

## Limitations to Religious Environmentalism: Some Evidence from Northeast Nigeria

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**Abstract.** World religions have, in recent years, become increasingly concerned with the issues of environmental sustainability. As a result, religious environmentalism is fast becoming an important feature of the global environmental movement. To understand how religious communities in one of the regions severely affected by environmental degradation define human-environment relations and perceive their role in dealing with the crisis, I interviewed leaders of some Christian and Muslim congregations in northeast Nigeria. The interviews reveal substantial evidence of religiously-inspired environmental concern. Religious resources have been identified as valuable assets in mitigating environmental degradation and achieving sustainable communities given the powerful role religion is playing in shaping people's social life across Nigeria. However, the study found limited evidence of conscious actions to protect the environment. The practice of religious environmentalism is limited by the 'conflict' between survival needs of the majority of the people and long-term goal of sustainability, low level of awareness of environmental issues and, 'deprioritisation' of environmental matters by religious communities.

**Keywords:** Religion, environmentalism, northeast nigeria, environmental degradation.

### 1. Background

Lynn White [1] is credited with introducing a valuable critique of the monotheistic religions especially the Judeo-Christian tradition for holding 'dominance-over-nature' orientation which he blamed for being the root cause of ecological crises of the time. According to White, Biblical injunctions in Genesis 1 have been interpreted as giving unlimited power to humans to have 'dominion over nature'. White holds that people in the Judeo-Christian west interpret this injunction to mean license given to man to exploit nature without limit, a situation that leads to unrestricted growth in science and technology [1] that engender anthropogenic ecological crisis. White suggests that an alternative environmentalist theology that promotes 'stewardship' is necessary to mitigate global ecological crisis. Many theorists [2]–[4] espoused White's hypothesis arguing that at least in the last few centuries the Christian world's relationship with nature was essentially anthropocentric. This 'anthropocentric' worldview characterised by 'materialist and exploitative perspective on nature' [5] is largely responsible for environmental problems of contemporary societies.

A different theoretical position emerged to critique White's thesis, stressing that a careful look at the religious scriptures show that humans have not been accorded with unlimited power to exploit nature. To the contrary, this position holds that some scriptural teachings of the Judeo-Christian faiths emphasise 'stewardship ethic' [3], [6]. Proponents of this alternative thesis [7], [8] maintain that theologies in the Judeo-Christian tradition place emphasis on the sacredness of nature and human's necessary role to care for God's creation. They claim to have 'discovered environmentally positive passages in classic texts, and that Judaism and Christianity are "really" more environmentally minded than they seemed at first glance' [9]. Another perspective [5], [10] holds that Abrahamic faiths (Christianity, Judaism and Islam) are the major world religions that can be indicted of holding 'mastery-over-nature' worldviews. Majority of non-Abrahamic

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religions (Buddhism, Paganism) in their various forms, by contrast, have developed and maintained a 'man-for-nature' or stewardship of nature orientation.

Yet some other scholars [9], [11] suggest that the relationship between religion and environment throughout history has been paradoxical. While it is inarguable that western monotheistic traditions "have been, at turns, deeply anthropocentric, other-worldly, ignorant of the facts or blindly supportive of 'progress', there are strong reasons to believe that religious resources have a valuable role to play in mitigating environmental crisis" [11]. Religions, from this perspective of 'ecotheology' not only have the ability to mobilise political action towards environmental protection, they also are capable of prompting hundreds of millions of people around the world to pursue pro-environment attitudes and behaviour necessary for confronting current environmental problems. Religious environmentalism, defined as "conscious, reflexive application of religious ideas to contemporary environmental concerns" [12], therefore, becomes increasingly emphasised in the global environmental movement. Accordingly, research into the theological basis and practical applications of religious environmental ethics in different societies continues to generate new insights on the topic, asking further questions and stimulating more research.

Many studies [13]–[17] have documented some evidence of pro-environmental concern or environmental stewardship attitudes among religious communities in different parts of the modern world. For example, Sherkat and Ellison [18] found that conservative Protestants and biblical 'inerrantists' showing strong stewardship orientations. However, their stewardship beliefs are limited by political orientation as political conservatism is found to have negative effect on environmental activism. Limitations to the effects of religious doctrines on environmental concern and action were further explored by Djupe and Hunt [19]. In addition to finding little support for White's hypothesis that religion has negative influence on environmental concern, the study also found strong indications of pro-environmental attitudes among members of religious congregations. The findings, however, show limited effects of religious beliefs and religiosity on pro-environmental behaviour and much greater effects of social sources of information within congregations. The role played by the clergy in promoting pro-environmental consciousness was particularly significant in predicting pro-environment views. Similarly, the importance attached to environmental issues by church leaders was found to have much stronger effect on individual's views on the importance of environmental protection than religious beliefs and worldviews.

