

RELIGION AND ECOLOGICAL CRISIS

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Abstract

Understandings of environmental change within religious communities have not enjoyed serious intellectual scrutiny. This is true even in many areas in Nigeria that are severely affected by environmental change. Understanding how faith communities perceive and adapt to change is important for understanding the relationship between religion and the environment in highly religious societies like Nigeria. It also serves as a foundation for developing ideas for mitigating environmental degradation. Different religious leaders in the Muslim dominated Northern and Christian-dominated Southern parts of Nigeria have different perspectives on how their respective communities view environmental degradation and change. According to scholarly analysis, participants' perspectives on environmental change are very diverse. While some blame human activity for the change, others see it as a "natural" occurrence or result, explaining it as either God's way of making up for human wrongdoing or the fulfilment of "end times" prophecies. These religious communities have been observed to use a variety of strategies to adapt to environmental change, from active management techniques like planting trees to religious rituals like special prayers. The work employed a descriptive and critical analysis methods in order to have a better Religious understanding of Ecological Crisis The Findings posit that religion appears to have a greater influence on how various religious communities perceive ecological issues. Future research and policy implications of these findings are discussed.

Keywords: Religion, Religious communities, Environmental Change, Ecological crisis

Introduction

The world today is plagued with ecological crises with Nigeria having a fair share of ecological disasters. The severity and impacts, of an ecological crisis which manifests in floods, drought, desertification water and air pollution and more, has become a polemical issue confronting humanity today (Gerten & Bergmann, 2012; Gottlieb, 2006; Leiserowitz, 2008). The devastation from these ecological crises and their consequences in human and material terms have made it a subject of serious concern for both government, stakeholders and citizens.

Coordinated efforts are needed to balance human affairs with the dynamics of the natural world because of the suffering that anthropogenic environmental impact causes to millions of people worldwide and the threats it poses to human society and the future of the planet. According to IPCC (2014), rapid changes in precipitation and rising sea levels brought about by human activity are primarily to blame for climate change. These changes are affecting global hydrological systems and affecting the quantity and quality of water resources worldwide. There are significant concerns regarding

food security for the world's expanding population due to the negative effects of climate change, which have also been seen to negatively impact agricultural yields in many parts of the world. Among the adverse effects of anthropogenic climate change on the natural environment that the IPCC has noted are species extinction and changes in ecosystems (Shehu 2015)

Anthropogenic climate change may have real or potential effects on human systems, such as an increase in illnesses linked to temperature, changes in the quality and availability of water, and more. Stress on society, the economy, and institutions is also a result of ecosystem disruptions brought on by climate change, particularly in "vulnerable" areas (UNFCCC, 2007). The effects of environmental deterioration are severe, particularly for those living in poverty, whose means of subsistence are directly impacted by the environment and who lack the means to adapt. While efforts are being made to lessen the risks associated with ecological crises, a great deal of focus is being placed on the environmental degradation caused by human activity. Human activities such as deforestation, land clearance for agriculture and urbanization, pollution from domestic and industrial wastes, and climate change are among the main factors contributing to environmental decline; the destruction of natural habitats as a result of these activities is already upsetting the ecosystem's natural balance and causing the extinction of species; deforestation is a major factor in desertification and soil degradation; and pollution of the air, water, and land is the root cause of many health issues facing human societies (UNEP, 2012).

Addressing environmental problems requires a reconfiguration of our social values, attitudes and behaviours. Similarly, developing and implementing an effective approach to mitigating environmental problems requires an understanding of how communities perceive environmental change and how they respond to its impacts (Leiserowitz, 2008; 2003). According to Stern (2000), there is a need to modify human behaviours that are causing environmental issues. As a result of continuing social scientific discussions on the relationship between religion and the environment in general and society-environment interaction in particular, it is acknowledged that religion influences attitudes, behaviour, perceptions, coping mechanisms, and actions. Empirical research has demonstrated that religious experiences and beliefs influence how people perceive and respond to their surroundings as individuals and as communities in many societies around the world (Guth, Green, Kellstedt, & Smidt, 1995; Hitzhusen & Tucker, 2013; Keans, 1996; Smith & Leiserowitz, 2013; Stern & Dietz, 1994).

