


Religion and Environmental Sustainability in Nigeria

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Abstract

Humans are notoriously and incurably religious and very gregarious. As they live together in a society, they often exert negative pressures on the environment. This study conceptualises the following words/expressions: religion, environment, pollution, environmental degradation, and environmental sustainability. The problem of this study is necessitated by the disheartening negative pressures human beings exert on their environment in Nigeria. The major thrust of this study includes, among others, to decipher the ways through which human beings exert negative pressures on their environment. This study is qualitative in nature and uses both primary and secondary sources of data collection. Among the findings is that a good percentage of Nigerians abuse their environment. The study recommends, among others, that Nigerians should be educated on how to take good care of their environment and concludes that very pragmatic, serious and intensive strategies should be mounted to instil on Nigerians good behavioural ethics to the environment.

Keywords: Religion, Environment, Pollution, Environmental Degradation and Environmental Sustainability.

Introduction

According to the submission of Rao (2018), human beings have their residential home at the earth surface and this supports life and sustains human activities. He further adds that the biosphere is very shallow compared to the total size of the earth. He furthermore points out that the biosphere extends to about 20 km from the bottom of the ocean to the highest point in the atmosphere beyond which life cannot survive without man-made protective devices. Human beings are “co-habiting the earth with up to 1.75 million species known to science” (Rao, 2018:1), and religiously, it is believed that other invisible beings are also co-habiting the earth’s surface with human beings. As human beings are gregarious and live in their various communities and societies, they interact with their environment. The biosphere supplies to human beings and other species co-habiting with him the essential requisites of life. Such include light, heat, water, food and habitats. Pepple & Nwachukwu (2015) observe that the activities of human beings on earth which includes movement from place to place, land cultivation for food, construction of houses, establishment of industries, construction of roads, construction of recreational activities, all take place in the environment. A lot of other human activities on the environment include clearing of the bushes and forests, building of bridges, establishment of markets, construction of airports, mining of some liquid minerals and extraction of some other solid minerals. All these amounts to exerting negative pressures on the environment.

Human beings make all necessary efforts to change and manipulate the environment to suit their tastes. For instance, they clear their immediate environment of grasses, cut down shrubs and trees, build houses, construct roads and bridges, etc., all to their favour. As they go about interacting and socialising with their environment, they exert some levels of negative pressures on the environment. It appears, most likely, that these human beings may not know what they are doing as they interact with their environment. However, their activities invariably lead to environmental degradation and depletion. The environment in general can be sub-divided into various types which include socio-cultural, physical, economic, political, technological, regional, etc., (Pepple & Nwachukwu, 2015). However, this study is concerned with the physical environment of humans which is made up of such geographical features as soil, the atmosphere, climate, vegetation, topography, rivers, seas or oceans, weather, mineral deposits, etc. As humans live and interact with their physical environment, they invariably exert negative influence on these constituents of the environment.

The problem of this study is necessitated by the incessant, alarming and disheartening pressures humans exert on their environment in Nigeria. Human beings, for instance, clear the bushes and forests with reckless abandon in Nigeria. All these are done for the purposes of building houses, markets, industries, airports and construction of roads and bridges. Furthermore, in Nigeria, human beings also excavate the surface of the earth in their efforts to extract solid minerals and mine the liquid ones. In addition, humans embark on numerous other activities on the surface of the earth that culminate in pollution of the biosphere. All these constitute bizarre attitude towards the environment and very serious breach of the environmental ethical behaviour.

The major thrust of this study is to attempt to ascertain the various ways through which humans exerts negative pressures on the biosphere in Nigeria, find out the main reason why human beings most often exert negative pressures

on the environment, and attempt to proffer some solutions to curb these negative pressures humans often exerts on the environment. The study also makes some efforts to encourage the populace to desist from exerting negative pressures on the environment. It also maps out some strategies on how to teach human beings in Nigeria to develop positive and favourable attitude toward the biosphere for their ultimate benefit, and in obedience to the fundamental ethical behaviour.

