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## An Appraisal of Attitudes of Nigerian Christian Leaders to Environmental Crisis

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### **Abstract:**

*The role of religion in the global environmental crisis is to change people's attitudes. This is needed because humans are the primary cause of environmental problems. Christianity in Nigeria is not exempted from this role; rather, more is expected from it, as Christians in Africa, including Nigeria, are increasing more than many other continents. Moreover, according to a 2005 BBC survey, Christian leaders, like other religious leaders, are more trusted and respected than any other form of leadership. However, despite their influence, many Christian leaders are silent on the issue of the environment. Rather, they contribute to environmental pollution through, among others, noise pollution, indiscriminate pasting of posters and the treatment of hills, mountains, river banks and groves when praying there. The major cause of their silence is ignorance of facts and the impacts of environmental problems. The methods adopted are a blend of ethnography and grounded theory. The authors immerse themselves in the ecclesiastical setting in Nigeria to observe and document the beliefs, practices and social dynamics of the major churches in Nigeria. However, the authors went further to develop explanations based on systematically analysing data collected from their observations. The paper suggests that it is very important for Christian scholars, the government and those who are concerned about ecological degradation to combat this ignorance by enlightening the clergy about the facts and impacts of environmental destruction. Due to their powerful influence, Christian leaders will then help change lay people's attitudes as well as political leaders.*

**Keywords:** Environment, attitudes, churches, Christians, climate

### **1. Introduction**

Natural sciences have conclusively demonstrated that the world is facing a dire environmental change (Anderegg, et al, 2010). Despite minor differences, it is also agreed that the consumptive attitude of humans, especially in developed countries, is the root cause of this (Erhardt-Matinez, 2015; Mayell, 2013). If Western societies continue with their unsustainable ways of life, the earth will soon become uninhabitable.

Human destruction of the environment occurs in every sphere of the earth: atmosphere (air and space), hydrosphere (salt and fresh waters), lithosphere (stones, rocks, and mountains), pedosphere (land), and biosphere (the community of living things). Scientists also agreed that although Africa is one of the least contributors to environmental pollution, it will suffer the most.

Africa is responsible for just 4 per cent of global greenhouse gas emissions, but it is one of the most vulnerable regions of the world, accounting for 17 of the 20 countries that were most at risk from climate change in 2020. According to the latest report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, North and West Africa are particularly vulnerable, with a rise in temperature of between 1.5°C and over 3°C envisaged in various scenarios. (UNECA, 2023)

Scientists and environmental experts have also agreed that the urgency and nature of the problem require a total reversal of contemporary consumptive attitudes. Examples of the consumptive attitudes that need reversal are disposable culture, materialism and status consumption. Behavioural change is a major tool to deal with these attitudes, and behavioural change is a primary objective of religion, whether it is called new birth (Christians) or peace with God (Islam), etc. This means that religions have to be involved in mobilising people to shift towards a more sustainable way of life. As David MacDonald, a Minister of the United Church of Canada, puts it, "As people of faith, we believe climate change requires not a quick technological fix but rather a transformation in how we live our lives on this fragile planet." (MacDonald, 2009)

This paper argues that the Christian Churches in Nigeria should be involved in mobilising people, not just for behavioural changes, but to guide them in adapting and mitigating the effects of climate change. Indeed, the Church in Nigeria should feel the burden more because the continent will suffer the consequences of climate change more than any

other continent. However, the Christian Church in Nigeria has not yet gotten much involved in wrestling with the problem. In this paper, it is argued that Nigerian Christian leaders as 'shepherds' should be aware of the problem. By 'Christian leaders', the 'clergies' are referred to in this paper. This group of leaders is the 'overseers.' They usually carry the title of 'Pastor' or different qualifications of 'Reverend' (Reverend Canon, Right Reverend, Most Reverend, Reverend Sister, Reverend Mother, etc). In African indigenous/independent Churches, they also carry the titles of 'Apostle' and 'Prophet/Prophetess.' It is this variety of Christians that are referred to as leaders in this paper. It is argued that they should be wholly involved in mitigating the effects of environmental crisis on their 'sheep,' their followers.

