

Care for Creation: Religion and Environmental Sustainability in South-eastern Nigeria

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Abstract

The world is contending with the severe problems of climate change, biodiversity loss, resource depletion, and the reckless destruction of wildlife. South-Eastern Nigeria is particularly afflicted by environmental issues such as deforestation, soil erosion, and pollution, worsened by both governmental exploitation of mineral resources and daily human activities. Utilising a qualitative research approach, this study explores the interconnectedness between religion and sustainability of the environment in south-eastern Nigeria, focusing on the part played by religious beliefs and practices in shaping environmental attitudes and behaviours. Data were gathered through focus group discussions and the examination of religious and relevant texts. Employing thematic analysis, the findings reveal that while religious teachings frequently advocate for environmental stewardship, there is a notable discrepancy between these teachings and actual practices. Cultural and socio-economic factors also affect how these teachings are interpreted and implemented. The study underscores the potential of religious institutions to significantly influence environmental sustainability by harmonising religious teachings with sustainable practices. The research enriches the understanding of the complex interactions between religion and environmental sustainability, promoting comprehensive strategies that harness the power of religious institutions to create a more sustainable future in south-eastern Nigeria.

Keyword: environmental issues, religion, religious institutions, environmental sustainability, south-eastern Nigeria

Introduction

Human beings occupy a pivotal position in God's creation. Humans possess both the capability and obligation to develop a consciousness of the environment (Taylor, 2017) based on an understanding of natural resources (Hall, 2004). As caretakers of the earth, humans are given the task of caring for it (Gnanakan, 2015; Hall, 2004). The intricate interconnection between human behaviour and the well-being of the earth necessitates a total mastery, encouraging a deeper exploration of how religious convictions shape environmental attitudes. Ecological ethics explores the responsible management of interconnected elements within ecosystems, encompassing various living organisms as well as non-living components like mineral resources, air, pollution, soil, water, and forests, which collectively form functional units (Jain, 2021; Caporali & Caporali, 2021).

Presently, society faces numerous socio-ecological challenges. The globe is contending with the consequences of climate change, the decline of biodiversity, and the degradation of natural resources (Shivanna, 2020). With environmental issues becoming more acute, there is an increasing acknowledgement of the necessity to utilise all potential resources, including the moral and ethical principles rooted in religious doctrines. Environmental degradation inherently threatens habitats and inhabitants alike. The motivation for examining this subject arises from recognising that religion, given its profound impact on human values and actions, might be pivotal in cultivating a shared sense of environmental responsibility. In light of mounting environmental crises, the urgency for sustainable behaviours and ecological awareness has never been more pronounced. Therefore, human endeavours must prioritise the conservation of forests, lakes, rivers, natural resources, grasslands, and wildlife.

Environmental degradation is a pressing global issue, with significant consequences for ecosystems, human health, and the overall quality of life. South-Eastern Nigeria is no exception. Despite the region's rich natural resources and biodiversity, it faces significant environmental challenges such as deforestation, soil erosion, and pollution. These issues are driven by both governmental exploitation of mineral resources and everyday human activities, including bush burning, indiscriminate disposal of refuse, tree felling, and unsustainable agricultural practices (Alumona & Onwuanabile, 2019). In pursuit of economic, social, and political transformation, initiatives are underway to exploit the mineral reserves and natural wealth of the region (Lewis, 1994). However, this endeavour constitutes mismanagement of these resources, leading to ongoing and potential environmental issues such as oil spills (Isidiho et al., 2020), indiscriminate disposal of hazardous waste, air pollution, unchecked depletion of wildlife, and deforestation, among other concerns (Kolawole & Iyiola, 2023; Alumona & Onwuanabile, 2019).

In south-eastern Nigeria, religious principles play a crucial role in influencing moral principles, beliefs, and behaviours as individuals and communities. Christianity, traditional African religions, and, to a lesser extent, Islam, are deeply embedded in the socio-cultural structure, and religious teachings and institutions significantly influence the daily lives of the population. Religious teachings across various faiths often advocate for the stewardship of the earth, urging followers to respect and nurture the natural world. Though the extent to which religious beliefs and institutions contribute to or mitigate environmental degradation in this region remains underexplored. There is frequently a gap between these teachings and actual practices, influenced by cultural, socio-economic, and contextual factors.

