

# RELIGION AS A TOOL FOR RE-ENGINEERING ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

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## **Abstract**

*Environmental degradation has become a global problem with each country or section of the globe experiencing one form of it or other or a combination of several types. Nigeria has a good deal of environmental crisis with all nooks and corners of the country experiencing environmental challenges. Nigerian government and the non-government organizations (NGOs) at both the nation, state, and the local government levels have put on several measures to confront the environmental crisis but still, the problems still persists and continued unabated. It is not the concern of this paper to discuss these measures exhaustively. The aim of this paper is to discuss how religion can be used as tool to enhance positive attitudes towards the environment and also, serve as a tool for re-engineering environmental education. It is the opinion of this paper that religion and religious organizations can greatly help in the quest for solution to Nigerian environment crisis.*

Environmental degradation has become a serious national and global problem. The world today is facing unprecedented environmental and ecological crisis. No continent or country is exempted. Such environmental problems as flooding, bush fire, desertification, oil spillage, erosion, deforestation, global warming, pollution, population growth and all manner of environmental crisis have become the order of the day.

Much of the attention given to these problems both at the global and national levels and especially in Nigeria has been secular approaches. For example, modern land use decrees or acts have been made in Nigeria without serious consideration to the religious influence on land and the whole environment. This attitude made Anyacho (2011) to observe that the federal and state governmental policies have not really helped matters in changing people's attitude towards the land. According to him, people live, move and have their being on the land but their activities are seriously governed by their predominant world views. Therefore, according to him, it is important that religion should be seen as a strong factor in issues relating to the land and even the entire environment.

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Zakkir, Hussain statement cited by Olupuna (1992: 2) is relevant when one considers the central role of religion in world's problems. He advised that it would be unwise for anyone to ignore religious solution to world problems because great issues continue to be settled consciously or unconsciously against the background of religions conviction.

Oeschlaegar (1994:4) put it more clearly when he asserted, "there are no solutions for systematic cause of eco-crisis, at least in democratic societies apart from religious narratives".

The observation above brings to the fore the crucial role that religion can play in any discourse that relates to the environment. It is in consideration of the role of religion in solving world problems that this paper discusses the role of religion as a tool for re-engineering environmental education.

### **Environment**

The concept "environment" has been defined in several ways. Scholars often define it in relation to their areas of specialization and socio-cultural backgrounds. Although the various definitions seem to contain the some basic elements, they have however revealed the diverse and encompassing nature of the environment.

Ajayi (1998) defined environment as the total surroundings of an organism in a given area including the physical surrounding, climate factors, and other factors. Abraham (1971) asserted that environment is the sum total of all external conditions influencing the growth and development of organisms. Oyeshola (2005) viewed the environment as the totality of mans immediately surroundings.

The Federal Environment Protection Agency (FEPA) Act of 1990, gives the following as the definition of environment. Environment include water, air land and all plants and human beings or animals living therein and the inter relationship which exist among these or many of them (section 38).

As an all-embracing and encompassing concept, the environment includes both land and the mineral in rocks, oceans depths and the polar ice caps, the atmosphere and climate, the cosmic or outer space as well as the solar and other energy resources. (Anijah-Obi 2001).

From the definitions above it can be said that environment is life itself. This explains why emphasis is placed on the care and maintenance of the environment and environmental education to ensure good life and maximum benefit of the environment.

### **Environmental Education**

Mwagwu (1996) defined environmental education as the product of planned and systematic efforts of inculcating in the individuals the consciousness of the quality

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of their environment. Environmental education can also be defined as the totality of formulated code of behaviours about issues concerning the environment intended to make to be aware of how to properly interact with his environment and how to solve problems affecting the environment.

Jekayinfa and Yusuf (2005) wrote that environmental education (EE) is a new field of education in Nigeria. It was introduced into the educational system in order to enhance the awareness of the people on environmental issues at all levels of education. It is a new approach to education which is hoped to bring some solutions to the deteriorating condition of the Nigeria environment. Through environmental education, it is believed that man would be able to find a mechanism for protecting and maintaining a friendly environment. Through environmental education, adults and children will be adequately equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills that will help them to meet the challenges of the environment. In environmental education, emphasis is placed on the needs of the children, adults and the general public to explore and conserve the environment.

The infusion of environmental education in Islamic studies and Christian religious studies point to the role of religion in solving human problems. It is a recognition that religion can help in solving environmental crisis especially in Nigeria.

### **Environmental Problems in Nigeria**

As observed earlier, Nigeria has serious environmental problems. Environmental challenges abound in all nooks and corners of Nigeria. Apart from the increasing desert encroachment affecting Sokoto, Kebbi, Zamfara, Katsina, Kano, Jigawa, Yobe and Borno states, the ubiquitous gully erosion in parts of South Eastern Nigeria, the oil spillage and water pollution in the Nigeria Delta area, there is also the frightening impact of land and environmental abuse of some natural resources such as water, air, the dumping of refuse and other domestic and industrial waste products in Nigeria cities and towns. In addition to the above, there is land scarcity and land disputes.