This study is qualitative in nature and uses both primary and secondary sources of data collection. The researcher purposely selected twelve informants, all lecturers in the Public Health and Food Science and Technology departments of Madonna University Nigeria, Elele, and distributed a set of open-ended questionnaires to them on the issue of Religion and Environmental Sustainability. The set of questionnaires was later collected and analysed, using simple percentage (%). In the secondary source, the researcher uses relevant library books, encyclopaedia, dictionaries, journal articles, newspapers, and internet source materials.

Conceptualising Terms/Expressions

The researcher conceptualises the following terms and expressions: Religion, Environment, Pollution, Environmental Degradation and Environmental Sustainability.

Religion

A lot of scholars have made some frantic efforts to shed light into the meaning of the word religion. For Okwueze (2003), religion can be seen as a regulated life of a people, adding that such people do that through experience, belief and knowledge. According to him, all these are reflected in man's conception of himself in relation to others, his social world, the physical as well as the metaphysical world. In his own contribution, Ekwunife (1992) is of the view that religion refers to human being's recognition of his being dependent on a transcendent being, the Wholly Other. This dependence on the transcendent being is mostly expressible in human society through beliefs, worship and ethical or moral behaviour. According to Arinze (1970:8) cited in Ugwu and Ugwueye (2004), religion can be explained both subjectively and objectively. He is of the view that using subjective measurement, religion can be seen as the dependence on a transcendent being. Furthermore, he observes that objectively, religion can be seen as a complex of truths, laws and rites by which human beings are subordinated to the transcendent being.

Furthermore, Durkheim cited in Okwueze (2003:3) is of the view that "religion is a system of beliefs and practices which are unified and relative to sacred things, adding that such sacred things are set apart and forbidden." The researcher, therefore, sees the word religion as the sum-total of what one does in relation to whatever one accepts as the Ultimate Being and a strong dependence on that Ultimate Being.

Environment

Pepple and Nwachukwu (2015) are of the view that the environment can be seen as the whole of the areas or surroundings where human beings and other organisms live and operate. They also add that the community or society in which humans live and reside is known as the environment. Aluko (2006) cited in Pepple and Nwachukwu observes that the environment is the physical space and the surroundings in which a human beings live or reside. In his own contribution, Hornby (2005:490), submits that environment is "the natural world in which people, animals and plants live". Furthermore, Okonkwo and Okeke, (2020) aver that environment can best be described as all the external surroundings influencing the life and activities of human beings, adding that environment has some vital components which include atmospheric air, soil and water. In his own contribution, an author, Hagget in Okonkwo and Okeke (2020) observe that environment can be seen as the totality of all the

conditions that surround human being at any point in time on the surface of the earth. He further adds that it can also be regarded as the complex of physical, chemical and biotic factors that act upon an organism or an ecological surrounding of an organism. The researcher, therefore, defines environment as the extensive network of physical, chemical, biotic and social factors that surround human beings in the surface of the earth where they live.

Pollution

Hornby (2005) submits that pollution can be seen as the process of making any substance such as air, water, soil, etc., dirty. He also adds that it is a state of being dirty. Also, Okonkwo and Okeke (2020:334) observe that air pollution "is the contamination of air environment, which is caused either by man or natural consequences," adding that "man can pollute the air by indiscriminate disposal of waste, flaring of gas, industrial pollution, oil exploration and coastal erosion" They also submit that "natural pollution is not man-made; it includes earthquakes, volcanic eruption and whirl winds." Again, Hyness (1963:96) observes that "human activities tend to result in the pollution of the environment – that is to make it more difficult environment in which to survive." Furthermore, Pepple and Nwachukwu (2015:261) postulate that "air pollution is the introduction of harmful substances such as particulate matters, chemicals and biological materials into the environment or atmosphere such that they become injurious to man and other living organisms, and at the same time cause the destruction of the ecosystem." They add that "as Nigerians interact with the environment every day, they release harmful substances into the air deliberately or unknowingly." Also, in their own contribution, Kasket, Hummer & Daniel (1988:592) aver that "pollution is anything that makes the surrounding unclean or unhealthful," adding that "most air pollution is caused by burning coal, oil, and gasoline or natural gas." Going further, they also observe that "... fuel, when burned in a car's engine, produces several harmful pollutant gases. These gases include carbon monoxide, nitrogen oxides, (substances made up of nitrogen and oxygen) and hydrocarbons, (substances made up of carbon and hydrogen)." They also add that "some auto fuels contain the metal lead. When lead is present in fuel, it is given off as a pollutant."

