

# Religious Value: An Instrument for Sustainable Environmental Management in Nigeria

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*GJHSS Classification – A (FOR)  
220402,220405,050205*

**Abstract**—As a sustainable environmental management remains elusive in Nigeria, this paper examines the viability of using religious value as a potent strategy to combat the myriad of environmental problems that have bedeviled the country in recent years. In doing so, it investigates the environmental ethics and values as embedded in the three major religions in Nigeria – Christianity, Islamic and African Traditional religions. The study finds that those religions are entrenched with different but complimentary environmental ethics and values which can serve as paradigm upon which a viable and sustainable environmental management can be developed. It recommends, therefore that governments and all other environment stakeholders should embrace ecotheology as a potent instrument to achieving sustainable environmental management in Nigeria.

## I. INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, environmental issues have generated discussions and consciousness of people around the world. It becomes clear that the physical, chemical as well as the biological integrity of the globe is being compromised on daily basis as the world continues to witness serious environmental disasters. These environmental disasters are not only continuous; they are increasing both in quantum and in rate. While those destructive processes understandably made headlines, it is the silent day – day deterioration of the environment that ultimately poses a devastating threat to humanity (Schaefer, 2004)

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 despoliation of the environment has been a source of concern for governments, international bodies, environmental stakeholders and individuals around the world.

Nigeria is not isolated from this widespread concern about sustainability of the environment and its entire ramifications. This concern becomes heightened as a result of increasing environmental degradation in the country. There is no doubting the fact that environmental degradation and poor sanitary conditions have affected Nigeria in recent years. These are particularly expressed in terms of environmental pollution, desertification, deforestation, and other negative environmental conditions.

The increasing concern for sustainable environment in Nigeria prompted the Federal Government, in 1988, to establish the Federal Environmental Protection Agency (FEPA) charged with the responsibility of safeguarding

Nigerian environment. However, in 1999, the Ministry of Environment was created to absorb and takes over the functions of FEPA, with the additional responsibility of administering and enforcing environmental laws in Nigeria. Various organizations have also spearheaded political activism and campaigns for changes in policies, laws, technologies, and development strategies to enhance environmental qualities (Ebong, 2001). It is however, disheartening that despite the concerted efforts of governments and non governmental organizations to address the issues of environmental degradation in Nigeria, the problem continues unabated.

Against the backdrop of seemingly intractability of environmental problems in Nigeria, this study examines the viability of using religion as a potent instrument to achieve sustainable environmental management in Nigeria.

## II. CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL ISSUES

The concept of sustainable environment can simply be seen as involving the use of natural products and energy in a way that does not harm the environment. Sustainable environment is therefore, the balance between every component of environment – the human environment (the social, cultural, and economic environments) and the bio – physical environment (Wikipedia, 2009)

From the foregoing, sustainable environmental management, is the one that recognizes the linkages between human-made and natural environment and integrates social, cultural, political, economic with environmental issues. By implication, sustainable environmental management is not the conservative of the environment solely for the environment's sake, but rather the conservation of the environment for humankind's sake (Wikipedia, 2009).

Religion, as a concept, has a considerably large number of definitions. All the definitions, however, emphasize certain aspect of religion and exclude others. While, some definitions tend to be too inclusive and too easy to qualify as a religion, others are too exclusive and too difficult to be passed for a religion.

In the words of Durkheim (1912) "Religion is a unified system of belief and practices relative to sacred things". From this definition, distinction is made between the sacred and the profane. Sacred objects produce a sense of awe, veneration and respect. Whereas, profane object do not. However, Robertson (1970) defines it in terms of supernatural belief "Religion refers to the existence of supernatural being that has governing effect on life". Spiro (1965) combines both supernatural element and institutional aspect of religion to define it as "an institution consisting of

culturally patterned interaction with culturally patterned superhuman beings”.

Although, none of the definitions given above is all embracing, it reveals, however, that religions comprise of sacred, supernatural and institutional elements. Thus, we can view religion as the system of culturally patterned faith that is based on the existence of god or gods (sacred or supernatural). From the foregoing, religion provides more general guidelines for action in the form of beliefs, values, and system of meaning which is necessary for value consensus, social order and collective conscience.

