Religious people believe in the absolute reality of the sacred, which transcends this world but manifests itself in this world. They also believe that life has a sacred origin and that human existence realises all of its potentialities in proportion to its participation in the sacred proportion to its participation in the sacred reality (Eliade 1957, 202).

Taboos and Totems in Africa and Environmental Sustainability

In Africa, there are laws and order which govern the various communities who are the totality of the people consisting of human beings and their milieu, and hence the emphasis on the community in Africa, which conveys shared values of morality, humanness, compassion, understanding, empathy, sharing, hospitality, honesty and humility. It is an ethic and a process of interaction that draws into a complete whole all people in society, including their environment. One of the important institutions for environmental sustainability erected by communities in Africa is the preponderance of taboos.

Taboos are religious prohibitions instituted by society as instruments for moral motivation, guidance and objectivity in order to protect things that are considered sacred in society. Taboos are a kind of “social prohibition imposed by the leadership of a community regarding certain times, places, actions, events and people, especially for religious reasons and the well-being of the society.

In many African societies, there is the belief in the sacredness of totems, which establish an intimate connection between them and the animal, plant or any other natural element with a kinship group which it represents (Amanze P452). The totem has social, psychological and ritual underpinnings. From a social perspective, there is a connection and interrelatedness between the animal species, or vegetation or an inanimate object with a given group of the community. There is a belief in a relationship of kinship or affiliation as between the members of the group and a given animal, plant or object and from a ritual perspective there is obedience to the totem in terms of taboos about the consumption or use of the natural item (Amanze,453). The dominant presence of totems in many African societies is a reflection of the connection that exists between human beings and natural phenomena. In many parts of Africa, one finds totems either in the form of animals, plants or any other natural being which people believe to be ancestrally connected to their ethnic group, clan or family. The particular totem is seen as a tutelage spirit to which people attach deep feelings of respect and is part of



their very existence. It is strictly forbidden to kill or destroy a totem. These are cultural practices and beliefs that serve as environmental conservation mechanisms.

African Traditions and the Preservation of the Environment

In Africa, the environment is sacrosanct and treated with great respect, particularly in communities where traditional beliefs and practices prevail. The sacredness of the environment is based on the African people's fundamental belief that the spiritual and the secular worlds are two sides of the same coin, endowed with divine power and presence. As a result, the line of demarcation between the two worlds is blurred. They complement each other in the sense that each derives its meaning, significance and importance from the other. Since the natural world is imbued with the divine, it is considered an extension of the supernatural world. In the absence of written legal frameworks, the environment in indigenous communities is protected through religious beliefs and practices. The environment is an integral part of God's creation and must therefore be preserved and conserved for future generations. In contemporary Africa, the emphasis on material values is leading towards the total destruction of the environment, thus putting humanity at the intersection of self-destruction – something that needs to be avoided at all costs.

One of the most distinctive characteristics in the relationship between nature and human beings in most African societies is that of being "in communion" with nature and not dominating nature. In this regard, the aspect of being "in communion" with nature has ensured the preservation of landscapes such as forests and hills, as well as endangered animals, birds and other natural resources which demonstrates that Africans are environmentally friendly. Among the people living in the riverine areas, several lakes are sacred to local communities and strict taboos and local rules shape the use of wetland resources. There are sacred forests where entry is strictly forbidden, while in others, people may be allowed to collect some traditional medicines and other specified products, but they cannot use them for farming or hunting.

African traditional attitudes towards the environment cannot be adequately understood outside of an important cluster of concepts which define the social meanings of "homeostatic" phenomena such as trees, the bush, "the forest," "sacred groves," and the wilderness. For example, both the bush and trees are valued as sources of survival. They provide food, timber, firewood, medicines, and they maintain the soil against wind and water erosion.

Some African ecological practices revolve around respecting some parts of nature, and that this respect is derived from the belief that some parts of nature are sacred. According to Antonio (2012:144) in African societies, rituals around procreation as well as funereal rituals derive from bush spirits and animals. Since trees are medicinal the bush is also a source of healing. Indeed, trees are invested with wisdom and power. They can walk and talk. Rocks too, can walk and talk. The sacred groves, according to Antonio are condominiums of ecological vitality (p.145), and their uses range from, on the one hand, their symbolic significance as places where ancestral spirits reside to being, on the other hand, sites of in situ conservation as well as being sources of food and medicine. Sacred groves in Africa sustain threefold ecology: a spiritual ecology; a natural ecology; and social or human ecology.