Again, in an effort to make their own contribution about pollution, McLaren, Rotundo & Gurley-Dilger (1991:836) submit that pollution is "any unfavourable change in the environment caused partly or wholly by the action of humans." They are also of the view that such harmful solid particles and gases are in most cases transmitted into the atmosphere as a result of different human activities. These harmful materials cause air pollution. The main source of air pollution is the burning of fossil fuels. Furthermore, Okonkwo & Okeke (2020) observe that pollution can be seen as the transmission of harmful materials into the surrounding. They further add that the harmful materials are called pollutants. The pollutants can be natural, such as volcanic ash. They can also be created by human activity, such as trash or runoff produced by factories. They also add that pollutants damage the quality of air, water and land. The researcher defines pollution as the transmission of harmful substances such as chemicals, gas, smoke, volcanic ash, runoff from industries, etc., to the air, water and soil.

Environmental Degradation

Hornby (2005) is of the view that degradation is referring to a situation whereby someone or something has lost all his or its self-esteem and the respect of the other people. Also, making their own contribution on environmental degradation, Pepple and Nwachukwu (2015) observe that gas flaring is indeed environmentally unethical and has contributed significantly to the degradation of the environment of certain region in Nigeria, namely, Niger Delta region.

They also add that gas flaring has altered the vegetation of the Delta, thereby replacing natural vegetation with stubborn and stunted vegetation, and has also made their soil unhealthy for the cultivation of crops. Writing specifically on soil degradation, Pepple and Nwachukwu (2015:263), also submit that “soil degradation in Nigeria is caused by factors such as farming activities, rain and flooding, wind, oil spillage, industrial wastes and chemicals” adding that, for instance, “soil erosion in hilly areas in Nigeria leading to landslides, deforestation, overgrazing and step-farming especially in hilly areas, waterlogging in irrigated lands and intensive agriculture on a particular land area in the proximity of desert like some parts of Northern Nigeria suffering from wind erosion caused by expansion of desert, dust storm and whirlwinds, all cause soil degradation.”

Furthermore, Okonkwo and Okeke (2020) submit that environmental problems emanate from environmental degradation that manifest in the following ways: deforestation, flooding and erosion, air pollution, water Hyacinth, noise pollution, emission of greenhouse gases, improper dumping of waste, desertification and draught, indiscriminate dumping of industrial and domestic waste, gas flaring and acid rain and over population. Also, Narayanan (2007) observes that environmental degradation can be traced to contaminants and pollutants emanating out of transfer processes (dispersion) of matter and energy. Furthermore, in his own contribution on environmental degradation, Okonkwo (2023) avers that unless very serious actions are put in place to check-mate climate change which is often caused by such human factors as deforestation, burning of fossil fuel, gas flaring, bush burning and other natural causes such as volcanic eruption, variation in solar activity, changes in earth’s orbit rotation, the environmental degradation will continue to be uncontrollable, and there shall be an increased threat to life on earth. The researcher defines environmental degradation as the depletion or destruction of natural renewable resources such as the air, water, soil and wildlife by using it faster than it is renewed.

Environmental Sustainability

This study draws attention, first to the word sustainable, before delving into the expression environmental sustainability. In this direction, Hornby (2005:1492) avers that the word “sustainable is an adjective referring to a situation that can continue or be continued for a long time.” An abstract noun from sustainable is sustainability. Also, in 1987, the United Nations Brundtland Commission explains that sustainability refers to a situation where the needs of the present are met without jeopardising or truncating the ability of the future generation to meet their own needs. With reference to sustainable development, Ukoma (2008) submits that it is an all-encompassing phrase which embraces all forms of durable and lasting development whether human or material. When sustainability is used in combination with the word environment, it can be said to be an all-encompassing phrase which embraces all forms of durable and lasting use of the environment. Furthermore, Pepple and Nwachukwu (2015:265) postulate that “environmental sustainability is concerned with the preservation of the environment for present and future generations,” adding that, “environmental sustainability has its origin in sustainable development argument.” In his own contribution, Ugwuewo cited Harris (2000), who avers that an environment sustainable system must, as a matter of necessity, maintain a stable resource base, and must have to avoid over-exploitation of renewable resource systems or environmental sink functions and depleting non-renewable resources only to the extent that investment is made inadequate substitutes. He furthermore adds that this incorporates the ability to maintain biodiversity, atmospheric stability and other ecosystem functions not ordinarily classed as economic resources. The