Every society or group evaluates the behaviour of its members as appropriate or otherwise through the widely conception about what is good, right or desirable, known as “value”. The concept of value is conceived by Tukur (1999) as a conception of the desirable which influences or guides in the selection of one from any number of available means and end action. Schaefer (2004) also sees values as collective conception of what is considered good, desirable, and proper – or bad, undesirable, and improper – in a culture.

Deriving from above, it is logical to say that values influence people’s behaviour and serve as criteria for evaluating the action of other. Religious value, therefore, can be explained as the conception of desirable, standards, or principles dictated by the belief system.

Having confirmed that religion is a cultural system, which provides more general guidelines for action in form of belief, values and system of meaning, it is pertinent to examine the perspectives of different scholars expressed in term of theoretical explanations on religion.

A variant of theories that exist on the nature and effects of religion are complex and contradictory. The scholars identified with each theory have convergence opinion on religion being an extremely important social variable.

The Functionalist sociologists such as Emile Durkheim and Talcot Parson examine religion in terms of society’s need. Functionalists believe that society requires a certain degree of social solidarity, value consensus, and harmony and integration between its parts (Haralambus and Alburn, 2007). They, therefore, analyze religion primarily on the contribution it makes to the society. In the words of Durkheim (1912), values and moral beliefs that form collective conscience are central to the social life. In their absence, there would be no social order, social control, social solidarity or cooperation. Durkheim (1912) observes that religion reinforces the collective conscience by defining values and moral belief as sacred, thereby provides them with greater power to direct human action. He affirms that if religion has given birth to all that is essential in society, it is because the idea of society is the soul of religion.

Malinowski (1954) agrees with Durkheim (1912) that religion reinforces social norms and values but does not see religion as reflecting society as a whole, nor does he sees religious ritual as the worship of society itself. Like the previous scholars, Parsons (1964) believes that religion maintains social stability by relieving tension and frustration that could disrupt social order. According to him, the major

function of religion is the provision of meaning to events that people do not expect or feel ought not to happen. By making sense of these frustrating and contradictory events, religion allows intellectual and emotional adjustments which ultimately promote order and stability in society. The works of Durkheim (1912), Malisnowski (1954) and Parsons (1964) represent the functionalist approach to the study of religion.

The Marxist perspective provides a sharp contrast to functionalist idea of religion. Central to Marxist theorists was the oppressive economic situation in which Karl Marx dwelt. Karl Marx viewed such elements as exploitation, objectification, and alienation as inherent elements in capitalism. It is on this basis that the Marxist theorists analyze religion

Marxists, like the Functionalists believe that religion acts as a mechanism of social control but they focus on its negative side. From their viewpoint, religion maintains the existing system of exploitation and reinforcing class relationship (Haralambus and Alburn, 2007). By “social control”, the Marxist means “keeping people in their place”. By this, religion does not simply cushion the effect of oppression, it is also an instrument of oppression which tends to discourage people from attempting to change their situation. In their analysis, the Marxist sees religion as the “opium of the masses” as it soothes and dulls the sense to the pain of oppression (Wikipedia, 2009)

Religion is also viewed by Marxist sociologist, as a justifier of social inequality. (Haralambus and Alburn, 2007). For instance, the lines from Victorian hymn “God made them high and lowly. And order their estate” shows how religion can make social arrangements appear inevitable. This makes those at the bottom of the stratification system to accept and come to term with their situations.

From whatever perspective religion is examined, one salient fact, that is very crucial to this study remains that religion can be the most powerful influence on the worldview, values, attitude, motivations, decisions, and behaviour of individuals, groups and societies for better or worse (Sponsel et al, 2007). Deriving from foregoing, the negative view, value, attitude, decision and behaviour of people towards environment can be altered through the powerful influence of religion.

#### I. RELEVANCE OF RELIGION IN ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

According to August Comte (1798 – 1857), human societies evolved through evolutionary processes of theology, metaphysical and positivistic (scientific). The course of scientific revolution, propelled by greed, has made man to become presiding deity of modern civilization which laid emphasis on the rights over obligations, particularly in the context of natural environment. The scientific research and development seemed to bring to the world technological superiority over nature. This development, no doubt, ignores the perennial wisdom of the world’s spiritual traditions. The result is discernable dysfunctions in the form of environmental degradation which raises serious questions regarding the long term viability of modern society.

Unfortunately, all the technocratic, scientific solution to the problem of increasing environmental degradation could not yield any desirable results. The question now is what strategy can be formulated to protect our environment and keep it intact for future generation?