Challenges to the Environmental Crisis in Africa

In modern African societies, things have changed considerably as a result of secularisation, in which the world loses its sacred character and human beings put a great deal of emphasis on material things such as money. In this process, the supernatural plays no part, leading, ultimately, to the abandonment of traditional religious values and practices (Hamilton 1995). In Africa, many traditional communities are undergoing a process of secularisation in the sense defined above. There is an ongoing process of desacralisation involving the transformation of knowledge, behaviour and institutions that were once thought to be grounded in divine power into phenomena of purely human creation (Hamilton 1995). Many sacred forests are being destroyed to give way to modern housing estates, roads and urbanization projects. There is widespread mining, dumping of industrial wastes into rivers, poaching of animals, etc. The implication of this in traditional African societies is that the environment is gradually losing its sacred nature, leading to environmental degradation. In a post-enlightenment world, and a world commonly adopting secular orientations, in which environmental policies are defined, set, and implemented by scientists, post - religious humanists, and religiously indifferent experts, the notion of the sacred are dismissed as a superstitious relic or a moralistic representation of an animistic avatar.

The upsurge of radical evangelism from foreign religions in Africa is another cause of concern in relation to the environment. The coming of Christianity and Islam has contributed a new challenge to environmental issues in Africa, where the religions advocated the eradication of African Traditional Religions, which are considered evil and therefore not a feasible path to salvation. Many sacred forests have been given out for the building of churches and mosques and important trees that protect the environment of the community have been cut down as they are considered as the guest houses of evil spirits. The radical message of conversion from the old to the new forms of religious orientation has led to the loss of the sacred value that traditional African societies attach to particular places, objects and species in many traditional African societies (Kouakou 2013).

In the Niger Delta ecosystem, artisanal crude oil refining and oil bunkering (oil theft) are endemic among the people of the Niger Delta, especially in Bayelsa and Rivers State. Artisanal refineries are small-scale facilities that perform subsistent distillation of crude petroleum over a specific range of heating points, producing useable products such as kerosene, fuel, diesel, bitumen and wastes. The process involves traditional knowledge and skills with little reliance on advanced technology. Artisanal refineries use a simplified version of fractional distillation (locally called “cooking”). These illegal economic activities have become major sources of income in the region. As a result of these activities, a few Niger Delta youths have become extremely rich. The number of artisanal crude oil refinery in this region is on the increase on daily basis, likewise the rate of oil bunkering or oil theft. These illegal activities with negative impact on the country’s revenue or national income and the oil companies, the greatest challenge is that the negative impact on the ecosystem is outrageous. This explains why the activities has been aptly described as “private gain and public disaster” (Juongwa 2023:10).



Some Remarks and Recommendations

The intersection between religion, culture and environment requires a radical approach in which human behaviours that promote and undermine the environment are considered as virtues and 'sins. Religious scholars who are involved in the teaching of environmental ethics should provide insight into what can be considered as environmental sins and virtues.

There is a need to raise awareness as to what it means to be a consumer at the heart of two conflicting narratives-consumerism and nurturing the environment, the costs of human life and consumerism and the environmental crises of the planet.

The discourse of environmental virtue can be used to re-direct the climate crisis in Africa from a collective politics to the choices of individual consumers, a variety of practices from fossil oil and cars, electric cars, polythene bags and supermarket culture, bottled and sachet (pure) water menace, e-waste, modern appliances to save the planet. We must continue to use available religious platforms to educate people on the disposal of waste which are often dropped on the highways while driving, in the drainage when rain is falling and using the water ways as toilet facilities. We must expand the theological understanding of consciousness to include moving away from these habits and embracing attitudes that engender a habitable environment for everyone.

We must be intentional on how individual personal good deeds of environmental virtue can save the earth, and also examine how tiny acts of voluntary personal piety, such as recycling, planting of trees, purchasing green consumer items, for the consumer to buy the right things and shop our way to a greener future.

Conclusion

There is increasing interest in the relationship of religion, culture with the environment, climate change and ecological sustainability as evidenced by a rapidly growing corpus of scholarly interests. The increasing attention paid to the religion, culture and environment by scholars has coincided with an increasing ravaging effect of environmental concerns in Africa thereby accentuating ecological engagement by religious actors.

The solution to our environmental plight resides in changing our practices, our lifestyles, our policies, and our outlooks. There is a need for all hands to be on deck in healing and repairing the earth. Our understanding of salvation and righteousness should incorporate responsible environmental behaviours to make the Kingdom of God on earth a habitable place for all in order to achieve the Kingdom of God in the hereafter of the afterlife.

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