This paper is concerned with the relationship between religion and the ecological crisis in Nigeria. It looks into how religion and the environment interact in general and the relationship between religion and the environment in particular. It aims to advance our knowledge of how religious beliefs and worldviews either cause or mitigate environmental issues.

Nigeria today has three main religions namely the Christian, Islam and the African traditional religion, all having different doctrines, ways of worship and worldviews. The perceptions of different religious communities, their attitudes and actions regarding ecological crisis have a great influence on the trajectory and future of ecocatastrophe. While there are similarities in the manner religious adherents view ecocatastrophe, there are differences in opinion on ecocatastrophe and how different religious bodies view and react to ecological crises. How the differentials in religious views affect the clamour for balancing the ecosystem is the focus of this paper which examines ecological crises and their relationship with the different religions in Nigeria. A conceptualisation of the terms ecological crises and religion will be relevant to understanding the interrelationship between Ecocatastrophe and religion.

Conceptualizing Ecological Crises

Ecological crises are the consequence of Climate change described as a statistical variation that persists for an extended period, typically for a decade or longer (Ogbuabor and Egwuchukwu 2017 p217). It includes a shift in the frequency and magnitude of sporadic weather events as well as the slow but continuous rise in global average surface temperature (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC, 2001]). Natural or ecological disasters are described as “ a sudden and terrible event in nature that usually results in serious damage and many deaths” by Crimmins (2022). It has an impact on the physical environment in addition to all facets of human and natural systems, such as the functioning of health systems and social and economic

circumstances. It shows up as severe weather-related occurrences like storms, intense heat waves, floods, droughts, and wildfires. These weather-related catastrophes increase the risk of noncommunicable diseases, infectious disease emergence and spread, mortality, and health emergencies. They also have an indirect effect on health. It is caused by several activities engaged in by man which have adverse effects on the overall ecosystem. Ibimelua (2011) concurs by stating that the various developmental activities of man have greatly interfered with the natural environment; thereby degrading it. Ecological crises are caused by activities like deforestation involving the destruction of the natural vegetation and biodiversity and Agricultural practices such as overgrazing, bush burning, and application of fertilizer, pesticides and herbicides. Industrialization and exploration activities are contributory factors which result in air, land and water pollution and oil spillage which damage farmlands, vegetation and aquatic life. Added to the above is the damming of rivers which interrupts their natural flow.

In Nigeria, environmental issues were not officially acknowledged until the 1988 Koko toxic waste-dumping scandal, which prompted the establishment of the Federal Ministry of Environment, the Nigeria Federal Environmental Protection Agency (FEPA), and other pertinent agencies with the stated goal of addressing environmental issues in the nation. Environmental pollution, poor sanitation, ozone layer depletion, desertification, flooding, erosion, poverty, bushfires, deforestation, and soil conservation are a few of these problems. Environmentally conscious academics like Ocheri (2003) and Aja (2005) have linked human activity and, albeit ongoing, human interaction with the environment to environmental crises.

Studies have also revealed that environmental abuse and pollution are escalated with corresponding effects on human and other living organisms' lives as a nation's population grows or increases, especially in the wake of improved technologies (Ocheri, 2003; Hausers, 1971). In addition, man tends to pollute the environment directly or indirectly through agriculture, industry, and the process of urbanization, which is growing every day. Along with the aforementioned, Jande (2005) and Aja (2005) concur in their observations that widespread use of pesticides, insecticides, and herbicides, as well as careless disposal of trash, animal dung, and excreta, refinery spills, extensive bush burning, etc., are some of the main causes of Nigeria's environmental crises.