## 2. Christian Leaders as 'Shepherds'

From the inception of Christianity about 2000 years ago to the present, Christian leaders are always pictured as 'shepherds.' Although the religion has spread to almost every part of the world and has been contextualized into different cultures, the picture of the leaders as 'shepherds' has not been forgotten. This is due mainly to the influence of the pervasive shepherd symbols and the origin of the religion in the Ancient Near East, where leaders, political and religious, were regarded as 'shepherds.' The laity, then, were the 'sheep.' The most important implication of this for our study is that the shepherd is expected to be more knowledgeable than the sheep. Therefore, the shepherd 'leads' and does not 'drive' the sheep. Either a man or a woman could be a shepherd/shepherdess. However, it was usually men who were shepherds. Examples of female shepherds (shepherdess) in the Old Testament are Rachel (Genesis 29:6) and Jethro's daughters (Exodus 2: 16). The shepherd/shepherdess perceives dangers before they befall the sheep and protects them with his/her strength and knowledge. S/he leads them, is 'tender' and cares for them. It was a situation like this that David was explaining to Saul when he said, "Your servant used to keep sheep for his father; and then there came a lion, or a bear, and took a lamb from the flock, I went after him and smote him and delivered it out of his mouth; and if he arose against me, I caught him by his beard, and smote him and killed him. Your father has killed both lions and bears..." (I Samuel 17: 34-36a).

The characterization of Christian leaders as 'shepherds' can still be perceived in many different terms and titles by which the leaders are called. The most common of the term in Nigeria is 'Pastor,' which means 'shepherd.' However, even other terms such as 'bishop' (from *ἐπίσκοπος* – *episkopos*, an overseer, curator, guardian or superintendent, 'one who watches over others' welfare). Thayer (1889) still reflects the connotation of 'shepherd.' In the history of the Christian Church, there have been sharp disagreements on the proper and/or biblical method of ecclesiastical administration. Hence, some churches prefer elder/presbyter (from *πρεσβυτερος* – *presbuteros*) (Thayer, 1889) to Episcopal type of administration, citing I Peter 5: 1-5 and other biblical passages for support. This internal disagreement does not detract from the point that Christian leaders are unanimously regarded as 'shepherds.' This is especially so in Africa where elders (Presbyters) are respected because of their experience and understanding. They can quickly perceive danger where the 'younger ones' could not. As the Yoruba say, "*Bí omọdẹ bá ngé igi n'ígbo, àgbà ló máa n mọ ibi tí á wó sí,*" meaning it is the elders who can quickly perceive the consequences of a destructive attitude of younger ones. Therefore, all forms of ecclesiastical administration – Episcopal, Presbyterian or congregational – still recognise the leader as a 'shepherd,' the 'carer' and protector of the sheep.

This is further confirmed in the symbol of authority of the shepherd – the crosier. The crosier is the ceremonial staff of the Office of Bishops and Abbots. Although the crosier, like other symbolic staff of office in other realms of human affairs (like politics), has now been modified into different shapes and makes, its origin is the shepherd's staff or rod. Jesus also referred to himself as "...the good shepherd" (John 10:14). Therefore, the crosier is also called a crook because of its curve. The crook symbolises the bishop/abbot/pastor's role as a leader, guiding and protecting the flock. The crosier also represents the bishop's authority over the diocese. In the Ancient Near East, the staff is one of two major tools of the shepherd, the second being the sling. The rod was for defence as well as for counting the sheep when they were folded. The shepherds were always experts in throwing or slinging a well-aimed stone to head off a straying sheep as well as to hit a marauder. This type of sling not only killed a Goliath in ancient Israel (I Samuel 17) but was also used by an Arab shepherd, Muhammed-ad-Dhib, to discover the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947 (Pfeiffer, 1985).