researcher defines environmental sustainability as a process of using the natural resources wisely now and still conserving them for future generations.

The Role of Religion in Attainment of Environmental Sustainability in Nigeria

Nigeria as a nation is a multi-religious country and operates at least three major religions which include Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religion (ATR) (Obaje, 2018). All these three religious groups will be focused on with regard to how each of them can be used in attaining and maintaining environmental sustainability. This study, at first instance, focuses attention on pollution which has been explained earlier on by Pepple & Nwachukwu (2015:261), as “the introduction of harmful substances such as particulate matters, chemicals and biological materials into the environment or atmosphere such that they become injurious to man and other living organisms, and at the same time cause the destruction of the ecosystem.”

The Encyclopaedia Britannica (2003), Pepple & Nwachukwu (2015) and Okonkwo & Okeke (2020) observe that pollution refers to the situation whereby harmful materials are introduced into the environment. Such harmful materials are known as pollutants and such pollutants can be natural such as volcanic ash. They can also be created by human activities which include trash or runoff produced by factories. It is on record that pollutants damage the quality of air, water and land. Other anthropogenic activities that culminate at polluting the air, water and soil include refuse dumps, bush-burning, combustion of refuse in the compounds, burning of petrol and gas by automobile machines and electric generating plants, burning of coal in industries and for domestic use and other various machines burning petrol and gas, refrigerators, spraying of insecticides, herbicides and pesticides in the farmlands, pouring of chemicals into the flowing water for the purpose of catching fish, indiscriminate defecation on the earth’s surface, pouring of refuse into the water ways, taking bath and washing dirty clothings inside the surface water, etc. All the above-mentioned ways constitute means of polluting either the air, water or soil, and human being can control some of the ways of polluting the air, water and soil.

Other human-made pollutant is smoke which emanates from petrol and diesel engines of cars, buses, lorries, trailers, tankers, trains, ships, burning of coal in industries and for domestic use, electric-generating plants, trash or runoff by factories and other petrol and gas combusting engines. All these emit smoke into the atmosphere and pollute the air in the first instance. According to Kaskel, Hummer & Daniel (1988), Okonkwo & Okeke (2020), Encyclopaedia Britannica (2003), these pollutants include carbon monoxide (CO), carbon dioxide (CO₂), nitrogen oxide (NO), particulate matter (PM), sulphur dioxide (SO₄) and volatile organic compounds (VOC) are transmitted into the atmosphere and carried by wind and air current. In the atmosphere, they react with water, oxygen and other chemicals to form sulphuric and nitric acid which when dropped on the surface of the earth through rainfall or other forms of precipitations become acid rain which is injurious to human and other biotic health.

Another special type of air, water and soil pollutant is the indiscriminate defecation on the surface of the earth. This practice is carried out freely in most villages in Nigeria and some sub-urban and our urban centres. In various villages and semi-urban areas in Nigeria, very few persons have pit toilets and water system toilets. Numerous others defecate freely on the surface of the earth. In the first instance, these faeces indiscriminately dropped on the earth’s surface, pollute the atmosphere to the detriment of human beings. When it rains, the remnants of these faeces which had already polluted the land and the air, are washed into the available streams and other bodies of surface

water. By this process, the streams and other bodies of surface water are unavoidably polluted. Residents of such areas fetch their drinking water from such polluted streams and other bodies of surface water. A lot of diseases such as cholera, cough and various types of worms are contracted from such impure source of drinking water.

