

Chapter Sixteen

RELIGION AND THE CONTROL OF ENVIRONMENTAL CRISES IN NIGERIA

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Executive Summary

This work argues that religion plays a vital role in formulating moral framework on how the human person should relate with other people and the environment. Religions fashion the attitudes and values that shape and influence people's concepts of nature. Environmental crises or ecological crises are fundamentally crises of values. This chapter submits that it would then mean that religions which are the primary source of values in any culture may play a vital role in the decisions made regarding the environment.

Keywords: Religion, Environmental Crisis, Ecology, Ecosystem, Nigeria, Africa

Introduction

It has been observed in recent times that the role of environment in a nation's development process cannot be relegated to the background. Apart from being the physical surrounding for natural habitats, the environment provides the basis for

agricultural, industrial, commercial, technological and tourism development of a society. For this and several other reasons, environmental issues now occupy a centre stage in academic discourse and other public debates both at the national and international levels. Recorded evidence has also shown that the environment represents a wide range of the external circumstances, conditions and the things that affect the existence and development of an individual, organism, group and society (Isaichei, 1999).

In Nigeria for instance, environmental issues did not gain official recognition until the 1988 Koko toxic waste-dumping brouhaha, which highlighted the urgent need to establish the Nigeria Federal Environmental Protection Agency (FEPA), Federal Ministry of Environment and other relevant agencies, ostensibly to tackle environmentally related issues, in the country. These include issues such as environmental pollution, sanitation, depletion of ozone layer, desertification, flooding, erosion, poverty, bush burning, deforestation, and soil conservation. Environmentally minded scholars, such as Ocheri (2003) and Aja (2005), have associated environmental crises with human activities and albeit persistent human interaction with the environment. Researches have also shown that as the population of a country grows/increases with attendant pressure on the environment especially in the wake of improved technologies, environmental abuse and pollution are nevertheless heightened with corresponding effects on lives of people and other living organisms (Ocheri, 2003; Hausers, 1971). Also, man, through industrial, agricultural and the ever-increasing urbanization process, security and terrorist activities tend to directly and/or indirectly pollute the environment. Jande (2005) and Aja (2005) in their separate observations, also in tandem with the foregoing agree that unrestricted use of pesticides, insecticides, herbicides

and indiscriminate dumping of refuse, excreta and animal dung as well as spillages from refineries, large scale bush burning etc are perceived as some of the leading factors of environmental crises in Nigeria.

Religion plays a vital role in formulating moral framework on how man should relate with other people and his environment. Religions fashion the attitudes and values that shape and influence people's concepts of nature (Gbenda, 2006). Moreover, environmental crises or ecological crises are fundamentally crises of values. It would then mean that religions which are the primary source of values in any culture may play a vital role in the decisions made regarding the environment.

Much of the attention given to the environmental problems both at the global and national levels and especially in Nigeria has been secular approaches. For example, modern land use decrees or acts have been made in Nigeria without serious consideration to the religious influence on land and the whole environment. Scholars such as Udodora (2011), Mbiti (1976), Thompson (1970), Calder (1968), had observed that all religious traditions whether elementary, pre-literate or advanced, are environmental friendly and teaches environmental preservation and protection. Udodora (2011) summed up the views of all the myths of creation in world major religions. According to him, although man is created last, he is given the highest responsibility and authority to take care of and rule over all creatures including the earth surface (the land mass) on which he dwells. He is also to take care of the sea and all the creatures living in it. All religion teaches that the creator (God) is the owner of the world and everything that is in it including man. Therefore, man is only a steward given the authority to take care of what belongs to the creator.

Indeed, Nigerians are notoriously religious. With the postulations of some sociologists of religion about the death of religion, religion has till today remained the most vibrant institution and vital force that integrates, unites and constructs the people's value and moral systems. The moral imperative and value systems of religion are very important in mobilizing the sensibilities of people towards preserving, protecting and conserving the environment for human sustenance and for future generation (Udodora, 2011). Nigeria is populated by adherents of three major religions namely: Traditional Religion; Islamic Religion; and Christian Religion. It is therefore imperative that religion should be seen as a strong factor in issues relating to the environment.

African Traditional Religion (ATR) and Environmental Control

Just as Africans have grown over the ages, so also is the Africa Traditional Religion. African Traditional Religion means the indigenous religious beliefs and practices of the Africans before and even after the coming of western religions in Africa. However, there have been serious arguments on whether one could legitimately speak of one African Religion in the singular (Mbiti, 1976). Whether African Traditional Religion (s) is/are plural or singular, one thing that must be noted about it is that they have traditionally expressed some ethical concerns for the environment and creatures. They have also accorded some moral significance to other creatures and equally proposed some ethical responsibilities on the part of humans. They have the understanding that earth has some kind of religious significance or religious values, while humans have some religious obligations to care for the earth. Grim and Evelyn (2013) affirmed this by maintaining that most religious traditions have

developed attitudes of respect, reverence, and care for the natural world that brings forth life in its diverse forms.