The shepherd or pastor is characterised by boldness, courage, intelligence and wisdom. B.J. Roberts emphasised this when he wrote: "The shepherd was ever a heroic figure, and, though a nomad, he was *cultured* and very well versed in country love. He was responsible for finding pasturage and wandered with his family over the barren countryside of Palestine – sometimes for many miles." (Roberts, 1963)

It is these traditional qualities of shepherds that are expected of a Christian 'shepherd/pastor.' They are expected to be 'cultured,' perceptive, be able to see ahead of the sheep because they go ahead of the sheep and see farther than the sheep; and when they see danger, they are expected to be heroic and bold, to eliminate the danger, or steer the flock away from the danger.

The sheep that Nigerian Christian 'shepherds' are tending are now in grave danger of the environmental crisis. Unfortunately, however, the shepherds, except for a few, appear to be unaware of the danger (Nche, 2021). Many of the shepherds are busy 'milking' and 'killing' the sheep for their consumption. How and why they are unaware of this grave danger will be examined below. Before that, however, let us examine the danger.

## 3. The Environmental Crisis and Its Impact on Africa

The catastrophic effects that are predicted to follow environmental degradation always bring to one's memory the description of similar events in apocalyptic literature. In the Christian Scriptures, 'apocalypse' is a part of the canon that is apocalyptic in genre. Many Christians cannot distinguish this literary genre from 'prophecy.' Hence, apocalyptic literature has always been treated as a 'revelation' (Michaels, 1995) of what will happen at the end of the world. However, an

evangelical scholar admonishes: "We should understand apocalypse as a literary device, a way of getting the message across. It sets forth the teaching of the author, but it does not describe something that happened." (Morris, 1983). The most prominent of the apocalyptic literature is the Apocalypse or Revelation of St John, the last book of the Bible. In the book, we have the description of the earth's atmosphere heating up to the extent of being burnt up, the sea getting dried up, and the world generally getting uninhabitable. (Revelation 6: 12; 8: 7-9). In the Apocalypse, the catastrophic events were caused by God; in the current environmental crisis, they are being caused by humans, or 'anthropogenic.'

The common people's observation on climate change and the resultant effect is backed by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). For instance, climate warming is indubitable, as can be seen in the rising temperature of air and oceans, the widespread melting of snow and ice, and the rise in the average sea level globally (IPCC, 2007). This increase in temperature has also affected the natural systems of different regions of the world. According to the IPCC, the effect of these changes will be seen in agricultural and forestry management, as well as in some aspects of human health, such as heat waves in Europe and more mosquitoes in Africa.

What are the causes of these changes? According to the IPCC, "Most of the observed increase in globally-averaged temperatures since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century is *very likely* due to an observed increase in anthropogenic GHG concentrations" (IPCC, 2007). In other words, the experts are ninety per cent (the measurement/interpretation given to 'very likely' by IPCC) sure that human (anthropogenic) emitted greenhouse gases (GHG) are the causes of the increase in global temperature from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. This is confirmed in the November 2014 (Fifth Assessment) Report of IPCC: "The evidence for human influence on the climate system has grown since the Fourth Assessment Report (AR4). It is extremely likely that more than half of the observed increase in global average surface temperature from 1951 to 2010 was caused by the anthropogenic increase in greenhouse gas concentrations and other anthropogenic forcings together." (IPCC, 2014). "Extremely likely" is interpreted as 95% to 100% assurance (IPCC, 2014). There are two types of greenhouse gases – natural and artificial/human-made. The natural greenhouse gases include water vapour, carbon dioxide, methane and nitrous oxide. The artificial or human-induced or manufactured chemicals that act as GHG are Chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs), hydrochlorofluorocarbons (HCFCs) and hydrofluorocarbons (HFCs). The human burning of fossil fuel, coal, natural gas, wood and wood products has released much of the GHG into the air and thus increases the temperature. This is accelerated by deforestation – the cutting down of many trees for lumber and the clearing of land for farming and building.