Other recent studies [20]–[22] have approached the topic from a slightly different angle, focusing more on the social dimensions of religious involvement in environmental issues. Although these studies focused on slightly different aspects of institutional impact of environmental concern, both studies reveal certain discrepancy between environmental beliefs and pro-environmental action and attitudes. Awareness of environmental issues, institutional concern with environmental problems, according to both studies does not necessarily translate into individual or congregational pro-environmental action. However, both studies lend support to Djupe and Hunt [19] that information and environmental education within congregations play a crucial role in activating environmental concern and action. A particularly important finding is the role of the clergy in not only interpreting environmental values of their religious traditions to congregants but also in promoting education about environmental problems and solutions. Whereas these studies have provided important insights into the social dimensions of religious environmental concern, there is need for further examination of how other institutional, social, and economic factors facilitate or impede religious environmentalism.

Most of the studies so far conducted on environmental concerns within faith communities were undertaken in America and western Europe [23]. Faith communities in developing countries of have not been sufficiently studied despite their acknowledged status and strong influence in most communities across the developing world. The research I am reporting here builds on the studies highlighted above to provide further insights on the complex relationship using evidence from an area that has not been previously explored – Northeast Nigeria. It is hoped that the findings could not only better our the understanding of environmental worldviews and actions of Christian and Muslim faith communities in the area but also lay foundation for future research on environmental attitudes and behaviour in the country as a whole.

The region provides an interesting case study for expanding research on faith communities' engagement with environmental issues in three ways. First, its being one of countries of sub-Saharan Africa that have been identified as 'hot spots' of climate change and anthropogenic environmental degradation in the form of rapid desertification; loss of soil nutrients and so on; erosion and flooding in all states of the regions [24] and; garbage accumulation in urban areas. The region is also believed to be inhabited by some of the most religious peoples of the world. According to Pew Forum [25], 87% of Nigerians see themselves as 'deeply committed to the practices and tenets of Christianity or Islam' and large numbers of the population express the view that religion plays a very important role in their social lives. Equally, a survey by BBC World [26] found that 85% of Nigerians "trusted religious leaders and were willing to give them more powers". Thus, faith communities constitute an important feature of the Nigerian social structure whose role in shaping people's attitudes and behavior towards the environment cannot be over emphasized.

## **2. Study Design and Method**

This article is reporting findings from a larger study on religion and environmental degradation in the region. To explore the phenomenon of religious environmentalism in the region, I studied 18 religious congregations in three states of Northeast Nigeria for data collection. The states are Adamawa, Bauchi, and Gombe. In each of Bauchi and Gombe state, four Muslim congregations and two Christian congregations participated in the study. In Adamawa state, where the population is roughly divided between Christians and Muslims, three Christian and three Muslim congregations were selected. The denominational distribution of the participating congregations includes Protestant/Pentecostal Churches, Sufi and Salafi Islamic congregation. The total of 18 interviews were analysed.

All interviews were unstructured and conducted face to face. All leaders of congregations interviewed are males, roughly between the ages of 45-60. All interviews were audiotaped with the permission of participants. Each interview session lasted for about 50-70 minutes. Audio records of the interviews were translated and transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis of interview data was conducted to generate categories salient in the data. Although thematic analysis has wide-ranging philosophical origin, the procedure adopted in this study has its epistemological roots in interpretivism and social constructionism [27]. In a nutshell, these philosophical perspectives see social reality as 'constructed' and 'interpreted' by people in the course of their day to day interaction. When researching social reality on the basis of these standpoints, attention is paid to the way individuals shape their society through constructing 'meanings' of their actions [28]. Thus, a systematic, step-by-step procedure was followed in analysing the data in line with these traditions. The transcripts were manually dissected to generate codes on the basis of both theoretical interests guiding the research and the salient issues inherent in the data. The codes were used to generate themes from text segments. In extracting the themes, I was interested in both commonly reported narratives and ideas that have descriptive value in relation to the research area. Themes were grouped into broader categories that summarized the entire data. These groups of themes were then used to interpret the data and explore the underlying story in the light of existing literature.