ATR began as a set of code of conducts and ethics guiding the activities of man in his society. In an attempt to enforce the precepts of this new ethics and code of conduct, the community members charged with the enforcement of these rules, code and ethical behavior formed themselves into an association, where their rules, code of conduct and membership was widely jealoused and accepted. As time progressed, communicating with the ancestors to guide human existence became expedient, so a chief priest will always elect a serving priest who teaches the community the way of the gods and also how to make incantations and appease the gods, so this new apprentice takes over the duty of divination in the event that the chief priest is no more or he is seriously ill (Ester and Seruen, 1992).

ATR teaches that some natural entities such as rivers, hills, mountains, stones or rocks, lakes, trees, and many others possess spirits and demand respect just like humans. It teaches that natural environments are inhabited by spirits hence, adherents allowed these natural entities to remain in their sacred groves. Because of this understanding, some forests, rivers, lakes, mountains, stones or rocks, and others were kept intact, treated as scared abodes of gods, and preserved out of reverence for the deity that inhabited them. Henshey (2011) posited that in traditional African societies like Nigeria, Ghana, and many others, many people believed that rocks, trees streams, ponds and forests were the manifestation of the power of the Supreme Being. He saw these things as ideal places to meet their supreme being or the gods. Deb and Malhotra (1997) concluded that these trees together with the vegetation around were preserved as sacred places for worship. Africans did not just attach much

importance to trees and herbs just for spiritual purposes, but also because trees, herbs and plants in general are useful in enhancing human life. Tree leaves, bark, roots and grasses provided herbal medicines to human beings and to wild and domestic animals. Trees were also seen as being symbols of god's presence among people. Rocks, ponds, lands, streams and other part of the environment were also the abodes of the gods, so shrines, sanctuaries, temples and sacred groves were all meant for the worship, consultation and appeasements of the gods.

Furthermore, as part of traditional religious beliefs or teachings, man is seen as a component of the environment, which means that any harm carried out against the environment is invariably against man, because environment is the basis for man's existence. Any harm done on ecology will bring untold hardship and problems to mankind. Man should therefore explore, develop and use with moderation all the available natural resources to enhance his being. Greed and destructive tendencies are condemned, while restraint and protection are affirmed by Africa Tradition Religions. The moral frameworks and ethical systems and values constructed by African Tradition Religion enabled the people to cooperate with nature, treat their environment well and trod lightly on earth. It was difficult then to acknowledge any disjunction between principles and practices. This explains why there was no mention of global warming, climate change, desertification, depletion, gas flaring, deforestation, coastal erosion, and many others when traditional religion was the only religion in the soil of Africa. The adherents understood that what is regarded as sacred is more likely to be treated with care and respect, which is basically lacking today in our interaction with nature (Enwereji, 2004).

Consequently, the teachings of traditional religions were totally embraced, accepted, practiced and strictly adhered to by the traditional people and thus, implemented in the decisions made regarding the environment. Nevertheless, as these values were erased from the minds of the people through the instrumentalities of western education and western religions, the adherents of African Traditional Religion began to see some of those natural entities believed to be the abodes of gods and which engendered the attitudes of respect, reverence and care for natural world in them as nothing but ordinary entities without divine presence anymore. The result is demolition and destruction of shrines, trees forests, rivers, mountains, stones and lands that were formally regarded as sacred. And this may have contributed to the current environmental crises of today.

Islamic Religion and Environmental Control

Islam is the name of religion that emerged from the revelation and teachings of Prophet Muhammad. Islam is the Arabic term for “submission”. Muslim is the name given to one who adheres to the religion of Islam. It means “one who submits” (Marin, 1997). However, according to Omoregbe (1999) Orthodox Muslims do not accept that Islam was founded by Muhammad, nor do they accept that they are Mohammedians. Islam, they claim was not founded by Muhammad but by Allah himself. Muhammad was only a messenger through whom Allah made his messages known to mankind. They reject the appellation “Muhammedians” because it seems to imply that they worship Muhammad an idea which is incompatible with the rigid monotheism of Islam.

Islam is one of the major religions of the world which is completely different from Christianity. It is the second largest religion of the world next to Christianity. The population of the

adherents in the whole world is estimated between 1.3 billion to 1.8 billion. Islam has penetrated into countries of the world such as the whole of Arab world, China, Russia, Spain, Caribbean, Indonesia, United State, Asia and Africa. Large communities of Muslims are found in Nigeria especially in the northern part of Nigeria. Muslim faithful all over the world claim Allah as their God and Muhammad as their prophet (Gbenda, 2006).