With regard to what religion can do in respect of enhancing environmental sustainability, one can state that religion is a strong and very powerful factor in controlling the behaviour of their numerous adherents. The various religious groups in Nigeria have numerous adherents and they can map out strategies for inculcating in them the spirit of positive attitude toward the environment. Various Christian denominations and Muslim groups should be organising workshops, seminars and symposia for their numerous adherents on what they should do so as to enhance and foster clean environment, and what they should not do for the purpose of avoiding pollution of the air, water and soil.

On another level, regarding bush-burning as a means of extensively polluting the environment, and, especially in the local level, the adherents of those religious groups should be educated and re-educated on the negative implications and consequences of bush-burning which is done annually by Nigerians during the dry season. When the bush is burnt, large quantities of smoke are emitted into the atmosphere thereby polluting the environment. Also, when bush is burnt, the grasses that should have formed manure to the soil for crops and plants' use are burnt and the soil remains barren and depleted. Also, various trees and plants are burnt to death during bush-burning, rendering the place prone to desertification, in addition to the fact that the wildlife are exposed to danger and killed off. Another very serious danger of bush-burning is that quite often people's homes are burnt to ashes. Burning refuse in the compound also has the same negative consequences as bush-burning. All forms of bush-burning or burning of refuse in the compound emit smoke into the atmosphere, and consequently pollute the air human being breathe.

Christianity and Islam often preach to their adherents on regular basis. The two religious groups should incorporate in their regular preaching what their adherents should do so as to enhance good environmental ethical behaviour and what they should not do to avoid polluting the environment. They should as a matter of necessity, make their adherents to realise the negative consequences of polluting the environment.

The adherents of African Traditional Religion are also guilty of unethical environmental behaviour to a very large extent. They should also be educated and re-educated on the negative implications of bush-burning and open-air defecation on the surface of the earth as sources of pollution of the environment. It appears, most probably, that they are quite ignorant of the adverse effects of bush-burning and the emission of smoke into the air and the entire environment. The Local, State and Federal levels of government, having enacted some bye-laws and laws to guide against bush-burning and open-air defecation on the surface of the earth, should ensure that the populace comply strictly with these bye-laws and laws.

The researcher now turns attention to tapping and depleting of both solid and liquid natural resources such as gold, diamond, lime-stone, columbite, stone, crude oil, forest, etc. On individual and/or collective basis, some Nigerians tend to harvest these or some of these natural resources with reckless abandon. The various religious groups in Nigeria should step up their campaign and preach against such illegal tapping of the natural resources from the soil. In addition to preaching to their adherents, they should also be organising regular and intensive seminars, workshops and symposia during which their adherents should be educated on the dangers of such illegal tapping

of natural resources. Indiscriminate tapping and harvesting of these natural resources may lead to their depletion sooner than later.

Furthermore, various religious groups in Nigeria should establish a strong link with the various levels of government, at the Local, State and Federal levels, to request for their backings in their various campaigns against the odds of polluting the environment and illegally tapping the natural resources indiscriminately. When the various religious groups in Nigeria have liaised properly with the various levels of government, it is the responsibility of the latter to enact bye-laws and laws prohibiting all forms of pollution of the air, water and soil, and the indiscriminate tapping of the natural resources, and ensure strict enforcement of these enacted bye-laws and laws. With the bye-laws and laws enacted by the various levels of government, the various religious groups now have a very strong backings of the power that be. Very serious efforts should be made to ensure that the bye-laws and laws so enacted should be implemented to the letter. Various governmental agencies such as Public Health Officers, Community Health Officers, Forest Guards, Environmental Protection Agents, Forest Marshals, etc., should be mobilised to ensure effective implementation of the bye-laws and laws so enacted by the various levels of government.

Furthermore, the government and various religious organisations should compensate and reward adequately individuals and various religious groups that maintain good and healthy relationship with the environment. Also, various individuals and religious groups should be very much alert to report any individual tampering with the environment, especially those tapping the resources of the environment illegally. The government should reward all those who give them such tip-offs with regard to those tapping the resources of the environment illegally. All hands should be on deck to watch over the environment to avoid a situation where some individuals tap the resources of the environment with reckless abandon, thereby depleting it. Any individual caught in the illegal act, should be punished most severely.

