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A THEOLOGICAL RELECTION ON ECOLOGICAL CONDITIONS IN NIGER DELTA REGION OF NIGERIA

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Abstract

Ecology refers to the study about the environment. This involves all the activities on the earth. Ecological conditions about the environment have become an important focus to every discipline including theology. The study is prompted by the fact that there is a serious rise in environmental crises due to human activities. These crises include all kinds of pollutions, spillages and flaring. The crisis is enormous in Niger Delta region of Nigeria where petroleum is extracted. Mismanagement of the environment is devastating. It leads to emissions such as greenhouse gases, carbon dioxide, chlorofluorocarbons, Aerosols, evaporation of contaminated water, spillage and flaring of gas and crude oil in the region. The ozone layer depletion leaves the earth with hotter and drier weather condition; this is experienced by many communities in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Mismanagement of the environment also leads to offensive weather that causes diseases such as malaria fever and sterility. This work employs the descriptive method which demands consulting theological materials in the light of biblical analysis. It reveals that in theology, the earth belongs to God but human beings are invited to toil diligently on it not to destroy it. Therefore, measure ought to be designed to sustain the desire of the Creator. This article concludes that a clarion call to adopt the theological instruction of preservation and good stewardship of the environment in order to maintain sustainable development in the society is imperative for contemporary Nigerians.

Introduction

The discussion on the humankind and the environment is a global phenomenon (White 23). The burning issues such as quality of environment, environmental degradation and pollution, disruption of the earth natural resources and ecosystem, ecological imbalance, global warming and others have given a great concern to scientific and religious thoughts. Presently, environmental crises is experienced everywhere in the world and every human beings in every society is concerned about the health of the environment. Akwa Ibom State is one of the states in Niger Delta region. Her experience of oil spillage and gas flaring is deplorable, Udok reports that about 90% house roofed with Zinc in affected area (where crude oil is extracted) gets depleted sooner (184). The state also experiences climatic crises effect. Food and erosion have caused some tremendous damages to the homes and residence. In Uyo metropolis especially in Urua Ekpa and Afaha, Oku axis, many houses have been abandoned, properties destroyed and many roads constructed in the region are damaged because of flood. Erosion has affected houses along Urua Udofia axis of Nwaniba Road. This has posed risk to human health.

Scholarly discussion about the health of the environment is not attributed only to science and technology. It becomes the business of every discipline. In other words, each discipline actually develops specific methods that help to examine the causes and develop ways to check the effects arising from environmental crises. Religion as a broad discipline which theology belongs, it studies environment from a wide range of multidisciplinary approaches namely: philosophy of religion, sociology of religion, phenomenology of religion, science, theology and others. This is possible because religion itself could be studied

differently by scholars of the subject. In a way, the scholar of religion may decide to approach subject matter, otherwise, the environment from the theological perspective or any other ways or even trying to combine the approaches with two or more disciplines.

From the dimension of theology, environment and environmental preservation form important issues of proper attention. Undoubtedly, both the environment and human beings are important to God. The earth (environment) is the Lord's and everything in it and all who live in it (Psalms 24:1). The earth is the only planet where life is sustained, "the earth serves respectively as a habitat and guardian of the life of human beings, other animals and plants" (Udok 179). On the other hand, God created humanity in his own image and likeness and command them to occupy the earth and care for it (Gen. 1:26-28). Human beings have a strong, caring and natural relationship with other components of the environment arising from the command given by God that they should dominate, care and protect the earth (Gen.1:28). This implies that God treasures both the environment and humanity; he did not command human beings to destroy it. Moreover, in one of the recent works, Michael Evans posits that the environment is at constant plague due to human activities. In his words:

An environmental disaster is defined as a specific event caused by human activity that result in a seriously negative effect on the environment. In most cases environmental disasters are caused by human error, accident, lack of foresight, corner cutting during industrial processes, greed, or by simple incompetence. In other words, without some kind of human intervention they would never have happened (93).