Islam in its environmental control teaches that humankind is created by God and shall one day return to him to give account of his actions. This means that we are answerable for all that we do both the good and the evil. As God's vice regents on earth, at the last judgment, man will be called to account for how he acted towards the trust, and how he treated it. 'So glory to him in whose hands is the dominion of all things: and to him will you be all brought back (Sura 36: 83). This message explains the hereafter. All things were created by God and were maintained by him, and will go back to him. Man will also be brought back to God and is answerable to him and to him alone.

The earth is also considered by Islam to be a place of purification and worship of God. According to God's messenger Muhammad, the earth was made a place of worship and purification for me and Muslims (Berry, 1996). This is shown when Muslim faithful use the earth for canonical ablution whenever there is unavailability of water before worship. God's messenger emphasized more on this when he said "God is beautiful and he loves the beautiful. He is generous and he loves generosity; he is clean and loves cleanliness" (Berry, 1996). By implication, God enjoins his trustees to keep the earth and the environment beautiful and clean without destroying and polluting and even defacing it. The trustees must keep the

common environment clean and avoid anything that will upset and disturb others in any circumstances or any places.

There is no place in the Holy Qur'an and Hadith, where Islam endorses that man should destroy and spoil the ecological balances and the order of the natural system, which are signs of His existence. Islam teaches that such vice-regent should not disrupt the natural equilibrium nor betray the trust of the one who created the world with a particular order, balance and harmony. Rather he is to enjoy the provisions (of Allah) therein the earth according to the will and in service of Allah who admonishes him not to "perpetrate mischief on the earth, which has been established with order, but call on him with fear and longing (in your heart) for the mercy of Allah is (always) near to those who do good" (Qur'an 7: 56, 7:85).

One of the most important aspects of protecting the environment and ecology taught by Islam is the conservation of trees, forest, woodland, countryside, and all the living creatures whose habitats are such areas (Ozdemir, 2013). It is very possible to observe from the practices and in several of Prophet Muhammad's Hadiths the importance he attaches on the planting of trees, protection of existing ones, planting of fruits, as well as conserving the existing ones. For instance, in His Hadiths, it is asserted that if you have a sapling, if you have the time, be certain to plant it, even if doomsday starts to break forth (Futato, 2000).

Furthermore, Islam enjoins the followers to treat the animals of all species well by protecting and extending kindness and compassion to them. Prophet Muhammad in strong terms forbade cruelty or wanton killing of animals. Muhibbu-Din (2003) observed that the Islamic law has prohibition against the

tormenting of animals, except when slaughtered for food in a humane manner. It is not permitted to even overburden an animal with heavy loads beyond its capacity, or to compel it to walk or run beyond its power. The Hadith of Prophet records that if without good reason anyone kills a sparrow or creatures less than that even, the living creatures will put his plans to God on the Day of Judgment saying so-and-so killed me for no purpose. The Prophet prohibited torture and abuse of animals. He also condemned hunting for sport (Muhibbu-Din, 2003).

From the foregoing, it could be seen that the tenets from the glorious Qur'an of Islam if strictly adhered to or put into practice as it ought to be by the faithful, would result in a harmonious and natural equilibrium of ecosystems. In Nigeria, the population of the Muslim faithful is found more in the Northern part of Nigeria where we have recurrent ecological problems such as drought, flood, desertification, and many others. It could be possible to argue that on the basis of the teachings of Islam discussed above, one is expected to see a free ecological problem zone in the northern part of Nigeria populated by about seventy-five to eighty percent of the adherents of Islam. Thus, the presence of environmental problems in the north calls into question the religion "Islam" since it is the primary source of values that determines the adherents' decision regarding the environment. In fact, Islamic religion is being implicated in view of the fact that the decisions of its adherents on anything that pertains to life and natural environment are based on the value systems and ethical principle from the religion. Worst still, it could be possible that some Muslim faithful are ignorant of the teachings of Islam on environment.

Christian Religion and Environmental Control

Christianity has had profound influence on the human society and culture. The presence of Christianity in Africa has drastically rooted out the traditional institutions and principles, supplanting them with Christian traditions and principles. It is a monotheistic religion and it draws much of its inspiration from the Holy Bible, the revelation of God, and the traditions of the church (the early fathers). The Holy Bible (both Old and New Testaments) remains the principle source of law for Christianity. Christian Religion, in controlling environmental crises, enjoins her followers to do more to rebuild the earth than to tear it down. This is highly needed now that humans have destroyed and polluted the earth they are given to take care of. Of course, renewal is part of our responsibility to take care of the earth. When we commit ourselves to helping to renew the earth's natural resources, the issue of ecological crises would be drastically reduced to barest minimum.