This research seeks to uncover how these religious teachings and practices impact environmental attitudes and behaviours and examine the potential for religious institutions to promote environmental sustainability in south-eastern Nigeria. By investigating the intersections of religion and environmental sustainability, this study seeks to provide recommendations for leveraging religious influence to foster a culture of environmental care. Unlocking the faith-environment dynamic is essential for effective sustainability strategies. This study enriches the scholarly conversation on environmental ethics and provides actionable guidance for stakeholders, including policymakers, faith leaders, and community members. By aligning religious teachings with sustainable practices, there is potential to create a more sustainable future for south-eastern Nigeria and beyond.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation that informs this research is stewardship theory. This theory was introduced by Donaldson and Davis (1989; 1991). Stewardship theory assumes that individuals have an innate desire to act as responsible stewards, fulfilling their duties and obligations to others. (Menyah, 2013). Stewardship is an ethical principle that involves the careful and responsible planning and management of resources. Stewardship Theory is a concept rooted in the idea that humans have a sacred duty to tend to the earth, protecting its beauty and bounty for future generations.

In the context of environmental sustainability, the idea of stewardship can be broadly applied to multiple areas, such as protecting the environment, preserving natural resources, and more (Chapin et al., 2009; Rozzi et al., 2012; Hendee & Dawson, 2002). Key principles of stewardship theory include responsibility - the duty to manage natural resources wisely and sustainably. Accountability - the obligation to report and answer for the management of the environment. Sustainability - ensures that natural resources are used in a sustainable manner, ensuring their continued availability for future generations. Ethical management - adopts ethical principles in the management of the environment and respects all forms of life (Bennett et al., 2018).

This theory is often associated with religious and ethical frameworks that emphasise the moral commitment to care for creation (Peterson, 2001). In many religious traditions, the concept of stewardship is deeply ingrained. Christianity, Islam, and traditional African religions prevalent in south-eastern Nigeria all advocate for the responsible care of creation. For instance, Christian teachings emphasise the biblical mandate of humans to "till and keep" the earth (Genesis 2:15), highlighting humans as stewards, not destroyers, of the environment. Similarly, Islamic teachings advocate for balance (*mizan*) and caring for creation as a form of reverence and obedience to God. Traditional African religions often emphasise on cultivating a deep sense of connection and oneness with the natural world, acknowledging its sacredness. In other words, individuals and

communities should act as stewards, managing resources sustainably for a lasting legacy that benefits both current and future generations.

The application of stewardship theory in south-eastern Nigeria is through religious teachings and practices. Churches and Christian organisations in south-eastern Nigeria frequently promote environmental stewardship through teachings, sermons, and community activities. Programmes such as tree planting, clean-up campaigns, and conservation projects are often organised by Christian groups to foster a sense of environmental responsibility among their followers (Green & Haron, 2020). Islamic teachings emphasise the concept of *khalifa* (stewardship), and Muslims in south-eastern Nigeria engage in environmental education and actions that reflect the principles of stewardship (Zulkifli, 2023). Indigenous religions in south-eastern Nigeria often regard natural elements as sacred and promote the sustainable use and conservation of natural resources (Okafor et al., 2023).

Traditional systems of resource management in south-eastern Nigeria involve community leaders and members collectively managing and protecting their natural resources. This approach aligns with stewardship theory by emphasising collective responsibility and sustainable use of resources. The south-eastern governments have adopted several policies that promote environmental stewardship. Civil society organisations and communities work together to implement sustainable practices and raise awareness about environmental issues in south-eastern Nigeria. Stewardship theory, therefore, provides a valuable framework for understanding and promoting environmental sustainability in south-eastern Nigeria. By integrating the principles of responsibility, accountability, sustainability, and ethical management, society can address its environmental challenges more effectively.

