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Religious and Ethical Evaluation of the Attitudes of Some Contemporary Nigerians to the Environment: An Issue in Nation-Building

By

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Abstract

This article argues that though the major religions that pervade Nigerian society are replete with studies of adherents towards caring for and sustaining the environment, little or no attention is being paid to assess the practical attitude of Nigerians to the environment. This is the vacuum this work intends to fill in a discourse that focuses on rebuilding the nation. This task becomes expedient in the present environmental challenges in Nigeria that are manifesting in uncontrollable flooding, erosion, contamination, degradation, littering among others. The work which is premised on theory of environmental ethics as pioneered by environmentalists like Carson, White, Harden Leopold, Baxter, Taylor and Callicots examined the positive and negative attitude of Nigerians to the Nigerian environment. Both descriptive and phenomenological approaches were employed in the context of religious ethics, and it was observed that Nigerians abuse the environment-land, air and water through littering and indiscriminate dumping of refuse, unmindful and illegal constructions, excessive noise in social activities which often constitute noise pollution and undue emphasis on dominion mandate over the environment at the expense of stewardship mandate as espoused by theorists of religious environmental ethics. Consequent upon this, the article suggests that Nigerian government, corporate institutions and individuals should jointly assist in educating and sensitizing the citizens to develop good understanding towards the environment and relating with it in a more responsible way. This task becomes urgent as the contemporary Nigerian environment is almost becoming overrun by flood and erosion which are currently posing threat to human survival in Nigerian cities.

Key words: Nigeria, Religious ethics, Attitude, Environmental ethics

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Introduction

The various religions practiced in Nigeria are replete with duties of human beings towards caring for and preserving the environment. This has been buttressed by many environmental movements such as Greenpeace and Earth First who have successfully raised public awareness of the various dangers to the environment posed by industry, development and population growth (Hoffman, M.W 2004:367). From the Christian standpoint, individuals and church leaders have borrowed much leaf from Church traditions to herald man's role in the responsible management of the environment (Brown Taylor, 2000). In spite of these efforts, little genuine attention has been made to evaluate the daily attitudes of Nigerian citizens to the environment as to assess how truly they hold tenaciously to the environmental ethics so emphasized in the Bible, the Quran and tradition of elders. This is the gap this study is poised to fill. This task is considered important and timely in the contemporary environmental problems which include Global Warming (the heightened warming of the Earth's surface temperature due to anthropogenic or human related activities ranging from industrial activities to deforestation(Microsoft Encarta,2005). Responding to the seriousness of environmental problem and its concomitant implications, Olanisebe remarks:

Environmental degradation has been one of the banes of the Nigerian society. There have been a lot of health crises as a result of the pollution of the environment through emission of dangerous chemicals that are hazardous to human health. In another vein, there has been destruction of lives and property as a result of erosion occurrences leading to collapse of buildings..... Yet, majority of Nigerians care less about the way they treat the environment as if it has nothing to contribute to their development and achievement in life. Similarly, many religious people do not understand the connection between the worshipping of the creator and the environment which accommodated all created things. The situation seem not to be getting better as the religious leaders who ought to call the attention of their followers to the importance of taking care of the environment probably do not understand the uniqueness and sacredness of the environment (2008).

One of the inferences we can draw from Olanisebe's observation is that most of the environmental problems Nigeria is facing is purely anthropogenic. Neither God nor the devil; and not even the nature (as it is commonly called natural disaster) are culpable. Therefore, if we must avert dangers that are associated with it, we need to examine how individuals have deliberately and inadvertently aggravated environmental problems so that the entire society would work towards preventing further damage as well as finding solution to the existing ones.

Religion is one of the most active social institutions. Its relevant functions in addressing environmental challenges are not in doubt. However, whether Nigerians who are supposedly pervasively religious are contributing to the abatement of the contemporary

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environmental problems or they are culpable in its degenerative condition is one of the issues this article is poised to investigate. Furthermore, how religious ethics will instill changes in the attitudes of Nigerians for a better environmental management will be the concern of this study as well.

Conceptual Framework

In this article, three basic concepts are going to be discussed as our background to the study. These are religious ethics, environmental ethics and nation building.