The impacts of these are devastating. For instance, although the increase in temperature means more perspiration and/or evaporation, thus causing an increase in water vapour, the rainfall will result in flooding, as experienced in the Philippines in September 2014 and Morocco in November 2014 (BBC, 2014). On the other hand, fresh drinking water will become more and more a rare commodity, as is the case in many African countries. Moreover, drought-affected areas will increase. In short, there will be an increase in flooding, wildfire, insects such as mosquitoes and even ocean acidification. This, in turn, will affect food production and other forest products. In addition, the coastal areas will be subjected to increasing risks such as erosion and a rise in sea level.

The most unfortunate aspect of these gloomy predictions of world experts is that they are unanimous that Africa, Nigeria inclusive, would be the worst hit. In its November 1997 report, the IPCC wrote, "Africa is the continent most vulnerable to the impacts of projected changes because widespread poverty limits adaptation capabilities." (Watson, et al, 1988). Ten years later, the same fact is emphasized: "New studies confirm that Africa is one of the most vulnerable continents to climate variability and change because of multiple stresses and low adaptive capacity. Some adaptation to current climate variability is taking place; however, this may be insufficient for future climate changes." (IPCC, 2008). Again, the negative effect will be felt mainly in droughts, floods, reduced rate of agricultural production, and rising sea levels. This will be intensified by a rapid increase in our population.

Relating this to Nigeria, David Okali, a former president of the Nigerian Academy of Science, commented thus in November 2009: "Climate change has affected farming activities with loss of crops, farmlands and income as a result of either excessive rain which leads to flooding or harsh climactic condition." Concerning Lagos, he said, "It (climate change) is threatening to wash away the whole of Victoria Island and Ikoyi and Lekki Peninsula if there is a major sea level rise. What we need to do is to intensify all our efforts on mitigation and adaptation so that we don't suffer too much." (Cotthem, 2009). The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) Report of November 2023 confirmed this of Lagos: "Rising sea levels threaten southern cities such as Lagos and coastal areas, increasing vulnerability to flooding and waterborne diseases" (USAID, 2023). In 2002, *Daily Trust*, a Nigerian daily newspaper listed "Seven major ways climate change affect Nigeria" to include low crop yield, food shortage, reduced livestock production, loss of income, public health crisis, decreased hydroelectric power supply and loss of shelter, and road networks (Daily Trust, 2022). Anyone who lives in Nigeria will agree with this list. However, the list is not exhaustive. Indeed, a major effect of climate change is insecurity, as experienced in farmer-herdsmen clashes and banditry. The insecurity is due primarily to desert encroachment, which in turn was due to climate change. In July 2009, a study by some environmentalists estimated that Nigeria needs 52 trillion naira to reduce the impact of climate change. Professor Okali commented on this thus: "Nigeria cannot afford it due to other pressing needs. The first option is for the industrialised and richer countries to raise funds or contribute to Nigeria and other developing countries to be able to cope." (Cotthem, 2009). In this suggestion, Okali seems to forget a deeper problem that will not make that suggestion work and may require the assistance of religions. That problem is endemic corruption. If 52 trillion naira is raised today to deal with climate change locally (which is highly improbable if the conclusion of the Copenhagen Accord in 2009 is to be taken into consideration) or as a grant from industrialised countries, about 50 trillion naira of the same money will end up in some personal accounts in the same industrialised countries; hence, the need to be 'religious' in the treatment of this gravest and imminent danger. Unfortunately, however, although Africans are generally religious, African religions, especially Christianity, seem unaware of the problem.