This question was answered by Sponsel et al (2007), while asserting that religion provides alternative ways of affording nature various cultural, cultural, moral, and spiritual meanings, and defining the place of humans in nature including how man should act towards non – human beings and other phenomena. This is because religion is grounded in the idea that nature as a whole is sacred, and or that particular spaces in nature are especially sacred.

The relationship between religion and environment gained relevance from the controversy generated by the famous article published in the “science” in 1967 by Professor Lynn White Jr. In this article, White affirms that western world attitudes were shaped by judeo – Christian traditions (with the inclusion of Islam and Marxian in the overall tradition). This tradition, according to White (1967), led to series of environmental crisis that bedeviled the planet today and was rooted in the concept of a world created solely for the benefit of man as entrenched in Genesis 1:28

“And God blessed them, and God said unto them, be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.”

The controversy generated by this analysis stimulated the growth of the field of environmental ethics and ecotheology. This resulted in a sampling of discussions of viewpoints of various religions, as well as statements by some religion groups on environment.

A more affirmative approach to the relationship between religion and nature was the Assisi Declarations of 1986 (Sponsel et al, 2007), which brought together Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Muslim and Jewish leaders, each to extract a viable environmental ethics from their faith. The Assisi Declarations rejected the idea that one religion is the cause of environmental crisis. Instead, they advocated that each religion may help resolve environmental problems for its followers. The world religion leaders agreed that religion is a more pluralistic, constructive, and pragmatic approach to solving intractable environmental crisis across the globe.

The place of religion in environmental management becomes prominent since 1980 through the growing dialogue among religions as well as between religions and sciences regarding the environment. This was despite centuries of recurrent mutual antagonisms. From the foregoing, it becomes obvious that substantial accomplishment have been accumulating in research, education, and action concerning the relationship between religion and nature. Accordingly, consideration of religion is very obvious, in the interest of environmental sciences, environmental studies, environmentalism and nature conservation.

## II. NIGERIA’S DEPRECIATING ENVIRONMENT

Nigeria has one of the worst environmental records in the world (Butler, 2008). The country has witnessed widespread social and environmental problems stemming from oil operations in the Niger Delta and has the world’s highest deforestation rate having lost more than half of its primary forests in the last five years (Agagu, 2009). The combined effects of these and many other environmental features have resulted in a visible and alarming rate of degradation in its environment, causing great damage to the land and bringing sorrow and poverty to many Nigerians. The manifestations of environmental problems are as discussed below

## III. DESERTIFICATION

Desertification, the encroachment of the desert on land that was once fertile, is more pronounced in the northern part of the country (Omofonwan and Osa- Edoh, 2008). The states affected by desertification accounts for about 38% of the country’s total land area (Agagu, 2009). In these areas, population pressure, resulting in overgrazing, over exploitation for fuel wood of mangrove land and aggravated drought due to global warming have accelerated the rate of desertification.

The reports from FORMECU (1997, 1998) show the increase in the total areas lost to sand dunes from 812 sq km in 1976 to 4829 in 1995. Desertification is a serious environmental problem which has led to famine, diseases, and destruction of crops, livestock and man.

## IV. POLLUTION

Environmental pollution can be categorized into three groups: The air or atmospheric pollution, aquatic or water pollution and land pollution (Omofonwan and Osa- Edoh, 2008). However, municipal and industrial pollution constitute the two major sources of pollution in Nigeria. It is disheartening that most Nigerian cities lack proper solid waste management scheme and the monitoring of industrial waste is inefficient (Agagu, 2009)

Despite the low level of industrialization in the country, industrial waste pollution still poses a major threat to Nigerian environment. This is made manifest in the percolation of effluent from industrial process into public drains and rivers thereby contaminating the surface or ground water.

It is imperative to say that petroleum industry contributes a significant quota to Nigeria’s environmental pollution. (Agagu, 2009). This is manifested in incessant oil pipeline spill incidents, equipment malfunctioning, corrosion of aged pipelines, sabotage of oil installations by militants and oil thieves.

## V. DEFORESTATION

Nigeria probably has the world’s highest deforestation rate of primary forest today as half of its primary forest has been lost to deforestation in the last five years (Agagu, 2009)

In 2006, UNEP estimated the annual deforestation in Nigeria to have covered 663,000ha with an annual national deforestation rate of 0.76%. It also affirms that the

deforestation rate in southwestern geopolitical zone doubles that of national average.