Religious Ethics

In simple language, religious ethics is the conception of good living and right conduct that are derived from and influenced by religious beliefs. Ethics generally is the science of what is morally good and, right or wrong (Lillie, 1961). Living a life that aims at maximizing goodness and rightness that has the capacity of producing what is good, helps one to the realm of living a moral life. Religious ethics is a set of rules and principles concerning duties incorporated in religion. It gives the religious perspective of moral issues.

Every religion has embedded in it, value frameworks in respect of personal conducts that should guide adherents in determining between right and wrong, good and bad, virtues and vices. For instance, in Islam we have the Sharia as the moral framework; in Judaism the Halacha, in Catholicism the canon law, in Buddhism Eightfold Path, and in Zoroastrianism, the Good Thought, Good Word and Deeds concept. These frameworks are interpreted and outlined by various sources such as holy books, oral and written traditions and religious leaders. So what constitutes good or bad conducts are contained in religious scriptures or traditions, hence, we have religious ethics. Some scholars argue that morality is a product of the society (Mbiti, 1969), others believe that religion gave birth to ethics (Ayantayo, 1999). This later view is conceived by some religions like Judaism, Christianity and African traditional religion on the conviction that God made man in his own image and gave him some qualities that are inherent in Him.

One of these qualities is the sense of moral values which St. Paul refers to as the conscience and explains it as God's law that is written in man's heart (Romans 2:5). Religious ethics therefore sees God as the absolute source of moral values and the supervisor of every moral action of man. Religious adherents take religious ethics as a divine obligation which must be tenaciously clung to in every human activity ranging from political, social, religious or economic endeavour. This implies that religious ethics is relevant to every form of human activity, be it political, economic, religious or environmental.

Religious ethics holds that every human conduct is of importance to God as well as to fellow humans. So, good conducts like respect, honesty, kindness, tolerance, generosity and the rest attract reward from both God and men in the form of blessing and praise respectively. Theoretically, religious ethics is generally deontological in the sense that it holds that an action is right if it is consistent with the divine rules and fulfillment of duties. Relating it to the environment, religious ethics dictates that humans are stewards in the caring for creation or the natural environment which the Creator designed, owned and handed over to man to oversee. There are divinely stipulated rules that guide humans regarding his relationship to the natural environment. Living in compliance to them is considered right conduct in Christian Environmental Ethics (CEE) as well as in other religions; and living in the contrary is regarded as bad conduct and wrong attitude toward the environment. The latter is responsible for most of the environmental crises experienced in the globe today

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Environmental Ethics

The study of the environment over the years has caused the emergence of theories of the environment, especially from the view point of ethics, hence we have environmental ethics. Environmental ethics is a field in applied ethics which is concerned with the issues that arise when human beings interact with the natural environment. It also evaluates human conducts towards the natural environment (Okeke, 2014). Environmental ethics does not only seek to evaluate past and present attitudes and practices, but also aims at offering guidance on how people ought to think about and conduct themselves in their relationship with the natural environment (Ayantayo, 2009). Environmental ethicists use their theories to drive home their views and give considerably objective guidelines ranging from the debate as to whether or not the natural environment is an exploitable resource for man's pleasure to the view that the natural environment has an independent intrinsic value. Some of these theories include Anthropocentrism which is concerned with the place of human beings as objects of moral consideration in every environmental issue. It is on this premise that environmentalists like John Button could argue that 'we own the earth; nature is just there to serve us' (Park C. 1991).

This implies that self-centered lifestyle underlies the attitudes and values that man has for the environment. It has however, been alleged that such philosophies which hold that nature exists solely for the purpose of serving man are responsible for the present environmental degradation we are experiencing globally (Derr, T. S 1995:379). On the other hand, Ecology theory places emphasis on the fundamental interdependence of all biological and a-biological entities and their essential diversity. On the basis of this view, Francis of Assisi practically treated animals as his brothers and sisters. By this, The Libertarian theory extends human rights to non-human beings, especially animals. From this emerges the theory of animal rights in which Jeremy Bentham in the 19th Century maintained that animals have rights because they are sentient creatures which feel pains (John Stott, 1995:23). More recently, Peter Singer in his conventional book, *Animal Liberation*, remarks: 'Though there are differences between humans and animals, there has to be an extension of the basic principles of equality to human and non-human animals. On this account, the idea of species must be rejected as racism is vigorously rejected (Peter Singer, 1990).