Religion Conceptualised

The majority of philosophers concur that the definition of religion is difficult because of the variety of world religions and the perspectives that define the term (Ajayi 2019). Religion is primarily viewed as a structured belief system that facilitates communication with the divine and makes a clear distinction between the sacred and the profane. As with its definition, the term "religion" can mean different things to different people. Examples include an institutional or personal set of beliefs and associated practices, the worship of a supernatural God, Goddess, or other deity, and a system of beliefs centred around a cause or principle. Ugwu (2002) defines religion as "Beliefs and practices involving the relationship between mankind and what is regarded as sacred" (p. 2). Merriam (1980) views it as "the feeling or expression of human love, fear or awe of some superhuman and over-ruling power, whether by profession of belief, by the observance of rites and ceremonies or by the conduct of life" (p. 250). However, Umeanolue (2020), citing Iwe, enumerates four perspectives on religion: "The subjective" refers to man's inborn awareness of his reliance on a transcendent supra-human entity and his ensuing inclination to honour and worship him. The objective is to show his allegiance to God, a transcendental Being, following a convoluted set of doctrines, laws, and rituals. The next perspective is "the moral," which refers to "virtue in an individual, an enduring quality, a habit, which disposes of him who has it to pay, steadfastly, the depth of honour and worship that he owes to God and the institutional" (140). The institutional perspective is made up of the "possession of a definite system of beliefs, activities, and values like any other social institution." Obiefuna (2018) summarizes these diverse interpretations of religion which cover all possible interpretations of the term religion as "a phenomenon in human society that is part of life which shapes the traditions of society - marriage, politics, education whether formal and informal, economy, law, and health as social institutions." (p 10). Deducible from this summation, it is evident that religion influences people's morals, ideologies, beliefs, behaviours, and character in addition to being entwined with almost every facet of human existence. As a result, how religion

is applied to societal problems and events will influence people's perspectives on life and the universe, which can vary greatly amongst religious communities. These differences dictate how a person's religion interacts with the ecological crisis.

Interface of Religion and Ecological Crises.

Scholars have a bifocal view of the role of religion in ecological crises experienced in Nigeria and other parts of the world. While some trump the pivotal role religion plays, others blame religion for the escalation of ecocatastrophes. Gbenda (2006) argued that religion plays a vital role in formulating a moral framework on how a man should relate to other people and his environment. Religions fashion the attitudes and values that shape and influence people's concepts of nature (Gbenda, 2006). This means that religions which are the primary source of values in any culture may play a vital role in the decisions made regarding the environment. Proponents of the above view decry the secular approaches to ecological crises which relegate the contributions of religion to the background. However, others with opposing views see religion as a minus in the ecological crisis equation. They hold the view that religion sees ecological crises as a natural occurrence beyond the control of man. Others see it as punishment from God for man's shortcomings. Consequently, religion does not prioritise the hazards of ecocatastrophe and pays a laissez-faire attitude to efforts being made to mitigate it. It is this controversy that underscores the need to investigate the perspectives of religious adherents concerning ecological crises.

Nigeria is a multi-religious state comprising three major religious bodies with differing doctrines, beliefs and worldviews. They are Christianity, Islam and the African traditional religion. Pertinence calls for scrutiny of the perspectives of these three religions as they concern the environment and ecocatastrophe.

Religious perspectives and attitude towards Ecological Crisis

Religious perspectives and attitudes towards the ecosystem are hinged on and coloured by the injunctions of the sacred scriptures or beliefs and doctrines of the different religious bodies. The literary forum is rife with intellectual controversies concerning the response of religion to environmental change and the prioritization and institutionalisation of scientific solutions to ecological crises (Fromming and Reichel 2012; Gerten 2010; Moore and Nelson 2010)). The issues in contention comprise the following amongst others. Is religion apathetic to the clamour for environmental protection and preservation or not? Does religion have the potential to contribute to mitigating ecological crises? What roles does religion have to play in the ecological crises? These polemical issues will be discussed as it affects the three major religions in Nigeria.

