

# Religion and Sustainable Environmental Education in Nigeria

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## Abstract

Environmental changes have been a source of concern to Nigerian experts and one of the greatest challenges of our time. As a sustainable environmental education remains elusive in Nigeria, this paper examines the viability of using religion as a potent strategy to combat the myriad of environmental problems that have bedeviled the country in recent times. In doing so, the study investigates the environmental ethics and values as embedded in Christianity, and a touch of Islam and African Traditional Religions. The study finds that there have been proliferation of religious worship centres even in residential areas, uncompleted buildings as well as littering of the streets with posters, sign posts and the use of public address systems which are sources of noise pollution. The study recommends amongst others, that stakeholders should create avenue through which adequate education is given to the students and the masses on the preservation of natural resources and healthy environment.

**Keywords:** Religion, Sustainable and Environmental Education

## Introduction

In recent times environmental changes have been a source of concern to Nigerian experts and have generated discussions and consciousness of people around the globe. Everyone is aware of the fact that the physical, chemical as well as the biological (ecological) nerve of the globe is being compromised on daily basis as the world continues to witness serious environmental disasters. Agha (2003), opined that destroying our environment which has been on going, automatically meant destroying ourselves.

The fact is that human efforts must be directed towards the preservation of our forests, lakes, and rivers, mineral resources, grasslands and animals. We must guard against the gross misuse of our environment and one of the ways of achieving this is for the teachers and leaders to build awareness in their communities of their responsibility for the integrity of creation.

Man's insatiable demand for ever dwindling resources propelled by the greed of the present generation, which gives little thought to the survival of future generation has indeed imposed tremendous strains and stresses on the environment putting the planet into perilous danger. This ever constant danger of destruction and putting to disuse of the environment has been a source of concern for governments, international bodies, environmental stakeholders and individuals around the globe.

As for us, Nigeria is not isolated from this widespread concern about sustainability of the environment in whatever caption aimed at averting the ever increasing environmental degradation and desertification all over the country. The environmental degradation and poor sanitary conditions which have affected Nigeria in recent years have gained various expressions such as global warming, desertification, deforestation, environmental pollution and other negative environmental acronyms. Consequently, the Federal Government of Nigeria in order to proffer solution to the ever increasing desertification in 1988 established the Federal Environmental protection Agency charged with the responsibility of safeguarding Nigerian environment for sustainable development.

Ogunkan (2010), reports that the Federal Government in 1999 created the ministry of Environment to absorb and take over the functions of EEPA, with an added responsibility of administering and enforcing environmental laws in Nigeria. In the same vein, Ebong (2001) considering the seriousness of the campaigns for environmental protection, affirm that various organizations in the country have also spearheaded campaigns, political activities and jingles for changes in policies, laws, technologies, and development strategies to enhance environmental qualities in the country. It is against the backdrop of seemingly intractability of environmental problems in Nigeria that this study examines the viability of using religion as a potent instrument to achieve sustainable environmental education in Nigeria since men and women, adult and children are all involved in religioning and environmental depletion.

## Relevance of Religion to Environment

Fundamental significance of religion has been confirmed by the experience of human life. In situations of insecurity, natural disaster, anxiety, failures, frustrations, poverty, sickness and death, the solutions are always directed to the leadership and creation of awareness and education on the part of the people. In view of this observation, religion manifest a kind of model for leadership in which our contemporary society should learn from and make use of without which our society will continue to be at risk as ever before, as pointed out by Porrit (1991:92), that "we have contaminated lands and rivers with poison, fouled shorelines and oceans with massive spills of oil and altered the chemistry of the air on which life depends."

Porrit's observation is quite typical of most Nigerian towns and cities where sitting or location of religious centres does not take cognizance of the aesthetic of the environment or in accordance with the lay out made by town planners. In Abakaliki the capital city of Ebonyi State for instance, if we can not count more, there may not be less than five to ten churches located in an average street in residential areas of Abakaliki and environ and some Mosques seen mostly at Hausas quarters/street. In the same vein shrines are seen located in places like Amike Abba, Ntezi Abba, Nkaliki, Ishieke, Nnodo, Onunwambara and Enyibushiri to mention a few. In other words, today churches, mosques and shrines are increasingly springing up in residential and some commercial areas, which under the law and normal circumstances should not be so, because ordinarily residential areas are places that are designed with concern for the aesthetics. In designated residential areas, there is always lay-out and the houses to be built there should be residential with right to serene environment. It is pertinent to note that builders in designated areas usually get approval for building their houses with all conditions associated with it met. Such conditions may include not to make noise or infringe into the privacy of other co-residents. But there are instances where part of the building so approved earlier as residential are converted first to fellowship centres which will later metamorphosed to church building all in the name of church planting. The same trend replicate of mosques in the northern and some part of the Western parts of Nigeria.