#### 4. Transforming Nigerian Christian Leaders to Concerned Carers of Environment

A Yoruba proverb says, "*Ilé ni a ti n kó èsò re òdè*" meaning charity begins at home. If the Christian churches in Nigeria have to assist their parishioners in Nigeria, they need to sanitize themselves first. It is also wiser, as we have stated above, for the church, generally, is, at present, ignorant about this problem. If this is so, then she needs to get well-acquainted with what she wants to discuss. This attitude is also Christian. As stated by the Church of England's Mission and Public Affairs Council, "It is important that the church ensure its own house is in order as it seeks to engage with the world in this project (climate change)" (Foster, 2005). Moreover, the fact that priestly formation on the issue of environmental crisis is important is affirmed by the World Council of Churches. In a 'Statement on Eco-justice and Ecological Debt,' WCC:

*... calls for continuous awareness – building understanding and theological reflection among congregations and seminary students on a new cosmological vision of life, eco-justice and ecological debt through study and action, deeper ecumenical and interfaith formation, and through the production and dissemination of relevant theological and biblical study material (WCC, 2011).*

Therefore, what Christian leaders need to be aware of and interested in environmental issues must begin in their training. In other words, there is a need for a radical review of the curriculum in religious studies generally, but in this instance, Christian Studies and Theology are needed. Furthermore, what the students are given in their training should not stop there; acquaintance with the facts and theological reflection on these issues should continue throughout the Pastor's professional life. What will be the content of this awareness creation among Christian leaders? Five are suggested here; however, an institution may add, subtract or re-arrange these suggestions as they seem suitable to them.

The first is the fact about current environmental degradation. This is like a statement of the problem in a research. Beginning with the effects and/or impacts of environmental crises, the students will be exposed to how current disasters occurring around the world, particularly in Nigeria, are the results of environmental degradation. It will also be necessary to expose the students to periodic statements, reports, and findings of experts on this issue, especially the United Nations-backed Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Reports.

Second, the students need to be exposed to biblical texts and themes in the environment. This is because Africans love their scriptures. They tend to accept whatever can be biblically supported. African Christianity borders on 'bibliolatry.' Since the aim is to transform society, the solution must be backed by scriptures. The different authorities already quoted above supported this. The aim is to show that God committed the earth to humans, not to destroy but to care and tender, and that it is even sinful to do otherwise. Scriptural passages such as Genesis 1 and 2, Matthew 10:31; 12:12 and Romans 8:19-22 can be used to buttress responsible usage of natural resources. Some of these passages are not explicit in their support for environmental friendliness; hence, Lynn White's thesis is that (western) Christianity is the root culprit of the modern environmental crisis (White, 1967). Therefore, words like 'subdue' (conquer, subjugate, violate, bring into bondage, force) and 'have dominion' ('tread down,' 'prevail against' and 'reign over') in Genesis 1: 28 will need to be carefully interpreted according to their context to bring out eco-friendly attitude.

Third, Pastors need to be exposed to great individuals in the history of the Christian church and contemporary Christianity who have emphasized eco-friendliness. Churchmen such as Sir Francis of Assisi and St. Augustine of Hippo, who in their different ways espoused the intrinsic value of the natural world apart from being useful to humans, may need to be studied. Similarly, the ideas of contemporary Christian leaders such as the Green Patriarch, Bartholomew of Constantinople, Pope Francis and many feminist theologians will need to be studied. Studying the ideas of these Christians is important for two reasons. The first reason is that it makes the issue biblical and traditional. The second reason is that the history, teachings and even fables and legends about these leaders enhance imagination.

The fourth component is the endeavour to ground this in African traditional culture. Having friendly relations with the natural world, instead of being destructive, is African. This has to be made explicit to the Pastors, as can be seen in traditional practices, concepts, proverbs and philosophy. An example is the concept of *Ubuntu*, which many African scholars – philosophers and religious scholars, especially in Eastern and Southern Africa – have explored to demonstrate that all humans are biologically related and even related to the environment. As the World Council of Churches' Report on the "African Ecumenical Consultation on Linking Poverty, Wealth and Ecology" explains, a positive attribute of *Ubuntu* is that: Community-Life in relationship is: '*I am* because we are, and *we are* because *I am*.' The individual's identity is inseparable from that of the wider community, which includes past, present and future generations, as well as flora and fauna, the physical environment, and the spiritual realm (WCC, 2007).