Doctrinal influence on Perspectives and attitude of religion on ecocatastrophe

Shehu and Molyneux-Hodgson (2014) effectively encapsulated the mindset of religious adherents when viewed through the lens of the disparate doctrines of Nigeria's various religious organizations. The vast majority of people on the planet identify with one or more religious traditions (Hitzhusen and Tucker 2013; Bergmann 2009), and religious views and actions continue to shape people's interactions with the natural world (Jenkins 2009). It is now recognized that religious practices and beliefs can have a "positive" or "negative" impact on people's perceptions of environmental issues and their environmental worldviews (Gerten and Bergmann 2012).

Religion continues to be an important tool for encouraging ecologically conscious behavior (Gottlieb 2006; Kanagy and Willits 1993; Woodrum and Wolkomir 1997), and a variety of religiously motivated environmental movements are becoming more and more popular in today's world. However, in certain communities, religious worldviews have a significant impact on how people perceive environmental issues. These worldviews emphasize that humans have a primary responsibility to mitigate environmental problems and suggest fatalism, viewing environmental issues as "given" (Gerten 2010; Gerten and Bergmann 2012).

This is a candid example of the consequence of the belief in predestination where all events that happen in life are attributed to fate. This belief holds that whatever happens has been preordained by God and there is

nothing man can do about it. This is particularly true of the Christian and Muslim communities in Nigeria that attribute natural disasters to transcendental causes. The implication, of this stance is that it prevents the indigenous people from perceiving themselves as actors in the ecosystem, a stance that may negatively affect their behaviour towards land resources.

In some cases, ecocatastrophe is viewed as punishment from God for some human mischief of atrocity (Lindskog and Tengberg 1994 p390). This is akin to the plague in the biblical stories caused either by disobedience of God's law or some form of transgression. As a solution to the problem, adherent premise repentance, prayer and fasting to avert disaster. In African traditional religion, famine, and other natural disasters are attributed to the anger of the gods for the transgression of the community. In such cases, sacrifices are made to appease the ancestral spirits who serve as mediators between man and the divine being (Bell 2014; Abegunde 2017; Haron 2017).

Another doctrinal belief common among the Christian and Muslim religions that foreshadows apathy to environmental degradation is the belief in the afterlife. The earth is seen as a transit camp with heaven which is their true abode of adherent awaiting them after death. For this reason, less attention is given to the earthly environment. Many religionists, studies have shown, do not see climate change as a problem either due to a lack of awareness or a willingness to wish it away as a sign of the end time (Simkins 2008) This apocalyptic stance does not favour paying attention to the environment, rather they become a reason for proselytising in the attempt to save man from further disaster and the ultimate fate of sinners which is hell fire. Another doctrinal belief that detracts from environmental change is that the earth was made for man to dominate. Christians believe in the dictates of the bible which stipulates that the earth is the Lord' s and man has been given dominion over it. The earth is for man to cultivate and master. Consequently, they hold the belief that the earth is for providence. This means the earth or environment is made for man to exploit for his survival. This consumerist approach implicates man as complicit in ecocatastrophe as the exploitation of earth' s natural resources to sustain man has partly contributed to environmental degradation. This view seems to support the claim that man in an attempt to explore the ecosystem has unwittingly damaged the environment through his activities in the quest to master the earth for sustenance.

All of the positions above seem to portend a complete apathy for environmental protection and sustenance among the various religions. However, some proponents of environmental protection believe and argue vehemently that religion is not opposed to environmental protection rather there is instruction in the scriptures of various religious bodies regarding the protection and maintenance of the environment (Udodora, 2011). Again, Once more, Dick and Ede (2021, p. 307) asserted that African Traditional Religion (ATR) teaches that, like people, certain natural entities—like rivers, hills, mountains, stones, lakes, trees, and many others—have spirits and should be treated with respect. Its followers allowed these natural entities to stay in their sacred groves because it teaches that natural environments are inhabited by spirits. It was because of this understanding that certain forests, rivers, lakes, mountains, stones, and other natural features—such as trees or rocks—were preserved, revered as holy places inhabited by gods, and kept intact.