Methodology

Using a qualitative research approach, this study investigates the interplay between religion and environmental sustainability in south-eastern Nigeria, highlighting the impact of religious beliefs and practices on shaping environmental attitudes and behaviours. The study uncovers the interconnection of environmental ethics and religion and the connection between religion and environmental sustainability, considering environmental issues in south-eastern Nigeria, their manifestations, and threat levels.

The area of the study is the South-eastern States of Nigeria, which is one of the country's geopolitical zones. The region is primarily inhabited by the Igbo people (Obaro, 2006), and the local language spoken is Igbo. The Southeastern States include Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo. Major cities in this area are Aba, Umuahia, Onitsha, Awka, Nnewi, Enugu, Abakaliki and Owerri (Population of Cities in Nigeria, 2023). The Igbo people are bordered by several ethnic groups, including the Igala and Idoma to the north, the Ijaw and Ogoni to the south, the Yako and Ibibio to the east, and the Benin and Warri to the west (Ekwunife, 1990). The region's population is approximately 36 million, which constitutes about 18% of Nigeria's total population (Population of Cities in Nigeria, 2023).

The data was gathered through focus group discussions (FGDs). Ten focus groups, each with eight participants, were conducted within diverse native and religious communities to understand their perspectives on environmental issues. Participants, consisting of both men and women aged between twenty-five and sixty-eight years, were purposefully selected from various religious groups across different regions in south-eastern Nigeria due to their relevance to the study. These participants were recruited through their community and religious leaders. They were informed about the purpose of the research and what participation would entail. The researcher obtained

informed consent from all participants, ensuring confidentiality and voluntary participation. Cultural norms and religious beliefs were respected during data collection and interpretation. Transparency and rigour in data collection, analysis, and reporting were maintained to uphold research integrity.

The researcher, as a moderator, conducts the discussion with a semi-structured approach, ensuring that crucial subjects are addressed while also allowing participants to express their views and opinions openly. Data were also collected from existing literature on religion and environmental sustainability. Transcripts and notes from FGDs were analysed thematically to identify the problematic environmental issues in south-eastern Nigeria, how these issues manifest, and the levels of threat they pose to the people, with variations in participants' views and experiences.

Historical Overview and the Evolution of Environmental Ethics in Religious Thought

Throughout history, the relationship between religion and the natural world has been deeply intertwined. This connection has manifested in various ways, emphasising a profound and interconnected rapport. The historical exploration of this relationship reveals the origins of respect and mutual dependence between religious beliefs and the environment. This includes early indigenous spiritualities, animistic traditions, and ancient belief systems that inherently acknowledged the sanctity of nature (Kellert & Farnham, 2013). These early perspectives not only shaped societal attitudes towards the environment but also underscored the importance of a balanced coexistence with the natural world, as exemplified in ancient belief systems and ecological harmony (Callicott & Ames, 1989).

The dynamic interplay between religious beliefs and environmental ethics has undergone a transformative journey throughout history, shaping moral perspectives on humanity's relationship with the natural world. The progression of environmental ethics is apparent within diverse religious traditions. The indigenous communities have historically embedded ethical considerations into their relationships with the environment, emphasising the interconnectedness of all living entities (Muller et al., 2019). The wisdom deeply rooted in indigenous cultures views nature as both an instructor and a companion, encouraging sustainable behaviours. Indigenous spirituality and environmental stewardship have been shaped by the insights derived from traditional ecological knowledge (Gordon et al., 2023). The ethical principles governing the utilisation of resources, sustainability practices, and conservation efforts within indigenous traditions contribute to the establishment of moral ecosystems (Wehi & Lord, 2017).

The pantheon of Greco-Roman deities and the philosophical viewpoints of ancient Greece attributed spiritual importance to elements of nature (Hughes, 2014). Ethical reflections on the environment in Eastern philosophies encompass Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, and Confucianism. The influence of Eastern philosophies in shaping cultural viewpoints towards nature as inherently divine and interconnected is substantial (Callicott & Ames, 1989). The formation of attitudes towards the environment is guided by ethical principles embedded in ideas like karma, dharma, and the interconnectedness of all living entities (Ravikanth, 2021; Diya, 2023).