To further sample the opinions of people on the issue being discussed in the article, the researcher purposely selected twelve informants and gave to each and every one of them an open-ended questionnaire. In addition, some of them were interviewed on the subject of the article. All the informants (100%) agreed that human beings are exerting negative influences on the environment, and these are done through various ways which include the following: open defecation, bush-burning, indiscriminate dumping of refuse, excavation of top-soil, destruction of aquatic animals, wildlife extinction, deforestation, overgrazing, erecting buildings indiscriminately, over population, unmitigated tapping of the natural resources from the environment, etc. The informants (100%) also agreed that various religious organisations and the Government can do something to control human's negative exertions on the environment. They can do this through such various means as enacting laws, environmental education, punishing offenders, discouraging cooking with firewood, provision of private and public conveniences, urban planning, controlling population growth, etc.

For instance, one of the informants, Okere, (personal communication, 2024) is of the opinion that Christian ideology underlying healthy practices should codify the way people behave to their environment, adding that Christian commitment and adherence to the rules and teachings should be associated with environmental sustainability. He also submits that Muslim beliefs, practices and institutions should play an important part in the health sector with particular emphasis on environmental sustainability. Most of the informants (95%) were of the opinion that the most frequent way through which human

beings exert negative pressures on the environment is through pollution of the environment which include air, water and soil. This environmental pollution affects most negatively human health-living.

This study finds out that human beings in Nigeria exert very serious negative pressures on the environment with reckless abandon through pollution, dislodgement and extraction of the mineral resources from the environment. It is also found out that the generality of the populace appears, most probably, not aware of the fact that they are breaching the environmental ethics through the kind of negative pressures they exert on the environment. Furthermore, this study finds out that the populace appears, most probably, ignorant of the fact that they should maintain good and very healthy relationship with the environment for their own good health living and for the sustainability of the environment. An average Nigerian breaches the fundamental environmental ethical behaviour with reckless abandon, without being aware of what he/she is doing. Some of our cultural practices such as bush-burning, hunting of the wildlife and burning of refuse in the compound continue to be in vogue, and an average Nigerian does that without knowing that he/she is breaching the fundamental environmental ethical behaviour.

Recommendation

Based on the discussion in the article, the researcher recommends that a good number of strategies should be put in place in Nigeria by various religious organisations for the purposes of environmental sustainability. In the first instance, these various religious organisations (Christianity, Islam & ATR) should be organising constant intensive human-centred education on the relationship that should exist between human beings and their environment. Also, there should be bye-laws and laws guiding how human beings should relate with their environment, and those bye-laws and laws should be obeyed strictly by the adherents of these various religious bodies. Furthermore, those who breach the environmental ethical rules and regulations should be punished most severely so as to serve as deterrent to others. Again, the Government should check and guide against over population of the environment so as to enhance environmental sustainability. The Forest Guards, Environmental Protection Agents, other connected parastatals and various religious organisations should be well-galvanised so as to maintain absolute surveillance on the environment so as to enhance sustaining the environment. Nigerians, hence the adherents of various religious organisations, should avoid bush-burning because of its long lasting negative consequences on both the environment and the populace. Individuals and various religious organisations that show observable evidence of cordial and positive relationship with the environment, should be rewarded appropriately by the Government.

Conclusion

This study concludes that human beings exert very serious negative pressures on the environment in Nigeria through various ways which include pollution of the environment, dislodgement of the environment and unmitigated extraction of mineral resources from the environment. It appears that the generality of Nigerian populace is ignorant of the existence of environmental ethics. It is, most probably, because of this reason that an average Nigerian infringes quite often on the environmental ethics. For this reason, very pragmatic, serious and intensive strategies should be mounted to instil on Nigerians good behavioural ethics toward the environment so as to enhance environmental sustainability. There is a strong need for the environmental resources to be used now and to be preserved for the future generations.

Conflict interest(s)

The author declares that he/she has no personal, professional or financial interest that may have inappropriately influenced the outcome of this research.

Ethical considerations

The author declares that this article was conducted in accordance with ethical standards and principles for research.

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