He contends further that traditional religious teachings view man as a part of the environment, meaning that any harm done to the environment is inevitably done to man as well, since the environment is the source of man's existence. Humanity will experience immense suffering and crisis if the environment is harmed (Dick and Ede 2021, p. 388).

However, the intrusion of Western civilisation and religions saw the denouncing of some of the sacred practices resulting in the demolition of 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. In the same vein, Islam also preaches the stewardship of man in taking care of God' s creation. Since all Muslims will after death give an account of his actions as God's regent on earth (Surah 36: 83 Quran). This presupposes that Islam supports environmental protection and is averse to environmental degradation.

Deducible from the foregoing analysis it shows that in contradistinction to the arguments that religion is apathetic to environmental degradation, scholars have proven that the doctrines beliefs and practices of most religions in Nigeria encourage protection of the environment.

Role of Religious bodies in mitigating ecological crises.

Aside from being embedded in the scriptures, beliefs and doctrines of the different religions that they are not against environmental protection, there seems to be a draught of evidence to show that they can contribute to mitigating ecological disaster outside what science has to offer. Scholars argue that the anthropocentric stance of most religions contributed to ecological crises and hold that religions need to be part of the solution for the crisis: “ More science and more technology are not going to get us out of the present ecologic crisis until we find a new religion or rethink our old one” (White 1967, p. 1206). However, some scholars believe the prevention of ecocatastrophe lies in the perception and mindset of the populace concerning the environment. It is in this regard that the potential of religion in combating ecological crises rests. The potential of religions to address environmental issues has been highlighted by contributions from the religion and ecology debate (Gardner 2003; Gottlieb 2010; Peterson 2007). Religions can reach large segments of the population, as over 80% of the world's population belongs to a religious tradition (Pew Forum, 2015). They have the power to influence their followers' lifestyles and interactions with the environment through their ethical teachings and worldviews (Mangunjaya and McKay 2012; Sheikh 2006; Jenkins 2009; Watson and Kochore 2012).

In order to create a more thorough environmental ethics that takes into account people, ecosystems, and other species, Tucker (2006) contends that religions can thus promote the values and ethics of reverence, respect, redistribution, and responsibility (p. 401). Moreover, religious leaders and umbrella organizations are often highly trusted by the public and sometimes have close relationships with members of different religious organizations as well as elite business and political figures who have social decision-making power (Casanova 1994; Davie 2010). Leveraging their networks can help them influence public debates, raise awareness of environmental issues, and influence decision-making processes (Reder 2012; Schaefer 2016; Wardekker et al. 2009).

In addition, numerous religious institutions possess substantial financial means and physical assets, like schools and buildings, which they can utilize to assist in the transition of society towards a more environmentally sustainable state (Gardner 2002, 2003; Palmer 2013; Blanc and Ostheimer 2019). These perspectives demonstrate how religion can effectively aid in the fight against ecological disasters and, of course, present an optimistic story about the potential of religious communities.

Summary and Conclusion

This paper set out to investigate the relationship between religion and ecological crises. It conceptualised ecological disasters and religion and went on to examine the perceptions of religionists concerning environmental degradation. While several scholars claim that religion promotes apathy to environment preservation others believe that religion has a pivotal role to play in assuaging ecocatastrophe due to their ability to conscientise their members on the need for commitment to the preservation of the ecosystem. As the aforementioned makes abundantly evident, none of the three religions should be held responsible for being apathetic to the current ecological crises because they are not insensitive to the environment. Fundamentally, every religion is environmentally benign; the issues arise from the followers of these faiths, who completely disregard and disobey the teachings of these faiths. While religions serve as the main source of values in any culture, it is evident that the attitudes held by their followers, or the values that guide their decisions about the environment, are not derived from or created by these religions. As a result, the religions can be exonerated from any criticism. It's important to keep in mind that the tenets of the different religions hold that God has entrusted us with the accountability of properly overseeing the planet. The Day of Judgment will hold us accountable for how we handle the planet in our capacity as stewards or caretakers.

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