The Abrahamic religions, namely Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and how their perspectives on human stewardship of the Earth have evolved. The rise of monotheistic beliefs has played a role in shaping both anthropocentric and theocentric perspectives, impacting environmental ethics through sacred texts and theological interpretations (Cone, 2012; Nafisah, 2018). The ethical

considerations regarding the environment in Judaism and Christianity have transitioned from the notion of human stewardship over creation to more contemporary ecological interpretations. The influence of biblical teachings extends to shaping perspectives on nature and guiding humanity's ethical responsibilities towards the environment (Green, 2008; Jenkins, 2013). Christian mysticism during the mediaeval period portrayed nature as a mirror that reflected the divine order. The Islamic perspectives on environmental ethics emphasise the Qur'anic principles of stewardship (Khilafah) and the concept of balance (Mizan) in human-nature relations (Saniotis, 2012; Bayat, 2023). The impact of Islamic scholars and their contributions to ecological thought is evident within the framework of Islamic teachings.

The rise of ecological spirituality in present-day religious discourse highlights the integration of scientific insights with core religious values. Religious communities are adjusting their ethical frameworks to confront urgent environmental challenges, integrating concepts such as eco-justice and eco-theology. The development of environmental ethics in religious thought reveals different ways religious beliefs have guided and still impact ethical viewpoints regarding environmental stewardship (Horrell & Davis, 2014; Leary et al., 2016).

The Interconnection of Environmental Ethics and Religion

Environmental ethics is a branch of applied ethics dedicated to exploring the connections between humans and their surrounding environment, particularly emphasising the moral principles guiding environmental stewardship (Elliot, 1995). It digs into the ethical bond between humanity and the environment. This includes ecocentrism, which prioritises the needs of nature and views humans in relation to those needs. The fundamental principles of environmental ethics often have religious origins (Attfield, 2011; Pedersen, 2015). Ecocentrism, the prevailing form of environmental ethics utilised in this study, aligns with the biblical directive for humans to exercise supreme authority over all living beings and to responsibly manage the Earth (Waters, 2021). Furthermore, through ecocentrism, humans are instructed by God to nurture His creatures, preserve the Garden of Eden, and refrain from harming or desecrating the environment (Bauckham, 2009).

Comparable directives are also present in diverse religious traditions, especially religions that acknowledge a divine being, including Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and traditional African religious beliefs. Across these religions, deviating from the Creator's commands results in punishment (Gomes, 2012; Butler, 1878). While many religions anticipate punishments in the afterlife, traditional African religious beliefs differ by emphasising earthly and often immediate consequences for transgressions of these commandments and prohibitions, which are regarded as taboos (Fuller, 1994). African traditional religions are recognised for their environmentally conscious practices. Consequently, certain geographical features, such as mountains, sacred forests, and rivers, as well as specific plant and animal species, are held in reverence and regarded as sacred (Tiedje, 2007; Orobator, 2021). Any form of interference with these elements is strongly disapproved of and subject to punishment.

Understanding the Connection between Religion and Environmental Sustainability

The relationship between religion and environmental sustainability is crucial in fostering effective strategies for environmental conservation and sustainability. The critical significance of addressing environmental sustainability in the contemporary global context is very important. This clarifies the escalating environmental challenges, such as climate change, deforestation, and pollution (Dalby, 2009), underscoring the urgent need for comprehensive

solutions. While often overlooked, religious beliefs and practices shape human relationship with the environment. Understanding this connection is imperative for sustainable practices to ensure a viable and balanced future for generations to come.