### **Religious Littering of the Environment**

Propelled by drive for membership, many churches, and other religious houses such as Ekanca through advertisement litter the environment with bill boards and posters in not only public places like banks, post office, motor parks and even residential house/schools. The present scenario as highlighted above has numerous implications for the environment. Abumere (1997) observed that such practices destroys the aesthetics of the environment because under normal circumstances churches and mosques should not be located in residential areas, which have right to serene atmosphere devoid of noise pollution for that matter. But the question we should ask is who issues licenses to these churches if they actually have or are duly authorized?

The answer to the question may reveal that the town planners did. In this case it means there is a deal among the church planners and officials of town planning and those in charge of creating of bill board and pasting of posters which consequently lead to de-beautification of our environment. This singular fact, raises question of social and moral irresponsibility on the part of the church and the officers in charge of environmental management. This situation is what Adula (2002:177) defines as "manifestation of corruption in management of Nigerian cities." However, the problems of environment which religion curriculum planners should contend with while planning religion curricular are as discussed below:

### **Deforestation**

As reported by Ayantayo (2009), in his observation of the history of Christian and Islamic religious propaganda in Nigeria, that Christian and Islamic missionaries engaged in deforestation of the environment in many villages and towns especially the grooves and shrines in their bid to rid the places of evil spirits and demons. According to him these missionaries alleged that grooves and shrines were abode of evil spirits which must be destroyed.

Though the exercise has had its positive effect, we must not lose its positive effect, we must not lose sight of the fact that forest has its own usefulness. For instance, it soaks up rainfall brought by tropical storms while anchoring soils and releasing water at regular intervals. This is the area the curriculum planners should come in because the regulating feature of tropical rainforests could help moderate destructive flood and drought cycles. But now with forest loss, the local community losses the system that perform valuable but often underappreciated service like ensuring the regular flow of clean water and protecting the community from flood and drought which is now the order of the day and which has led to great deal of famine, diseases, and destruction of crops, livestock and man.

### **Liturgical Activities**

Liturgical practices of churches, mosques and other religionists in villages and cities in Nigeria directly or indirectly affect the environments, for example most of such activities are accompanied with the use of drums-sized microphone and trumpet during morning, afternoon and evening services. This results to air pollution and social noise which affects everybody, especially infants and those on admission in hospitals who ordinarily might be expected to be on bed rest. On the menace of noise pollution in Nigeria, Ayantayo (2009), quoted Soni – Ehi (1984) who observes that: Residents of big cities are increasingly going through process of partial deafness. Their sensitive eardrums are daily being bombarded by a continuous barrage of environmental noise overflowing from ear shattering drum-size speakers of markets, mosques and churches (Soni-Ehi 1984).

The churches and mosques in most Nigerian towns and villages makes use of generating plant, which generate noise and air pollution, this is a serious problem in Nigeria because studies carried out by the Federal Environmental Protection Agency (FEPA) in 2001 show that Nigeria emitted 23.5 million metric tons of caribon,

slightly down from a high of 27.7 million metric tons of carbon emitted in 1996 but still and over all increase since 1980, when the same figure was 18.9 million. Emissions from natural gas accounted for 12.5 millions metric tons (53.3%) of the total, with oil emissions making up 11.0 million metric tons (46.6%) coal for the remaining 0.04 (0.1%) (<http://www.ela.doe.gov/emenu/cabs/nigenv/html/>), (18<sup>th</sup> July, 2006).

Apart from the above, studies already carried out shows also that some churches and mosques in the name of street evangelism are fond of barricading major and minor streets. At times some of the religious activities take place in trans highways especially in the northern states of Nigeria thereby leading to road diversion, thus causing hardship for road users including pedestrian and motorists. People express the opinion that if care is not taken that the development if not checked could generate to interreligious conflicts since Nigeria is a pluralistic society where religion is always a volatile issue.

### **Religion as a Panacea to Environmental Problems in Nigeria**

In view of the fact that several efforts aimed at controlling environmentally related problems by governments, non governmental organizations and individuals have failed, it becomes imperative that religion be utilized as vital strategy to tackle the increasing environmental problems in Nigeria. Sponsel, and Casagrande (2007), observed that religion has the most powerful influence on the world views, values, attitudes, motivations, decisions and behaviour of individuals, groups and societies. Religion, therefore can serve as a moral compass in guiding the behaviours and actions of individuals and organizations towards the environment.