The major cause of this problem is the rapidly growing population with attendant higher demand for agricultural land, livestock production and fuel woods. The repeated cultivation of crops on cleared area of land also plunders the forest and exhausts the soil and its mineral contents (Omiegbe, 1998)

The increasing global demands for agricultural developments, urban growth, industrial expansion, and pressure from increasing population have had profound impact on the deforestation in Nigeria. This has ultimately reduced the extent, diversity and stability of the Nigerian forest.

## VI. EROSION

Erosion is one of the most critical environmental pollution affecting different parts of the country and this is particularly expressed in two types: soil erosion and coastal erosion.

Soil erosion is particularly severe in parts of the Nigeria underlain by sandy formation and are said to be prevalent in the states like Edo, Anambra, Imo, and Enugu. (Agagu, 2009). This problem is aggravated by such factors as increased agricultural activities, civil construction works, deforestation, bush burning, over grazing, drainage blockage, poor waste management, urbanization and increased population pressure.

On the other hand, coastal erosion is highly visible on Nigeria's coastline as 853km along Nigeria coastland are prone to coastal erosion (Agagu, 2009). This constitutes a series of ecological concern especially because a large percentage of Nigeria's population and economic activities are located within coastal zone.

Among the factors that influence coastal erosion in Nigeria, as identified by Agagu (2009) are (1) relatively flat coastal topography which restrain proper drainage, (2) climate change leading to rise in sea level, (3) reckless cutting down of mangroves which exposes the shoreline to increased energy and reduce sediment stability and (4) sand mining and dredging around beaches which depletes sand volume.

## VII. RELIGION AS SOLUTION TO ENVIRONMENTAL PROBLEMS IN NIGERIA

The manifestations of various environmental threats to the overall developments of Nigerian society have attracted the attention of governments, non governmental organizations and individuals. For example, Federal government in its bid to tackle environmental problems in Nigeria established environmental regulatory bodies such as FEPA, ministry of environment e.t.c. It also promulgates various environmental laws and regulations such as FEPA Act of 1988, EIA Act of 1992, Harmful waste act of 1988 etc. various organizations have also embarked on political action and campaigns for changes in policies, laws, technologies and development strategies to enhance environmental qualities. In spite of these efforts, there is not yet enough by way of concrete result indicating a drastic drop in Nigerian environmental problems.

In view of the foregoing, it becomes imperative that religious value be utilized as vital strategy to tackle the increasing environmental problems in Nigeria. As observed by Sponsel et al (2007), religion has the most powerful influence on the worldviews, 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 religions have ethical values which favour the conservation of nature. This provides a paradigm upon which a viable environmental management 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 messages about the creation is very lucid and are discussed 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" Romans 1:20

God values all creation "Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? and one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father." Mathew 10:29

All things depends on God's continuing care "And he is before all things, and by him all things consist"

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.

What are the responsibilities of man to the nature? The Bible makes it clear that God bequeath unto man, the responsibility of earth keeping

"And the LORD God took the 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 of which we are going to give account.

"Thou madest him to have dominion over the works of thy hands; thou hast put all things under his feet: All sheep and oxen, yea, and the beasts of the field; The fowl of the air, and the fish of the sea, and whatsoever passeth through the paths of the seas". Psalm 8: 6 – 7

While it is true that God gave man dominion over all creations and made them subservient to man. However, Christians must treat nature as having value in itself, and must be careful to exercise dominion without being destructive. The Bible contains numerous examples of the care with which Christians are expected to treat the environment.



“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. Furthermore, many of our environmental problems can be traced to man overindulgence and greed. The Bible warns on such greed and overindulgence

And he said unto them, Take heed, and beware of covetousness: for a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth.” Luke 12:15

“Jesus said unto him, If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow me” Mathew 19:21.

“But godliness with contentment is great gain” 1 Timothy 6:6

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. Muslims derive their values and guidance through a fundamental source of Quaran while hadith serves as a source of some basic principles or standard of ethics.

The position of Quaran 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). Humans are distinguished from animals by their capacity of reasons to moral choice. That is why they are entrusted and accountable as God's agents and stewards on earth. In other words, as part of God's creation, the human being has a special position as God's vicegerent (Khalifa) on earth.