When King Saro Wiwa and other environmental activities campaigned against environmental degradation in the Niger Delta area of Nigeria due to the activities of oil exploitation, most people made no sense of their warnings. However, the effects of environmental damage as currently being experienced in Nigeria have triggered a lot of concern for environmental education and care for the environment.

### **Land Scarcity**

Land scarcity in Nigeria is due to increase in population. The last census population figures stand at 150 million. Most of our cities and towns have recorded high population density resulting in the pressure on land.

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### **Land Degradation**

Anijah-Obi (2001) Agbi (2005) have observed steady loss of the quality of soil in Nigeria due to human and natural activities. Anijah-Obi (2001) observed that Nigerian soil is losing its biological, chemical or physical richness. Agbi (2005) observed that there has been a phenomenal increase in the volume and range of solid waste generated in Nigeria due to the high rate of population growth, urbanization, industrialization and general economic growth. Commenting on soil erosion in Nigeria, Okebukola (2011: 21) says:

*It is particularly severe in Abia, Imo, Anambra, Enugu, Ondo, Edo, Ebonyi, Kogi, Adamawa, Delta, Jigawa and Gombe states. Anambra and Enugu states alone have over 500 active gully complexes with some extending to over 100 meters long, 20 meters wide and 15 meters deep.*

### **Desertification and Deforestation**

As noted earlier, much of the land of Sokoto, Kebbi, Zamfara, Katsina,, Jigawa, Kano, Yobe and Borno states have been eaten by desert encroachment. Okebukola (2011) cited report presented by the University of Maiduguri FEPA linkage centre for drought and desertification control thus:

*351,000km (38% of Nigeria's total land mass of 923,000km) has been desertified. Some 30 million people (about 30% of Nigeria's population) live under the hardship caused by desertification. The rate of desertification is estimated at 0.3-0.7km per year.*

### **Deforestation**

Deforestation is another great environmental crisis confronting Nigeria. Much of the forest in Nigeria is gradually disappearing without replacement. Deforestation is increasing because of the felling and logging activities. Much of Nigeria's tropical rain forests are under severe attack. Ogugua (2011) observed that in Onitsha and environs in Anambra state, most of the forest reserved by the colonialists have been felled down with high density buildings replacing them.

### **Environment Pollution**

Environmental pollution refers to the process of making air, water, soil (land) dirty. Pollutants also refers to substances that make air, water, soil (land) dirty. Abogunrin (2009) defined pollution as the introduction by man into the environmental of substances and energy which are liable to cause hazards to human health, other living organisms' resources and ecological system. He classified pollutions into three groups namely: air, water, land.

In Nigeria, there is the problem of pollution from toxic emission from factories and electric plants (because the electricity power authorities cannot generate enough electricity for the nation). Also prominent harmful pollutants like carbon monoxide is emitted from the exhaust of automobiles, machinery of industries, oil exploration and

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mining activities and other combustibles. Pollution from the huge refuse dumps in all Nigerian towns and villages is common. In Lagos and other cities, waste products from the saw mills and plumbing activities are being burnt on daily basis or thrown into the lagoon and waterways thereby, causing environmental hazards.

The environment is also polluted by smoke emitted from industrial engine, vehicles and machines, refuse dumped on land and water, industrial and domestic waste products, burning of waste products etc. Manus (2009) observed that one-third of all household garbage in Onitsha and surrounding towns came from polythene packaging material known as “nylon bags”. The same is true of all cities and towns in Nigeria.

### **Reengineering Environmental Education through Religion**

Scholars such as Udodora (2011), Thompson (1911), Cader (1968), Mbiti (1976) observed that all religious traditions whether elementary, pre-literate or advanced, are environmental friendly and teaches environmental preservation and protection. Udodora (2011) summed up the views of all the myths of creation in world major religions. According to him, although man is created last, he is given the highest responsibility and authority to take care of and rule over all creatures including the earth surface (the landmass) on which he dwells. He is also to take care of the sea and all the creatures living in it. All religions teach that the creator (God) is the owner of the world and everything that is in it including man. Therefore, man is only a steward given the authority to take care of what belongs to the creator.

African traditional religion has deep respect for the sanctity of the environment. That is why in African belief; each section of our environment has its role and functions in the society. Each section of land is dedicated to certain activities. These prescriptions were respected by every member of the community before the introduction of Islam and Christianity. There were taboos and laws governing the use of the environment throughout the year. Any abuse of the environment was always met with severe punishment. African traditional religion respects forests and prevents people from felling them.

Islam has great concern and respect for the environment. Like other religions, Islam views the land (the earth) as God’s own creation. Abedi Sarvestini and Sharvali (2008) cited many portions of the Qur’an to highlight the Islamic world view or perspective on the earth. One of them is:

And whosoever is in the heavens and whatsoever is in  
the earth is Allah’s and Allah encompasses all things  
(Qur’an 4: 126).