This is to say that there is a wanton destruction of natural environment. Human activities in form of modern technologies, bush burnings, poor management of waste, emissions of bad gases and chemicals into the atmosphere make the environment noisier, dirtier, contaminated and sometimes hotter and unbearable. When dangerous chemical are transmitted into the atmosphere, it will affect the atmosphere badly. These are chemicals containing halocarbons also known as chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs). These chemicals are inexpensive to produce and can be used as cleaning agents in big and small companies. The chlorine released by CFCs into the atmosphere leads the depletion of the ozone layer. Ozone layer is a shield that prevents the ultraviolet harmful effect from the sun. The ozone layer is constantly depleting, the atmosphere will be very hot and unconducive for living. This work seeks to give a brief synopsis of environmental crisis as caused by the activities of human beings and its devastating effect in the context of the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria. Possible solutions to the problem will be drawn from the theological perspective.

Concepts Clarification

Environment: According to Robert , environment is the sum total of all living organism including natural forces and other living things, which provides conditions for development and growth as well as danger and damage (301). This paper accepts this definition and adds that the word "earth" is used simultaneously with environment. The earth (environment) includes the lithosphere (beneath the surface of the soil) the biosphere (the outer earth and atmosphere capable of sustaining life) and all the components in them.

Theology: In this paper, theology is referred as the science that study about God, his concern about ecological relationship between the environment and human beings as well as spiritual relationship each human being who believes in Christ has with heaven as a reward for those that keep to terms with the divine command over the universe.

Environmental Theology: Environmental theology is a reflection on the systematic study of the relationship between theology and nature in the light of divine consciousness. It evokes concern about ecological values, human exploration and sustainability. Brown coins the

name eco-theology and holds that it is a form of theology that focuses on the interrelationship between religion and nature (4).

Environmental Crisis in the society

A number of factors lead to environmental crisis in the society. Some major ones are treated here.

- i) **Climate Change:** Cuputa et.al claims that it is inevitable that the changes occur in the physical environment in form of cold and warm periods. While natural changes occurring in the environment through natural greenhouse gases such as carbon dioxide (CO₂), oxygen (O₂) water vapour (H₂O) and nitrous gases and methane (CH₄) in an equilibrium proportion maintain average temperature in the atmosphere (203). This helps to maintain conducive living condition for human beings, plants and animals. But the anthropogenic climate change brings about pollution of the atmosphere by artificial or human-caused greenhouse gases (and other contaminants), that is, emitting more carbon than oxygen into the atmosphere. The result will be hotter air, gas flaring and depletion of the ozone layer (Udok 182-183). For Clark 360, the increase amount of carbon dioxide (CO₂) in the atmosphere due to human activities cause the earth to over-warm and the ocean to become more acidic (360). Climate change also occurs largely as a result of the combustion of fossil fuels, emissions from agriculture and pastoralism, and land-use changes that accompany the destruction, clearance and burning of forests. The resultant effect is an unconducive living condition for any living organism.
- ii) **Ozone Layer Depletion:** the depletion of ozone layer is caused by the pollution of the atmosphere by chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs), a family of chlorine contaminated gases that can be refrigerants aerosol spray propellants and cleansing agents (Udok 183). For Evans, the effect of ozone layer depletion is devastating because the lack of protective ozone at high altitudes results in increased levels of harmful solar ultraviolet (UV-B) radiation reaching the earth's surface, causing a range of health-related and ecological impacts (insert page).
- iii) **Land Contamination:** Evans holds that land contamination happens as a result of chemical or radioactive pollution, especially by long-lived (persistent) chemical species that enter the soil. Land contamination may cause profound ecological effects and it presents severe constraints to development, since contaminated land must typically be rehabilitated before it is safe to use for agriculture, construction or recreation (95).
- iv) **Air Pollution:** This occurs in both small and large scales arising from the activities and emissions of small groups and mega industries respectively. The pollutants include nitrogen oxide from bush burning, carbon from light generating plant and burning of food items at home. Air pollutants are responsible for the dilapidation of the quality of air in an environment. Many times, air pollutants may cause aggravate respiratory and cardiovascular illnesses as well as cause damage to vegetation and, in turn, produce a range of ecological effects.
- v) **Water Pollution:** Fresh water can be seriously degraded by pollutants. Human activities that lead to water pollution include oil spills, introduction of some certain chemicals into the ocean or marine environment to kill fishes. Udok mentions another form of pollution with groundwater (182). This happens when companies or individuals inject hazardous waste ponds into oceans. Leakage of industrial underground tanks and septic tanks to the

extent that those who drink bore holes that are not deep drink impure and contaminated water.