## **3. Results**

### **3.1. Evidence of Religious environmentalism**

Religious environmental concern is evident throughout the interviews. Participants reveal different levels of understanding of religious role in environmental conservation. Analysis of the data reveals significant evidence of environmental concern that is religiously-inspired. These ideas and beliefs are interpreted as religious environmentalism because they are either rooted in religious scriptural teachings or participants have used religion to rationalise them. Religious environmentalism is evident among both Christian and Muslim faith community leaders. However, responding to the question whether these environmental beliefs and principles really translate into conscious actions to protect the environment, participants revealed a discrepancy between beliefs in religious environmental principles and ethics and pro-environmental actions. First, none of the clergymen interviewed reported making a speech in his congregation about religious environmental principles or about environmental issues. Second, only one congregation reported organising periodic environmental protection activity (sanitation campaign). Third, none of the participants revealed

having awareness of existence of religious environmental movement in the region. Fourth, all participants have reported observing widespread environmentally-damaging behaviour among members of their congregation and little practice of religious environmental ethics. Fifth, a number of participants (14) have expressed awareness of the alarming rate of anthropogenic environmental degradation in the area.

The study proceeded to look at participants views on the factors responsible for the 'gap' between theory and practice of religious environmentalism. Analysis revealed three major themes which summarise participants' arguments on why many people don't follow the teachings of their religions in their dealing with the environment and why the clergy are not preaching the religious principles as a response to environmental crisis affecting the region. I categorised these themes as limitations to religious environmentalism. They are: 'poverty', 'ignorance', and 'de-prioritisation'.

## **3.2. Limits of religious environmentalism**

### **3.2.1. 'Poverty'**

The majority of participants (16/18) made reference to 'poverty' as a key obstacle to the practice of religious environmentalism. Although, their positions on the degree to which poverty affects environmental behaviour differ, participants' conception of poverty is the same across board: a condition of lack of material resources to afford a decent standard of living. Three themes emerged from the analysis to summarize how lack of basic resources impedes the practice of environmental ethics and/or propel people to engage in ecologically-damaging behaviour.

Participants' narratives reveal a 'conflict' between religious teachings of 'harmony with nature' and 'survival needs' of the majority of people in the area. In situations of extreme poverty, people are naturally expected to prioritise 'survival' over long term gains of environmental protection. Even though respect for nature is an important tenet of their religions, it is in practice subject to meeting basic human needs. In difficult situations where basic resources like food, shelter and clothing are lacking, certain negative environmental actions like deforestation are seen as 'acceptable'. As one of the leaders of participating Muslim congregations puts it, "humans are not held accountable for offenses committed out of necessity". A number of clergy maintained that in a region where majority of the people are living in conditions of extreme poverty, it is difficult for the clergy to preach against behaviours like bush burning and firewood harvesting. This means that even though religious leaders command a very high degree of influence on members of their congregations, the economic conditions of majority of their followers is not favourable to 'conservation sermons'. It is worth noting that most of the 'subsistent' environmentally-damaging activities that fall under the category of 'acceptable evils' are associated with search for food or energy for domestic purposes. The major subsistent activities that were cited by respondents are bush-burning, firewood collection/deforestation, land clearing for agriculture and, over-cultivation.

However, there is another category of poverty-driven environmental destruction that has been identified as constituting a practical barrier to religious environmentalism. This dimension involves income-generation activities and low-income factors. Many people in the region are believed to be engaging in the business of firewood cutting and selling, illegal mining and other unsustainable activities in order to generate income in the absence of skills or opportunities in other sectors. It is unlikely for such people to stop their activities without being provided with better alternatives. In the same vein, because majority of people lack resources to afford alternative sources of energy like cooking gas and electricity, the business of firewood and charcoal sellers is sustained and strengthened. Here too, religious environmentalism is constrained by economic realities.

Another narrative that emerged from the discourse on poverty and religious environmentalism is that the 'high cost of environmental management' in relation to people's income makes it difficult for them to put their environmental beliefs into practice. While expressing common belief in the desirability of environmental management, some participants believe that individuals lack the resources needed to put those beliefs into practice. At the level of congregations, environmental action is limited by lack of resources. Not all participants agree with the characterisation of environmental management as essentially a costly activity. Also, a clear minority of participants (3) don't see poverty as an obstacle to following the teachings of

religion in dealing with the environment. Actions like environmental sanitation, they argued, can be maintained regardless of individuals' economic condition.