Christianity has a historic concern for nature and the natural world. At the same time, ecological concerns operate in tension with anthropocentric values, such as the Biblical notion of human dominion over the Earth. (Gen 1:28) A broad range of Christian institutions are engaged in the environmental movement and contemporary environmental concerns. Latter Day Saint movement Mormon environmentalists find theological reasons for stewardship and conservationism through biblical and additional scriptural references including a passage from the Doctrine and Covenants. "And it pleaseth God that he hath given all these things unto man; for unto this end were they made to be used, with judgment, not to excess, neither by extortion" is one of such references (Anderson, 1984).

In examining the Christian Religion in controlling environmental crises, the first place to begin from is the creation, that is, how everything came into existence. In the biblical understanding, God created everything that exists. This doctrine stands clearly at the opening of the Bible; “in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1). The expression ‘heavens and the earth’ is simply a Hebrew idiom that means “all that exist” (Erickson, 1993). Everything that has existence is inclusive in this creation, both the visible and the invisible. The same doctrine was also recorded in other parts of the Old Testament. The Holy Bible records: “The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein” (Ps. 24:1). The same understanding permeated the religious practice of the Hebrew believers as expressed thus; “the heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handwork” (Ps. 19:1). It is evident from this Psalm (19:1) that the Hebrew believers are here giving their thanks and praise to God for creating or bringing the entire universe into existence.

Bohlin, (2002) stated that while God intended us to live in harmony with nature, we have more often than not been at odds with nature. This reality tells us that man has not fulfilled his mandate. The source of our ecological crises lies in man’s fallen nature and abuse of his dominion. Man is a rebel who has set himself at the centre of the universe. Man has exploited created things as though they were nothing in themselves and as though he has an autonomous right to do so. Man’s abuse of his dominion becomes clear when we look at the value we place on time and money. Our often uncontrolled greed and haste have led to the deterioration of the environment.

There are three important principles taught in the Bible which Christians need to remember and practice. They are principles of

preservation, conservation and restoration. The principle of preservation is all about keeping things beautifully. This can be observed in some of the statements God made to Adam and Eve concerning the Garden of Eden and everything therein. God told them “to work it and take care of it” (Gen. 2:15). We are told that the Garden of Eden was a beautiful garden, and to keep the beauty, God instructed them to work and take care of it. Principle of conservation is the principle of utilizing resources to their fullest (McCain, 2000). Conservation is the management and sustainable use of the natural environment and natural resources for ethical reasons and the benefit of humanity. This principle can be illustrated by the supernatural feeding of the Israelites in the wilderness with manna after they left Egypt. While supplying them with manna, God instructed them to take just enough for their needs (Ex. 16:13-21). They were to take no more and no less. They were only to take the one that will satisfy them for that particular day, but not to store for other days. The Bible (God) expects us to use only what we need not to accumulate wealth for our generations to come. Lack of these principles (conservation) has plunged the world into recurrent ecological problems, we should make these principles part of our everyday life style. The last principle, the principle of restoration is all about returning natural things to their original condition. God is the God of renewal. He renews both human beings and also the face of the earth: “you renew the face of the earth” (Psalm 104:30). If God is a God of renewal and He has made us in His image, we should be involved in renewal, that is, renewal of the resources God has given to us. This renewal is highly needed now that humans have destroyed and polluted the earth they were given to take care of.

Furthermore, as part of God’s command and principles proclaimed by Christian Religion regarding nature, Christians

are enjoined to care and treat nature or environment with caution. Apart from treating nature as having value in itself and being careful in exercising dominion, the Bible enumerates various examples of the care with which humans (Christians) are expected to give to the environment. In Leviticus (25:1 - 12), God told Moses on Mount Sinai to tell the Israelites to care for the land. God said it specifically that the land is to have a year of rest. Job 38:25-28 speak of God's nurture and care for His Creation; "who cuts a channel for the torrent of rain, and a path for a desolate wasteland and make it sprout with grass? Does the rain have a father? Who fathers the drops of dew? And Jesus spoke on two occasions on how much the father cared for even the smallest sparrow (Mathew 6:26; 10:29).

Conclusion

From the foregoing it is clear that the three religions are not arrogant towards the environment and therefore should not bear any burden of guilt for the current ecological crises. All religions in essence are eco-friendly and supposed not to be implicated or blamed for the ecological problems. But the problems lie on the adherents of these religions, that is, their total disobedience and lack of compliance to the teachings of these religions on environment. Despite the fact that religions are the primary source of values in any culture, it could be seen from our discussion that the various attitudes of the adherents of these religions, or otherwise, the values of these people which determine their decisions regarding the environment, are not sourced out from or constructed by these religions, and so, both religions are exonerated from any implication. We should remember that the responsibility given to us by God to carefully manage the earth goes with accountability. How we manage the earth as stewards or caretakers will be accounted for on the Day of Judgment.

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