- vi) **Deforestation:** Evans estimated that around half of the world's mature forests have been cleared by humans. Deforestation occurs for a variety of reasons, but the majority of deforestation now occurs when tropical forests are cleared for agriculture and pastoralism; other reasons include the destruction of trees for charcoal production and the selective logging of forests for timber. When forests are destroyed and trees cut down without building up new ones, oxygen (CO₂) is reduced drastically in the environment. This will affect human breathing adversely (93).

The Niger Delta Experience

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria is experiencing poor environmental management. Again Evans puts:

In West Africa the Niger Delta covers 20,000 km² within wetlands of 70,000 km², formed primarily by sediment deposition. It is home to some 20 million people from 40 different ethnic groups. Its floodplain makes up 7.5% of Nigeria's total land mass and is the third-largest drainage basin in Africa. Its ecosystem contains one of the highest concentrations of biodiversity on the planet. In addition to supporting a vast range of flora and fauna, there is arable terrain that can sustain a wide variety of crops, tropical forests and more species of freshwater fish than any other ecosystem in West Africa. Unfortunately for the Niger Delta, oil was discovered in the region. Since drilling began in 1976 there has been little or no concern by the Nigerian government or the oil operators to exert any control of the environmental problems associated with the industry. The Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation admits that every year as a result of around 300 individual spills, nearly 2,300 cubic metres of petroleum are jettisoned into the environment. However, this does not take account of so-called "minor" spills and one estimate put the total spillage between 1960 and 1997 as upwards of 100 million barrels (16 million cubic metres). A major reason for these spills is simply the result of poor maintenance. Pipelines are old and corroded and although they have an estimated lifespan of about 15 years, many have been in use for about 25. Leaking pipes and the use of old and corroded tankers accounts for 50% of all spills. Understandably there has been a major impact on the ecosystem. Enormous tracts of mangrove forest have been destroyed along with most of the flora and fauna that were once found there (89-90).

From the above, petroleum extraction in Niger Delta though beneficial is leaving the environment of the region in a dreadful state. Oil spillage affects both the biosphere and the marine environments of the region. Crops cannot do well under such situation. Agricultural activity is low. Aquatic animals and fish are drastically reduced in the ocean. Gas flaring arising from oil and gas burning as well as the use of combustion engines to process petroleum release more calories of carbon in to the air. The heat experience in the area makes the roofing sheets to be corroded and depleted.

Burning of fossil fuel especially from generator is a serious practice everywhere in Uyo by individuals, small scale industries, large scale industries and other institutions. It is with serious dismay to note that different departments in the University of Uyo procure a generating plant since there is no constant supply of electricity. The plants are put to use at the same time. This leaves the environment in a terrible condition with excessive noise pollution and the air that is mixed with carbon. In such cases learning cannot be conducive in such environment. This same case is true in some compounds with many tenants. When all of them put on their generating sets, the environment becomes tense with smoke and noise.

They also go to bed with this terrible condition. In addition, Udoeffiong reports, “the state (Akwa Ibom State) has experienced high temperature for some months now which has cause some heart-related sicknesses and diseases to the citizens of the state” (20). The spread of the infectious disease may be due to warmer and contaminated environment. The World Health Organization (WHO) teaches that warmer temperature allows disease infectious insects, animals and microbes to survive in an area where they were once treated by cold weather.

Environmental crisis is affecting the economy of the state. Many people have suffered setback and loss in their businesses. The declining state of crop yielding due to prolong draught caused by oil spillage, high temperature and other forms of contamination in the Niger Delta Region has put many people at the risk of starvation and poverty. Udok reports about the extinction of a particular specie of cocoyam known as *cocondia* or *Ikpong paya* that grew in the coast land of Akwa Ibom and Cross River States (185). This specie of cocoyam was cheap and most people especially children loved eating it. Today the crop is lost.