Religion significantly influences human attitudes and behaviours towards the environment. Religious traditions around the world often contain teachings, values, and ethical principles that emphasise stewardship, reverence for nature, and the interconnectedness of all living beings (Negi, 2005; Aung, 2017; Egri, 1999). For example, many indigenous cultures view the Earth as a sacred entity deserving of respect and care. Similarly, major Nigerian religions that is African traditional religions, Christianity and Islam, and world religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism, among others, offer insights into humanity's role as caretakers of the Earth. Recognising the profound influence of religious beliefs and teachings on individuals and communities, various faith traditions have provided ethical frameworks and moral imperatives related to environmental stewardship. The shared values across different religions underscore the sanctity of nature and lay the groundwork for understanding how religion serves as a potent catalyst for ecological consciousness (Gottlieb, 2006; Kellert & Farnham, 2013). As stewards, we bear the ethical duty to preserve and safeguard natural resources for future generations. It is crucial and mandatory for humans to exhibit social and moral obligations to the society they inhabit.

Moreover, religious institutions and leaders play a significant role in promoting environmental stewardship within their communities. They have the potential to leverage their influence to raise awareness about environmental issues, advocate for sustainable practices, and mobilise resources for conservation efforts. There are numerous ways in which religious communities contribute to environmental sustainability. Religious leaders' integration of religious principles with environmental ethics creates a powerful force for positive change (Hedlund-de Witt, 2014). Combining the spiritual motivations inherent in religious practices with the practical aspects of environmental sustainability, this synergy not only enhances the depth of individuals' commitment to environmental well-being but also has the potential to mobilise entire communities towards sustainable living. As such, it establishes a compelling rationale for the exploration of the connection between religious faith and environmental responsibility.

Table 1: Environmental Issues in South-Eastern Nigeria: Manifestations and Threat Levels

S/n	Problematic Environmental Issues	Manifestation	Threat Level
1	Deforestation	The extensive clearing of forests for timber, agriculture, and urban expansion.	Deforestation results to ecological degradation, interruption of climate change, ecosystems, and expanded carbon discharge, compounding significantly to the reduction of forest cover. This also cause soil erosion and degradation, which adversely affects agricultural productivity and water
2	Soil Erosion	Soil erosion is prevalent due to deforestation, poor agricultural practices, and construction activities.	Soil erosion depletes fertile land, reduces agricultural yields, and increases the

		Heavy rainfall further exacerbates the problem by washing away topsoil.	risk of landslides. It contributes to the deterioration of water quality and the decline of aquatic life due to excessive sedimentation in rivers and streams
3	Water Pollution	Pollution of water bodies from industrial discharges, agricultural runoff, and domestic waste. Inadequate sanitation facilities contribute to the contamination of rivers and streams.	Water pollution threatens the well-being of people who use these water sources for essential purposes like drinking, cooking, and farming. It also affects aquatic ecosystems, reducing fish populations and biodiversity.
4	Urbanization and Waste Management:	Rapid urbanization leads to increased generation of solid waste and inadequate waste management systems. Improper disposal of refuse is common, with waste often ending up in streets, rivers, and open dumps	Poor waste management results in environmental pollution, public health hazards, and the spread of diseases. Accumulation of waste clogs drainage systems, leading to flooding during the rainy season.
5	Unsustainable Agricultural Practices	Practices such as overgrazing, slash-and-burn agriculture, and soil quality deteriorate due to the improper use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides, and reduce agricultural sustainability.	Unsustainable agriculture depletes soil nutrients, reduces crop yields, and leads to desertification. It also contributes to the contamination of water bodies and loss of biodiversity.
6	Climate Change	Changes in climatic trends, rising intensity and frequency of extreme weather events and rising temperatures.	Climate change exacerbates existing environmental issues, leading to more severe droughts, floods, and storms. These changes threaten food security, water resources, and the livelihoods of communities in South-eastern Nigeria

Source: Field study

The FGDs revealed a strong consensus among participants that the environmental issues in south-eastern Nigeria, as stated in Table 1, have reached alarming levels, posing significant threats to the region's ecology, economy, and public health. Some participants noted that the combined effects of deforestation, soil and gully erosion, and water pollution undermine the natural resources that the population depends on for survival. This is in tandem with the view of Agha (2015) that, with the continued repetition of deforestation, the soil gradually becomes more permeable and less compact, leading to the formation of gully erosion. Rampant deforestation driven by logging, agriculture, and urbanisation also threatens the integrity of forest ecosystems (Ferreira et al., 2022; Ogunbode et al., 2021). In areas where there are still virgin forests, people hew down the trees not only for building purposes but also for commercial or economic reasons, thereby deforesting the area (Barbier, 2011).