*Ubuntu*, as interpreted here, is similar to the Yoruba concept of *Àjòbí/Alájòbí*. In *Àjòbí*, which Akinsola Akiwowo appropriately interpreted as consanguinity, all human beings are related: *Omo iya kan ati baba kan ni gbogbo wa* (All of us are born of the same father and mother). However, more than that, In a Yoruba Odu Corpus (Yoruba Oral Scripture), *Irosu Iwori*, the children of Oduduwa (the Chief who created being) include "...palm trees, beasts and earthworms, man [sic] and such like things." In other words, everything is related. However, human beings are the 'chosen ones' (this is the root meaning of the Yoruba word for human being, *Eniyan* or *awon eni ti a yan*). Human beings are chosen for responsibility, according to the Corpus, "...to convey goodness to the earth." (Akiwowo, 1983)

The fifth and last component of the priestly formation is a philosophical study. It is also related very much to the fourth component above – that is, it is African. The metaphysical worldview underpinning the human destructive attitude to nature is contrary to the African traditional worldview. It is hard to say whether it is also Western because the destructive attitudes are now traced to the 17<sup>th</sup> century 'father of modern philosophy', Rene Descartes. In his philosophy, Descartes separated human beings, particularly the mind, from all other things, which are now seen as machines. This resulted in dualism in all its varieties – matter and mind, man and nature, et al. This philosophy does not see any relationship among components of reality. Rather, because they are only externally related, individualism, self-centredness



and competition are the resultant effects. However, as reported by Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, "... extreme individualism is strongly associated with anti-environmental attitudes and behaviour." (Leiserowitz et al, 2007).

These suggestions are for eradicating ignorance among Nigerian Christian leaders. As stated above, these suggestions are not only for their training but should continue during their professional practices. However, Christian churches need to take further steps to address environmental crises. Among others, the following are being suggested:

- The church has the wisdom, power, and followers to inspire, provoke and challenge policymakers. The churches in Nigeria should, with this strength, urge the government to produce a policy that will lead from reliance on fossil fuels to other alternative and renewable energy sources. Indeed, some Nigerian churches have the resources to lead in this.
- The churches should encourage their followers to reduce the use of plastic products, chemicals, pesticides and other environmentally unfriendly products.
- The rapid increase in population is a major driver of the environmental crisis. The churches are in the best position to counsel their parishioners on this. Parents can also be advised to plant a tree for every birth.
- As a social contribution to the community, the churches can also finance an eco-friendly way of cooking. As reported by USAID, this is a major way in which deforestation occurs in Nigeria. Some young women and men can be sponsored to learn how to produce solar cooking stoves, which can be used to replace the burning of fossil fuels—gas, coal, kerosene, etc. Some churches in Nigeria also have the resources to lead in this area.
- The solar power production can be extended to usages in churches and even homes.

## 5. Conclusion

African Christian leaders, as 'shepherds', should be concerned about the fate of their sheep. This is, however, not the case at present. Africa will be one of the most affected by the weather patterns. The degradation of the environment has also been shown to be human-caused; hence, the solution has to be attitudinal change. This is because the solution requires value reversal and attitudinal change, and religious leaders have to be involved. Religious leaders, particularly Christian clergies, are at present generally unconcerned about the grave danger of environmental degradation. Therefore, the majority are silent about the problem. This paper has, however, suggested the inclusion of environmental studies in clerical training. It has also been suggested how the clergy can encourage attitudinal change in their members through biblical exegesis in preaching.

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