### **3.2.2. 'Ignorance'**

Although a number of participants have shown good understanding of the challenges facing the environment and the role of religion in tackling the challenges, 'ignorance' has featured quite prominently in their comments on constraints of religious environmentalism. Participants expressed views that suggest lack of awareness among individuals in their congregations or leaders of other congregations of the nature, severity and consequences of environmental problems such as desertification, soil erosion, flooding and so on. Although only one participant admitted his lack of such knowledge, analysis of their discourses reveals that people in area, or at least majority of them, are not adequately informed about the role of religion in achieving environmental sustainability. The discourses suggest that awareness of causes and effects of environmental problems helps 'activate' anthropocentric and spiritual environmental concern. Lack of such awareness, on the other hand, contributes to 'unmindfulness' of the changes that are taking place in the environment. One respondent further maintained that sufficient knowledge of environmental problems among the clergy is necessary for any faith-based environmental movement. Another participant implied the following comment that not many religious leaders actually see any connection between religious environmental teachings and current environmental problems.

### **3.2.3. 'De-prioritisation'**

Failure to realise that religion could play a vital role in addressing environmental problems could be understood further by taking a look at another important narrative: 'de-prioritisation' of environment and environmental problems. Majority view expressed by participants suggests that concern for the environment is not, in practical terms, considered an issue of high priority within their congregations. De-prioritisation of environmental concern is manifest, according to participants, among both followers and leaders of religious groups. Believing that leaders of faith communities are largely responsible for setting the agenda for their groups, a number of participants opined that prioritisation of spiritual matters entails paying lesser attention to other teachings of their faiths.

Another contributing factor to de-prioritisation of environmental issues is religious leaders' perceived responsibility in combating environmental change. It is clear from their comments that matters like environmental management and conservation are seen as exclusive responsibility of the government. This perception increases indifference to environmental problems and in turn lesser efforts to reviving religious environmental teachings.

## **4. Discussion and Conclusion**

The data presented above shows evidence of religious environmental concern in the views of both Christian and Muslim congregations that participated in the study. This evidence supports findings from previous studies [18], [19], [23] that reported pro-environmental beliefs rooted in or are compatible with religious ethics. The study also finds support for previous studies [21], [29]–[31] that pro-environmental beliefs do not necessarily lead to pro-environmental practices. The findings show evidence of what has been termed as a 'gap' between beliefs in environmental conservation and actions that aim to conserve nature. As reported by previous studies [18]–[21], a number of social, economic and cultural factors are believed to affect the practice of religious environmental concern. Basing my findings on the subjective views of the clergy who lead these religious communities, I have come up with three discursive themes that constitute obstacles to the practice of religious environmentalism. The findings identify poverty as one of these obstacles. The role of poverty here corresponds with earlier findings such as Guha and Martinez-Alier [32], Tomalin [12] "full-stomach" vs "empty-belly" environmentalism. Unlike 'post materialist' environmentalism of the global north, argues Tomalin, people in developing countries of the south see environmental conservation as a matter of 'survival' as life-supporting systems become increasingly degraded. However, 'survival' according to the findings of the present research also involves exploitation of the available resources which often produce further degradation of the environment. Another obstacle exists in terms of low-level or lack of awareness of environmental problems and the role of religious ethics in

mitigating them. This obstacle seems to limit pro-environment actions especially those driven by anthropocentric motives. As Djupe and Hunt [19] and DeLashmutt [20] suggest, flow of environmental information within congregations plays an important role in activating environmental concern among congregants. My findings support the notion that communication and interpretation of environmental beliefs and principles by the clergy could serve in promoting pro-environmental actions. Future research could investigate the effects of information sources and interpretation of scriptural teachings by the clergy on environmental behaviour of their followers. The third constraint to religious environmentalism revealed in the analysis corresponds to what has been widely reported in the wider literature that religious environmentalism is only possible in practice if faith communities consider the environment a matter of priority. The views analysed above suggest that human-environment relations have not been given sufficient attention by the majority of religious groups that participated in the research. ‘Deprioritisation’ of environmental concern by faith communities in the area reflects findings of previous studies [29], [31] which indicate that religious communities in Muslim countries prioritise ‘spiritual matters’ over environmental concerns. ‘Deprioritisation’ as found in this study also involves religious leaders’ perception that environmental matters are government’s responsibility. Focusing religious teaching on spiritual aspects and lesser awareness of responsibility among the clergy and the laity prevents commitment to the environment. Again, future research could examine the issue of ‘perceived responsibility’ among the clergy and how it affects individual behaviours within the congregations.

Finally, given the small sample size, it is not possible to make any generalising statement on the nature of religious involvement with the environment in the region studied or country. However, it is hoped that these initial findings will stimulate further research on the subject in the region and beyond.

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