Most participants noted, 'constant bush burning deprives the soil of its nutrients and the bacteria that aid in the decomposition of material.' This insight underscores the negative effects of bush

burning. When the earth is stripped of trees, herbs, and cover crops or plants with strong vegetation, it loses its capacity to retain rainwater (Kricher, 1997). This in turn affects the productivity of the land and the economic development of the people. The FGDs highlighted a widespread agreement among participants that faulty fishing methods, such as bottom trawling and bycatch, have a negative effect on aquaculture. These unsustainable fishing practices have led to the depletion of fish stocks and the collapse of marine ecosystems (Goñi, 1998; Carneiro & Martins, 2021). Using dangerous chemicals to kill fish in the river is very destructive, not only to the fish but to every creature in the river within the area of operation that is affected by the chemical (Johnson, 1968; Anju et al., 2010). The chemicals also affect the health of those who consume the fish FDGs reveal.

Some of the participants assert that rapid urbanisation and poor waste management not only degrade the environment but also create hazardous living conditions, particularly in densely populated urban areas. Pollution from industrial activities, agriculture, and waste disposal contaminates air, water, and soil, posing serious health risks to humans and wildlife (Mishra et al., 2019; Pona et al., 2021). One participant uncovered that ‘high levels of water pollution pose a considerable public health challenge in the south-eastern region and Nigeria as a whole.’ This aligns with the perspective that south-eastern Nigeria water bodies are heavily polluted with untreated sewage, used plastic bottles, nylons, and solid household waste (Arukwe et al., 2012; Ezeonu et al., 2012; Olarinmoye et al., 2015).

The health implications of these environmental problems are intense. There is a high prevalence of E. coli contamination affecting the water supply in the area (Dahunsi et al., 2014; Interactive Country Fiches, 2024; Fuh et al., 2018). Contaminated water sources also lead to waterborne diseases, while air pollution from waste and industrial activities increases respiratory issues. Soil degradation affects food production, threatening food security in affected areas. Wanton destruction of plants and animal life through indiscriminate bush burning destroys enormous acres of tropical forest annually, whereas in Nigeria, more than 60% of the tropical forest land is affected annually (Agha, 2015).

Moreover, the region's vulnerability to climate change amplifies these threats, making it imperative to address these environmental challenges urgently. The impact on biodiversity is also significant, with many species facing the risk of extinction due to habitat loss and pollution. Human activities such as urban expansion, mining, and agriculture result in habitat destruction and land degradation, leading to the loss of biodiversity and ecosystem services (Adla et al., 2022; Kanianska, 2016). As natural habitats are cleared or altered to make way for human activities, countless species of plants and animals lose their homes and, in many cases, their lives. This loss of habitat fragments populations, disrupts ecosystems, and can lead to the extinction of species (Scanes, 2018).

Forests, wetlands, and other natural habitats play crucial roles in regulating climate, purifying water, preventing soil erosion, and providing food and resources (Gupta et al., 2020). When these habitats are destroyed or degraded, these essential services are compromised, impacting everything from agricultural productivity to human health (Smith et al., 2013). The environmental issues in south-eastern Nigeria are deeply interconnected and have become increasingly threatening. By tackling these issues, south-eastern Nigeria can work towards a more sustainable and resilient future.