For Peter Singer, the question of human dominion over all the creatures of God should be considered obsolete and unreal. The conservationist appreciates the worth of the environment in terms of its usefulness to humans. A more embracing theory is the holistic ethical theory, which holds that people have moral responsibilities to collection of individuals rather than (or in addition to) those individuals who constituted the whole. A critical examination of these theories has brought to the fore, the works of environmentalists like Aldo Leopold, Lynn White and Rachel Carson (Des Jardins, 2001). Against this background, environmentalists of some religions have come up with questions such as: should human beings deliberately cause the extinction of species just for human pleasure? Do we have any environmental obligation for the future generations? Should we continue to deplete the vegetation and forests for human consumption without adequate effort for replacing them? Should human beings continue to vigorously pursue technological advancement at the expense of the existence of other life forms in their natural habitat?

Drawing on biology, moral philosophy and environmental science, Taylor defends a biocentric environmental ethic in which all life has value. There is a rational justification for conceiving all living things as possessing inherent worth. Taylor holds that human beings, plants and animals have moral rights; a conception that offers a reasoned alternative to the

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prevailing anthropocentric view which holds that natural environment and its wildlife are valued only as objects for human use or enjoyment. Taylor goes further to posit that where there is respect for nature, there will be a comprehensive view of the complex relationship between humans and the whole of nature. Thus if we will not ask “what is human being good for”? We should not ask “what is nature good for”? (P. W. Taylor, 2011). In environmental ethics, we value ecosystemic stability as an end as well as valuing the ecosystemic diversity as a means. Environmental ethics also maintains that by diminishing the natural systems and species, we diminish the enjoyment and the fulfillment that might be available to us, our neighbours and our posterity. These are moral issues that environmental ethics addresses.

Nation Building

To understand the concept of nation building, one needs to define what a nation is. Early conception of nation defined it as a group or race of people who share history, tradition and culture, sometime religion and usually language. Among people of the same nation, there is usually a sharing of common identity ranging from common origin, common tradition and lifestyle and often common goals. According to I A Gambari, ‘Nations are built by exemplary men and women and sustained by institutions that promote good governance and socio-economic development (Gambari, 2008). Earlier in history, societies were divided in kingdoms and empires. In the modern period, societies are divided into nations or nation-states as the basic human political organization.

Nigerians are concerned about nation-building because they lack most of the original ingredients of a nation. Nigeria neither shares the same history nor tradition and culture. She neither has the same religion nor a common origin. Building a solid nation out of these diversities has to be the product of concerted and determined efforts. Nigeria constitutes an integral part of the modern world. Nation-building does not just happen. It requires the conscious efforts of men and women with vision to achieve stability and development for their citizens. Nation building involves many aspects which include building a political entity which corresponds to a given territory which upholds some generally accepted rules, norms and principles and a common citizenship. It is also about building institutions like economy, judiciary civil organization etc. In addition, nation building is also about building a common sense of purpose, and building values that make nations viable and sustain the collective community. Unfortunately, nation building is not just about the size of the population, nor is it about the abundance of its natural resources; otherwise, Nigeria would have passed for a built nation.

In the case of Nigeria, there are different levels of challenges to nation-building. They include the historical legacies of colonial rule that divided the nation into two blocks (or countries) within a country - the blocks of northern and southern administrative regions and the challenge of socio-economic inequalities. In an entity that claimed to be a nation, some areas are marginalized and denied their basic rights. Consequently, citizens are not motivated to support the state and the society. Some members of the society feel neglected and that the society does not care about their welfare. They have to struggle to survive with the raw provisions of nature that are available to them; even if it means stripping the natural environment. Nation-building is about national development. When people are not adequately catered for, their commitment towards national development is impaired. Today, many Nigerians are aware that logging degrades the environment, yet trees are steadily felled for commercial purposes without minding its effect on the land.

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Attitudes Of Some Nigerians To The Environment

In Nigeria, religion, health and economic factors sometimes influence the attitudes of people to the environment. Thus, some Nigerians are environmental friendly, while the perceptions of some towards the environment are clouded by disregard. In recent times, certain Nigerians who are Christians indiscriminately cut down trees on the belief that they are evil. While some road contractors and construction Companies sometimes after destroying trees and moving earth with bulldozers, abandon the road construction, without completion, thereby exposing some Nigerian roads, and communities to the ravages of erosion.