The three main religions in Nigeria: Islam, Christianity, and African Traditional Religion have ethical values which favour the conservation of nature. This provides a paradigm upon which a viable environmental education can be attained in Nigeria.

Christian ethical values compel Christians to behave or act according to the dictates of the scriptures and in conformity with God's unchangeable moral values especially as it relates to the treatment of nature. The Bible's message about the creation is very lucid and are discusses below. God's original creation is good "And God saw every thing that he had made, and behold, it was very good". Genesis 1:31a.

Creation reveals God's character "For the invisible things of Him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse" Roman 1:20.

God values all creation "Are not two sparrows sold for a copper coin? And not one of them falls to the ground apart from your father's will". Mathew 10:29.

All things belong to God "The earth is the LORD'S and the fullness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein". From the foregoing, humanity must not plunder the creation because it reflects God's goodness, it is the revelation of God, it is what God values and it belongs to God. Man is only a caretaker of God's creation in its entirety. The Bible makes it clear that God bequeath unto man, the responsibility of keeping the earth, thus "And the LORD God took man, and put him into the Garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it" Genesis 2:15. Another Bible verse put it that we are stewards of God's earth, ruling over which is not ours and which we are going to give account.

That God entrusted all creations under man's caresheep is not a license for man to embark on such large scale destructive tendencies of the environment but rather Christians must treat nature as having value in itself, and must be careful to exercise dominion without being destructive. God Himself showed displeasure of man's destruction of the environment, when He said "Woe unto them that join house to house, that lay field to field, till there be no place, that they may be placed alone in the midst of the earth; In mine ears said the LORD of hosts, of a truth many houses shall be desolate, even great and fair, without inhabitant. Yea, ten acres of vineyard shall yield one bath, and the seed of an homer shall yield an ephah" Isaiah 5:8-10.

In this Bible verse, the lord judges those who have misused the land. Further more, many of our environmental problems can be traced to man overindulgence and greed. The Bible warns on such greed and over indulgence.

Like Christianity, Islam is built on ethical values which guide Muslims in their behaviour not only towards their fellow human being but also to the nature. Qu'ran is the source of Muslims conduct and behaviour, while hadith serves as a source of some basic principles or standard of ethics.

The position of Qu'ran concerning the relationship between man and nature is clear. It is the responsibility of Muslims to treat nature with respect and reverence because it is God's creation (Sponsel et al 2007). Man is the most fundamental creation of God and that is why they are entrusted and accountable as God's agents and steward on earth (Qu'ran 45:12-13).

The African Traditional Religion is also embedded with environmental ethics and morality. These are entrenched in their customs, traditional laws, taboo and traditions. For example, the Igbo traditional religion recognizes and acknowledges God's divine Lordship over the whole earth. They also believe that man is a tenant on God's earth. The Igbos, like the Yorubas of western Nigeria believes that the creation is a wondrous work of God (Chineke or Chukwu) whose responsibility was to create, preserve and sustain.

## Conclusion

As effective environmental education in Nigeria remains elusive, the study has proved that religion provides the most viable means through which sustainable environment could be achieved for the country. The three main religions in Nigeria were noted to be rooted in environmental ethics and values which when adhered to strictly could be an all important panacea to achieving sustainable peace and environmental education in Nigeria.

In their bid to solve the seemingly unsolvable environmental problems in the country, environmental stakeholders and policy makers, governments, non governmental organizations, religious leaders and general public are advised to lay more emphasis on the religious values as it relates to sustainable environment. This will go a long way in formulating an effective and acceptable environmental education strategy which Nigeria deserve most as a sovereign nation.

## Recommendations

Based on the various observation of the study, the following recommendations are hereby made:

- a. That the government and churches/mosques should mount an intensive education of the masses on the protection and preservation of environment in all the local government and education institutions.
- b. Schools, colleges and churches should create an avenue through which adequate education is given to the students and the masses on the preservation of natural resources and healthy environment.
- c. Churches and Mosques should be sited at non residential areas while loudspeakers and other devices that help to litter our environment should be discouraged.
- d. Aforestation of the farm lands should be encouraged, while deforestation should be stopped forthwith and there should be no burning of bushes.
- e. Religious education curriculum should be restructured to incorporate themes on climate and environmental changes.

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