Table 2: Challenges and Opportunities for Leveraging Religious Influence to Foster a Culture of Environmental Care

s/n	Themes	Challenges	Opportunities
1	Doctrinal Rigidity and Interpretation	Religious teachings can be interpreted in various ways, sometimes leading to conflicting views on environmental care. Doctrinal rigidity can hinder the adaptation of religious teachings to contemporary environmental issues	Encouraging open dialogues and reinterpreting sacred texts in the context of modern environmental challenges can bridge these gaps.
2	Cultural and Socioeconomic Factors	Cultural norms and socioeconomic conditions can influence the effectiveness of religious messages on environmental stewardship. In regions where poverty and basic survival are primary concerns, environmental care may not be a priority.	Integrating environmental care with initiatives that address basic needs can make environmental stewardship more relevant and impactful.
3	Institutional Resistance and Priorities	Some religious institutions may resist focusing on environmental issues, prioritizing traditional spiritual and social concerns instead	Highlighting the interconnectedness of environmental health and human well-being can help shift institutional priorities towards greater environmental engagement.
4	Political and Economic Pressures	Political and economic interests can sometimes conflict with environmental goals, leading to resistance from influential stakeholders within religious communities.	Building alliances with progressive political and economic entities can help align religious initiatives with broader sustainability goals.
5	Lack of Resources and Expertise	Many religious institutions lack the resources and expertise to develop and implement effective environmental programs.	Collaborating with environmental organizations and leveraging external expertise can enhance the capacity of religious institutions to promote environmental care.
6	Diverse Theological Views	Diverse theological views within and across religions can create fragmentation and reduce the effectiveness of unified environmental actions.	Fostering interfaith dialogue and focusing on common values can create a unified approach to environmental stewardship

Source: Field study

Religious teachings on environmental stewardship can vary significantly in their interpretation and emphasis across different denominations or sects. Some may emphasise the spiritual or ethical duty to care for the Earth, while others may focus more on personal piety or salvation. The application of these teachings is heavily influenced by cultural norms and socio-economic conditions. In regions where economic development is prioritised over environmental protection, religious teachings on stewardship may take a back seat to immediate economic needs.

Most informants exposed that, ‘in practical terms, religious communities and their members often engage in activities that contribute to environmental degradation, such as land development, resource extraction, or unsustainable consumption patterns.’ One informant notes that ‘religious institutions themselves may not always model environmental stewardship in their operational practices.’ For example, some churches or temples might not prioritise energy efficiency or waste reduction in their facilities according to another informant. In other words, there is a gap in

understanding among followers about the specific teachings of their faith regarding environmental stewardship. This lack of awareness can lead to inconsistent or contradictory behaviours in relation to environmental practices among religions.

External factors, such as government policies or the lack thereof can influence how effectively religious teachings on environmental stewardship are put into practice. Weak enforcement of environmental regulations, for instance, may undermine efforts promoted by religious teachings. Despite these challenges, there are numerous examples where religious communities and leaders actively promote environmental sustainability. Bridging the gap between religious teachings and actual environmental practices requires addressing these complex factors through education, advocacy, policy support, and the active engagement of religious leaders and communities.

The role of religious institutions in promoting environmental stewardship

Theological Foundations and Doctrinal Statements:

Across various religious traditions, some teachings and principles emphasise stewardship, conservation, and responsible use of the earth's resources (Hitzhusen & Tucker, 2013). Harnessing the moral authority and influence of religious institutions can be instrumental in addressing the problem of environmental degradation. The concept of stewardship is one of the key aspects of many religious teachings, which emphasises the responsibility of humans to care for and protect the earth and its resources. For instance, in Christianity, the concept of stewardship frequently connects to the belief that humans are custodians of God's creation and bear responsibility for the Earth's resource management (Van Dyke et al., 1996). Likewise, within Islam, teachings on Khalifa, or stewardship, stress the obligation of humans to responsibly oversee and protect the environment (Rizk, 2014).

In African traditional religions, certain natural features, such as mountains, sacred forests, rivers, specific plant and animal species, and totemic animals and trees, are held in reverence and deemed sacred (Taringa, 2006). There is a significant focus on the tangible and sometimes immediate consequences of disregarding commandments and prohibitions, which are viewed as taboos regarding these elements. Any disturbance to these sacred aspects is strongly discouraged and could lead to consequences. This underscores the human duty to responsibly oversee and protect the environment.