The activities of local farmers who see bush burning as a means of preparing the land for tillage are posing a threat to the Nigerian environment; so are some Nigerians whose means of livelihood is hunting. Illegal exploration and refining of crude oil, and the emission of carbon monoxide into the air by some oil companies, especially, in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, are also devastating the Nigerian environment. Onyema (2016:19-20), anticipates this position when he writes thus:

In the Niger Delta, the environment crawls with the devastation of the oil firms whose enormous profits mock a people whose bowel of the earth has become an oblation for... companies in alliance with our government. The result is that our farmers cannot farm, the hunter's guns are now shy for lack of game, the fisherman can neither swim nor catch fish in its former rivers that teemed with life.

The major attitudes of Nigerians that constitute environmental concern in this study include the act of littering, inappropriate erection of structures and bill boards, and thoughtless decimation of forests and vegetations. Both in the cities and rural areas, it is observed that Nigerians are obsessed with littering. Collins English Dictionary defined littering as carelessly dropping small refuse or waste materials especially in public places. In Nigeria, people drop cellophane and other types of wrappers after eating their snacks either from the moving vehicles or as they walk along the road. During celebrations, the party venues are usually defaced with disposable plates, spoons and cans. Households dump their trash by the roadsides, waterways and nearby bushes. Market women bring out their refuse when it starts raining so that the flood will assist them to convey it to 'the unknown' destination. Various members of the society including men, women, children, educated and illiterates are all guilty of such attitudes.

Other attitudes that are inimical to the environment include unplanned citing of structures to constitute built environment. Such structures are not compliant to the prescription of the urban developer. They therefore result in blockages to the drainage systems and water ways. These attitudes have great negative impact on the environment and on the members of the society. Beyond littering and blocking the water ways with irregular citing of structures, another attitude of Nigerians that abuses the environment is that of greedily felling down trees to make wood coal for domestic use. Normally, a tree takes about twenty-five years to mature. It is cut and burnt into coals that would be used up in just three weekend parties. Unfortunately efforts are hardly made to replace the cut trees by planting new ones. Consequently rain forest zones are speedily turning to desert lands.

The effects of littering and unplanned development include blockage of water ways, land and air pollution and de-beautification of the environment. Littering of inorganic substances like polythene paper bags, and other domestic disposables constantly block the gutters and sewage system in urban areas resulting in the terrible flood we are now experiencing in almost all the urban centers in Nigeria.

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Nonetheless, there are certain Nigerians whose attitudes to the Nigerian environment are really commendable. In some states of Nigeria, every last Saturday of the month, the citizens are encouraged by their leaders, at the state and local government levels, to clean their surroundings. This is to make sure that their health conditions are not tampered with. There are some Nigerians, also, who use the clean-up periods to plant trees around their houses.

Environmental ethics and the attitude of Nigerians towards the Environment

As was earlier established, environmental ethics has to do with moral principles that guide human behaviours towards the environment. If this is the case, then the relevance of the natural world, in the sustenance of the lives of people, animals and plants cannot be overestimated.

Bowie in Manus (2008:307-308), corroborates the said view when he writes:

Value ethics prescribes that we humans must respect our environment through the preservation of species the conservation of habitats, the non-depletion of biodiversity and natural resources, the Ozone layer...

The position of the Infinite (God) in the establishment of man's environment (Gen. 1:1-2-25), makes the natural world an invaluable asset. Our environment must be treated as such. The divine mandate given to man to dominate the natural world (Gen. 1:26), makes him (Man) an active participant in the development and protection of the ecosystem. Therefore, any attempt by man to relegate his environment to the background, endangers his relationship with the Creator, nature and humanity in posterity.

Ademola (2008:232), agrees with the aforesaid idea, when he states:

Then God said, let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth and over all the creatures that move along the ground. Though God is the creator, He gave humanity the responsibility of being the ruler under God's sovereign supervision.