“Behold, thy Lord said to the angels ‘I will create a vicegerent (Khalifa) on earth’. They said ‘wilst thou place therein one who will make mischief therein and shed blood?’ Whilst we do celebrate Thy praises and glorify Thy holy name? He said ‘I know what ye know not’” Quaran 2:30

Environmental crisis reflect the failure of the trusteeship, thus nature becomes an index of how a well a particular society has performed its responsibility towards God.

Furthermore the Glorious Quaran made it known that God has made nature subservient (sakhkhara) to man. This gives man the potential to abuse to abuse nature. But man should also realize that this relationship is also to test man's gratitude towards God.

“It is Allah Who has subjected (sakhkhara) the sea to you, that ship may sail through it by His command, that ye may seek of His Bounty, and that ye may be grateful. And He has subjected to you, as from Him, all that is in the heavens and on earth: behold, in that are Signs indeed for those who reflect”. Quaran 45:12-13

From these Quaranic verses, it is evident that all creations are for the use of mankind, however to show their gratitude to Almighty Allah, this must be done responsibly with as much consideration and kindness as possible.

While the attitude of Islam to environment, the sources of life, and the resources of nature is based in part on

prohibition of abuse, it is also based on cultivation and sustainable development. This integration of the development and conservation of natural resources is clear in the idea of bringing life to the land and causing it to flourish through agriculture, cultivation and construction.

“The Earth is green and beautiful, and Allah has appointed you his stewards over it. The whole earth has been created a place of worship pure and clean. Whoever plants a tree and diligently looks after it until it matures and bears fruit is rewarded. If a Muslim plants a tree or sows a field and humans and beasts and birds eat from it, all of it is counted as charity on his part”.(Hadith)

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 Yoruba 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 (Idowu, 1978). The Yorubas believe that the creation is a wondrous work of God (Eledumare). This is clearly explained in the words attributed to Orunmila by the Yorubas.

“Orunmila fehinti, o wo titi

Oni, ‘eyin ero okun,

Eyin ero osa,

Eyin o mo wi pe, ise Olodumare tobi.”

#### VIII. LITERALLY TRANSLATES

*“Orunmila leaned back, gazing contemplatively, he said ‘You travelers to the sea, you travelers to the lagoon, don’t you perceived that the works of God are marvelous?’”*

The Yoruba believe that by respecting the nature, they are respecting the wondrous work of God. They also believe that all features in natures are created and placed for significant purposes. For instance, some of the natural features are to serve as abode for a category of divinities (Awolalu and Dopamu, 1979). The Osun groove in Osogbo, oke Ibadan in Ibadan and Olumo rock of Abeokuta are all being preserved because they serve as abode for some spiritual beings.

The Yoruba religion has always being regarded as environmental friendly religion. The religion has regularly involved in reforestation and preservation schemes and their shrines are protectors of nature. (Ogunade, 2009) The overall idea of this belief is that it creates healthy and beautiful habitats for human and spiritual beings.

The concept of nature in Yoruba religion regards humans, animals, plants, and non living beings as co – habitants. Therefore, human beings must be careful not to maltreat the nature in order to allow for a peaceful co – existence.

#### IX. CONCLUSION

The global environmental crisis is certainly as result of lack of self discipline of scientific knowledge propelled by greed. There is no doubt that the scientific knowledge disregards the perennial wisdom of the world's spiritual traditions while laying emphasis on rights over obligations particularly in the context of natural environment.

A cursory glance at Nigerian environmental profile presents a heartrending situation. Nigeria is confronted with enormous environmental challenges. For instance, Nigeria has been identified to have one of the worst environmental records in the world (Butler, 2008). Agagu (2009) also confirmed Nigeria to be one of the worst environmentally stressed region in the world. This abysmal record underlines Nigeria's vulnerability to environmental risks and lack of effective environmental management strategy to respond to the threats in a sustainable manner.

As effective environmental management in Nigeria remains elusive, this study has proved that religion provides the most viable means through which this could be achieved. The three main religions in Nigeria were examined to be rooted in environmental ethics and values which could be an all important solution to achieving sustainable environmental management in Nigeria.

Therefore, in their bid to solve the seemingly intractable environmental problems in the country, environmental managers and policy makers, governments, non governmental organizations, religious leaders and general public are advised to lay more emphasis on the religious value as it relates to sustainable environment. This will go a long way in formulating an effective and acceptable environmental management strategy in Nigeria.

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