Leadership and Advocacy, Educational Programmes, and Sermons: Notable Religious figures such as Pope Francis, through his encyclical "Laudato Si'," have called for immediate action on climate change and environmental degradation (Wilkins, 2022). Similarly, the Dalai Lama has extensively promoted environmental conservation within Buddhism (Pitkin, 2020; Darlington, 2018). Other religious leaders can follow these examples to encourage their followers to adopt sustainable practices and endorse environmental policies. Religious institutions often incorporate environmental themes into their educational programmes and sermons. Teachings that highlight the religious duty to care for creation can significantly influence the attitudes and behaviours of congregants.

In addition to their educational efforts, religious institutions actively engage in advocacy to influence environmental policies. Religious teachings frequently emphasise principles of justice, compassion, and equity, which are directly relevant to environmental issues. Many religious traditions call for the fair distribution of resources and condemn actions that lead to exploitation or deprivation (Paul & Elder, 2003). This includes tackling environmental degradation,

pollution, and resource depletion, which disproportionately affect marginalised communities and future generations.

Moreover, religious communities often possess strong networks and infrastructure for community organising, education, and advocacy. These networks can be mobilised to highlight the issue about environmental issues, promote sustainable practices, and advocate for policies that protect natural resources (Steinberg, 2009). Additionally, religious groups frequently collaborate with non-governmental organisations to promote sustainable development. For instance, the Catholic Church has been active in international climate negotiations, advocating for policies that protect the environment and support vulnerable communities.

Community Initiatives and Practices, and Interfaith Collaborations: Religious leaders, as trusted figures within their communities, can play a crucial role in inspiring and motivating individuals to take action to preserve the environment (Wolf & Moser, 2011). Many religious institutions organise community-based environmental initiatives. Religion can provide a sense of meaning, purpose, and interconnectedness, fostering a deeper appreciation for the natural world. Most religious traditions emphasise the sacredness and interconnectedness of all life, promoting reverence and awe for the Earth and its ecosystems (Irvine et al., 2019). These spiritual dimensions can inspire individuals to develop a stronger sense of responsibility and care for the environment.

These initiatives can include tree planting drives, clean-up campaigns, and efforts to reduce the carbon footprint of religious buildings. For instance, the Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environmental Sciences (IFEES) serves as a prime example that collaborates with mosques to promote eco-friendly practices (Mohidem & Hashim, 2023; Welch & Rahman, 2023). Similarly, the Evangelical Environmental Network in the United States mobilises Christians to engage in environmental advocacy and practical action (Bomberg & Hague, 2018). From the above examples, interfaith collaborations have become a powerful force in promoting environmental stewardship. Initiatives like the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative bring together religious leaders from different faiths to address deforestation and advocate for the rights of indigenous peoples. Such collaborations highlight the shared values across religions regarding the care for creation and amplify their impact.

Recommendations

Religious leaders and institutions should incorporate environmental education into their teachings and events to motivate sustainable practices. They should also promote eco-friendly religious practices and organise faith-based environmental initiatives like tree planting and clean-up campaigns. Religious institutions should partner with environmental organisations to enhance sustainability efforts and instil lifelong values. Religious leaders should advocate for environmental policies by engaging with policymakers. Form alliances between religious groups to address environmental issues collectively, as interfaith collaborations can unify approaches to sustainability. Provide training and resources for religious leaders and community members on sustainable practices. These steps will empower proactive environmental care. Implementing these recommendations will enable religious institutions in south-eastern Nigeria to foster environmental sustainability and harmonise faith with the natural world.

Conclusion

As the global population grows, food production increases, depleting natural resources and causing environmental disasters in south-eastern Nigeria. Issues like marine resource depletion, deforestation,

and pollution harm ecosystems. It is important to harness the relationship between religion and environmental sustainability. Understanding this connection can help utilise religious traditions to promote environmental awareness and action. It is crucial to inspire south-easterners to preserve their community spirit and recognise the interconnectedness of human life and nature. Religions play a key role in providing hope, resilience, and motivation through spiritual insights, moral guidelines, communal support, and educational programs. Embracing diverse religious and environmental perspectives fosters inclusivity and cooperation, leveraging collective wisdom to build a more sustainable and just world for all.

Conflict interest(s)

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

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