Still on this, Danny (2004:116-117), opines that God said that men and women (both young and old) must rule over and take care of the natural world; failure to do this is disobedience. There is no gainsaying the fact that the practices of certain Nigerian citizens are antithetical to environmental ethics, from the Christian perspective. African traditional religion, which the Nigerian indigenous religion is part of and Islam, both frown at environmental degradation. This is simply because it threatens the health, socio-economic and religious status of man. Bakut in Best (2012:241), makes this point clearer as he posits that:

Environmental degradation, if it continued unchecked, would lead to disasters in the world with great consequences. For example, the impact of global warming caused primarily by pollution linked to ... industrialization ... has led to the emergence of new forms of cardiac related diseases and the rising of the sea levels. This in turn, results into floods, washing away coastal cities...

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destroying lives or rendering the inhabitants refugees. It also leads to hotter climates which contribute to drought, desertification, as well as soil erosion – common problems in Africa.

A critical look at the above stated positions indicates that as long as religion is concerned, it is absolutely immoral to abuse the natural world. The beauty of Christianity, Islam and African traditional religion lies in the fact that they match word with action (Uche, 2006: 27-28; Anyanwu, 2013: 46-47 & Opoku, 1978:8). For this reason, all genuine religions must directly and practically respond to the plaguing issues in the society.

Nigerians, both in the traditional and contemporary situations, are highly religious (Parrinde, 1954 & Kanu, 2015:405). Little wonder traditional religion, Christianity and Islam are seen in almost all the nooks and crannies of Nigeria today. It is really worrisome that the Nigerian environment, currently, is suffering from noise pollution. A horrendous situation created mainly by the nefarious activities of certain contemporary Nigerian Christian, and Islamic leaders, whose megaphones and loudspeakers are often turned to the highest pitch, in order to attract new members, and increase the numerical strength of adherents.

Each of the afore-stated religions preaches the salvation of man. How can one be saved, when the oil that lubricates the wheels of the environment, which refurbishes the lining of his soul, is frozen solid, by some “Liberators”? True religion that can save man from eternal condemnation is the one that is ready to liberate his mind, body and spirit from the clutches of all forms of forces of suffocation.

In every state in Nigeria, there is a department that takes care of town planning. It is quite unfortunate that some Nigerians build their houses, without following the directives of the authorities of the said department, thereby exposing some Nigerians and their environment, to the menace of flooding.

Conclusion and Way Forward

The importance of religion in social cohesion, integration, solidarity, etc., cannot be overemphasized. So, religious leaders in Nigeria must live up to expectations. God is pure and divine. He is an epitome of perfection. For this reason, there is an element of perfection in all His creations. If this is the case, then the natural world and its contents deserve some respect. Again, it is absolutely immoral to abuse any of God’s creations. The aforesaid facts or truths must be properly drummed into the heads of Nigerians by religious leaders in Nigeria. Failure to perform this divine assignment amounts to negligence of duty; a crime and sin which demeans man’s dignity and pedigree.

The natural world, must, at all times, be treated with respect because it critically showcases the magnanimity of God’s love for man, and His position on the relevance of order and beauty. To indiscriminately destroy any of its components for whatever reason is highly inimical to the interests of the Nigerian society. Every Nigerian citizen must be adequately informed, as regards this. For example, trees provide man with oxygen (a gas that is present in air and water) and takes in carbon dioxide from man. Therefore, its abuse and destruction will cause man severe pain and sorrow. Similarly, the essence of town planning is to promote beauty, order, harmony, etc., in the society so that the quality of man’s life will be improved. For this reason, Nigerian citizens must always be advised to build their houses, churches, mosques, etc., according to the directives of the authorities of the town planners in Nigeria.

Permit us to state at this point that the religious authorities in this section of the globe must, through their homilies, sermons, etc., call to order some of their members who are

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involved in illegal exploration and refining of crude oil, in Nigeria. Those of them that work in some oil companies in Nigeria that are directly or indirectly involved in the emission of harmful gasses into the Nigerian environment, must also be admonished to follow the part of wisdom. If the aforesaid ideas are properly adhered to, God, nature, etc., will be pleased; and when this happens, Nigerians will experience poise and peace. Again, if religious authorities in Nigeria introduce the use of soundproof devices in their churches, Mosques, and other public places, noise pollution which has subjected some Nigerian Citizens to partial or complete deafness will be drastically reduced.

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