Theological Response to Environmental Crisis

Christian theology is not only saddled with the responsibility of teaching the Bible and church confessions, but also respond to social moral crisis and global issues. Theology in the 21st century attends to global issues. Christian theology and the church retain a universal nature from its confession. Geissler puts thus

Because of the universal scope of God’s intension, because of the universal scope of Christ’s lordship, because of the universal scope of the kingdom of God, the church of Jesus has always understood itself as the as nothing short of universal... it becomes a global village open to, including, calling and embracing all humans (163). The scope of Christian theology is therefore not limited to some issues or persons and the cases it treats are whole lots of plurality of cases. Environmental crisis putting the all condition of living into disaster is a serious concern to theology. Two models of theological enquiries may be appropriate in responding to environmental crisis. They are the theology of divine sovereignty and human responsibility.

- a. **Divine Sovereignty:** Divine sovereignty refers to God’s ownership and rulership over all creation. It expresses the power and authority of God as the creator of the universe. Calvin holds that all creatures trace their origin and existence to God (197). Divine sovereignty translates to divine ownership of the universe. God made the world by Himself. The Psalmist records that the earth is the Lord and everything in it (24:1). Geisler quoted Job 41:11, Psalm 50:10 and 12 while saying that God owns the land, the trees, the animals and the minerals indeed the entire, environment (302-303). Theology ascertains that the environment is owned by God. The activities of human in the universe should be according to God’s dictates. The divine sovereignty is also expressed in God’s providence and continuous sustenance of the universe. In Psalms 115:3, 113:3, everything that exists in the universe depends on God’s sovereignty. For Geisler, “the world is sustained and operated by God... and that He is active not only in the origin of the universe but also in the operation of it” (303). This implies that humanity should be in obedience to acknowledge and pursue the glory of God who owns the world. This obedience is the power to do well and be led to pursue justice in all done in the universe of God.
- b. **Human Responsibility:** In theology, responsibility over the earth is obligatory to every human being. God created the world and requested the human beings to act as stewards in the universe. In Genesis (1:27-29), God created humans in his image, he blesses them and

commended them to be fruitful and increase in number fill the earth and subdue it. Also, to rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the earth and over every living creature that moves on the ground. This implies that humanity is under God's commission to fill, to toil and rule or dominate the earth. In the language of eco-theology, to fill would not mean to overfill, to toil and destroy or degrade and dominate, and to lord over. The sovereign Lord remains the Lord of the universe. The divine command to fill, toil and dominate the earth brings humanity into a relationship with God in building the environment together. Filling, toiling and dominating the earth culminate to mean care of the environment. God, out of trust entrusted his earth to human and expects service from them. God expects the human beings to render account of service in his environment to Him.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Recommendations

1. This paper evinces that theology stands the ground of providing possible solutions to all problems humankind faces including environment crises, hence, religious leaders should enlighten their adherents through preaching, teaching, seminars, and workshops in the view to making them become major agents of environmental protection, maintenance and sustainability.
2. It has discovered that the increasing level of environmental pollution, climate change and global warming are the activities of humanity, therefore Government through the ministry of Environment, should use bill boards and other means to give orientations to the public on environmental protection and sustainability.
3. Theology ascertains that the environment is owned by God and that human beings act as stewards. Therefore, every individual should endeavor to keep the environment clean and neat and avoid any activities that will destroy or degrade it.
4. Individuals should build positive consciousness and attitudes towards the environment knowing that if the environment is destroyed, there is no any other space or planet that sustains life. As such, every negative attitude towards the environment should be aborted. Positive attitudes toward it should be encouraged such as planting of trees

Finally, theology enunciates that the environment (earth) belongs to God. Human beings were created by God too therefore God wants them to care and sustain the environment.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