In Islam, according to Back (2011), the prophet Mohammed said “the world is green and beautiful and God has appointed you to be his steward over it.” Consequently, according to her, the first Muslim Caliph, Abubakar, declared “do not cut down a tree and always be kind to God’s creation.” In Islam, man has been granted

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stewardship for the environment, but nature (the environment) belongs to God. Islam teaches that the whole expanse of land is a mosque and therefore, must be respected and properly taken care of. Hence the environment, i.e. the land should always be kept tidy.

**Christianity:** In the view of Back (2010), Christianity holds the opinion that also reflects the view of other religions on environmental sustainability. She argued that Christianity can not afford to differ on such an all important issue because “all of the earth religions speak of an ethical responsibility to care for the natural world.”

The Bible reveals that God’s vision for his creation (as expressed in Genesis 1: 1-31) is very beautiful. According to the Bible, God looked at his creation and said that “everything was very good.” Every thing that God created was very beautiful. He created a very good universe. His vision for the world was of good and harmony, where every part expressed God’s wisdom, love and perfection. But unfortunately, what we have now is a sorry state of things, calling for redemption (Ashipu and Illesanmi, 2011: 171) quaoated Pope John paul II lamenting the unfortunate situation of the world in 1990 when he said,

There is a growing awareness that world peace is threatened not only by the arms race, regional conflicts and continued injustice among people and nations, but by also a lack of due respect for nature.

Psalm 104 is dedicated to the praise of God for his careful creation and supernatural ordering of the earth and for his sustenance of the earth. Northcott is cited by Hallum (2003: 58) supporting the Judeo-Christian world view of the environment. He stated:

We have found in the Hebrew Bible evidence of an ecological world view at least as earth friendly as that which ecologist such as Edward Goldsmith found in Taoism or in other eastern religions.

In Genesis 1: 25 – 28, we are told that man was created in the image and likeness of God with a divine mandate to rule and dominate the entire creation. Jacobs (2000) noted that “dominion means that we have sovereignty over and responsibility for the well being of God’s creation.” He further argued that:

We resemble God primarily because of this dominion; hence our dominion must also resemble God’s dominion. We must cultivate and care for the earth as God does with love and wisdom. We are called to exercise dominion in ways that allow God’s original creative act to be further unfolded.

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This view is in line with the teaching of Jesus Christ as recorded in the Bible. The two commandments of Jesus Christ to love God above all things and to love our neighbours as ourselves, is explained by Mick (1997:20) in relation to the environment.

Love of God requires respect for God's gift and for God's will for creation. Love of neighbor requires justice which prohibits the selfish destruction of the environment without regard to those in needs today or for the need of the future generations.

This statement means that God's instruction to conquer or dominate (Genesis 1: 26 – 29) is not a license to use the environment unethically. It means that God wants people to apply wisdom in the use of the environment to take care of God's creation and maintain its harmony (Ashipu and Ilesanmi 2011:170).

With regard to land disputes and the environment, Udodora (2011:11) stated that:

There will be no peace and social justice as well as socio-economic development in any part of the world if the owners of the land are not allowed to own their property or to have a say in matters of their land or environment. The use of land should be seen as a secular business but as a religious duty that should be handled with commitment and sincere respect.

## **Conclusion**

The paper discussed the role of religion in re-engineering environmental education. It demonstrated that African Traditional Religion, Christianity and Islam are environmental friendly and teach about environmental protection and preservation, it concludes that, going by the religious world-views of African Traditional Religion, Christianity and Islam religion can be used to make a strong case for land and other environment issues.

## **Recommendations**

The various religions in Nigeria can help to promote environmental education through the following as recommended by Anyacho (2011:6).

1. The religions in Nigeria should define sin in a new concept. The concept of sin should be expanded to include ecological injustice. All selfish treatment of the environment should be seen as sin.
2. The religions should teacher members to strictly consider environmental impact assessment before embarking on activity on land especially when building residential houses.
3. Religions can develop an ecotheology based on their world-views. Each religion ahs captivating world-views which shows that God is the owner of the earth. Man is not the owner.

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4. The major religions in Nigeria should take advantage of the common beliefs to propagate environment education. Common to African traditional religion, Christianity and Islam is the belief that God the creator is interested in his creation and hold humans responsible for any destruction of the created order.
5. The church should make a comprehensive review of the curriculum for Bible colleges and seminars to incorporate vital courses in ecology from the Christian perspective. “Christian earth keeping” should be taught in all junior seminaries while advanced courses in ecological theology should be offered in all advanced schools of theology. Islamic institutions should do likewise.
6. The church should evolve a new hermeneutic that is environmental friendly. Pastors should undergo regular ecological training in the form of seminars, conferences and workshops. (Etim, 2011:12).
7. The Church should encourage the formation of new non-governmental organization with ecological focus.
8. The Church should encourage the publication of journals, magazines and newspapers to generate ideas, and carry out public education and information on ecology.
9. Inter-religious dialogue should be pursued vigorously to make the social environment peaceful for living. Therefore, religion should be a source of peace and not a source of conflict.
10. Religious bodies, the church and mosque should endeavour to dedicate some days for clearing the environment, tree planting campaign and the propagation of environmental education.

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