THE ESSENCE OF THE REVELATION: AN APPRAISAL OF THE CONTENTS OF THE QUR'AN Attahir Shehu Mainiyo, PhD	1 - 14
SHEPHERD MOTIF IN PSALM 23 FROM AN AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE: A TEXTUAL AND THEOLOGICAL CONSIDERATION Philip Asura Nggada, PhD	15 - 23
THE REDEEMED CHRISTIAN CHURCH OF GOD AND HER CONTRIBUTIONS TO NATIONAL DEVELOPMENTS Adesanya Ibiyinka Olusola PhD	24 - 30
AN EXPLORATION IN THE COMPILATION OF HADITH Muhammad Yahya PhD & Muhammad A. Abdullahi PhD	31 - 37
EXIGENCY FOR MUSLIM SCHOLARS IN THE PARTICIPATION OF CONTEMPORARY POLITICS Abdurrahman Abubakar Idris PhD & Muhammad Dahiru Shuni PhD	38 - 46
HARNESSING AND APPLICATION OF RELIGIOUS-CULTURE FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA Gerald Emem Umoren PhD	47 - 58
DESIGNATION OF LEADERSHIP TITLES IN ISLAMIC HISTORY Yakub Dauda, Mumini Isiaka Olosan, Salami Mufutau and Khadijat Buba	59 - 67
EXPEDIENCY OF NIGERIAN MUSLIM WOMEN IN NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT Rafatu Abdulhamid PhD & Abdul Rahim Muhammad Sanusi PhD	68 - 76
RESTORING THE PERSONHOOD OF THE AFRICAN WOMAN: CRITIQUE OF THE OLD TESTAMENT Sylvester Dan Udofia PhD	77 - 86
NIGERIANS' PERCEPTION OF CORRUPTION AND ISLAMIC VIEW Moshood Atanda Moshood PhD	87 - 95
ISLAMIC MORALE EDUCATION IN POST PRIMARY SCHOOLS: AN INSTRUMENT FOR SOCIETAL REFORM Lawal Abdulkareem PhD	96 - 101
CHRISTIAN CITIZENSHIP AND THE NIGERIAN STATE Adewale K. Kupoluyi PhD	102 - 107
FULFILLING GOD'S MANDATE: CARING FOR THE BIOPHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT AND SOIL CONSERVATION S.M. Maton, C.D. Dayil, S.J. Fada PhD, J. Audu, N.L Binbol PhD, E.A. Olowolafe PhD, G. Baklit PhD, A.C. Eziashi PhD and B. M. Matur PhD	108 - 118
SCHOLARSHIP TOWARDS STUDYING BIBLICAL LANGUAGES (HEBREW AND GREEK) Nenman D. Wapwera	119 - 127
EMPIRICAL STUDY ON THE USE OF INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY (ICT) IN TEACHING / LEARNING ISLAMIC STUDIES AND THE PERCEPTION OF STUDENTS AND LECTURERS OF COLLEGES OF EDUCATION, NORTH-EASTERN NIGERIA Bello Ali	128 - 134
CHURCH REFORMATION AS ANTIDOTE TO THE PROMOTION OF NATIONALISM IN NIGERIA Odudele Rotimi PhD	135 - 143
POWER OF LANGUAGE NAVIGATION: MORPHOLOGICAL DERIVATION IN ARABIC LANGUAGE Sulaiman Ayobami Sanusi	144 - 149
MUSIC PROSPECTS ENHANCEMENT THROUGH RELIGIOUS AND TECHNOLOGICAL IMPACT IN NIGERIA Emmanuel Imasekhodevbo Aimiuwu Ph.D	150 - 155
UNDERSCORING THE STRENGTH OF THE CHRISTIAN FAMILY IN NATION BUILDING – CHURCH PERSPECTIVE Ogunlusi Clement Temitope PhD	156 - 162
THE IMPACT OF ISLAMIC PROPAGATION IN THE TRANSFORMATION OF KAMBARI PEOPLE OF NIGER AND KEBBI STATES Aminu Alhaji Bala PhD & Aminu Malam Yakubu Umar PhD	163 - 171
A THEOLOGICAL RELECTION ON ECOLOGICAL CONDITIONS IN NIGER DELTA REGION OF NIGERIA Mbosowo Bassey Udok PhD	172 - 177
RELIGION, POWER AND MEDIA: EXPLORING THE INTERFACE OF TOOL FOR ACHIEVING GLOBAL PEACE Kahar Wahab Sarumi PhD	178 - 187
INTERFACE OF LUTHERANISM AND AFRICAN INDIGENOUS RELIGIONS James Jemeyira Reynolds PhD	188 - 195
YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT AND SOCIO-RELIGIOUS CHALLENGES Omomia O. Austin PhD	196 - 207
CHRISTIAN-ETHICAL ASSESSMENT OF <i>IWOLEFU</i> AS A NECESSITY BURIAL RITE AMONG THE IJEBU/REMO OF OGUN STATE, NIGERIA Emmanuel Oluwasegun Awofeko PhD	208 - 219