A BIBLICAL-ETHICAL EVALUATION OF THE ATTITUDES OF CONTEMPORARY CHURCHES TO THE ENVIRONMENT IN NIGERIA: AN ISSUE IN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT DISCOURSE

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ABSTRACT
The paper posits that in spite of the fact that the Bible is replete with duties of Christians towards caring for and sustaining the environment, little or no attention has been paid to assessment of the practical attitude of Christians, particularly Nigerian Christians, to the environment; this is the vacuum this work intends to fill in sustainable development discourse. This task becomes expedient in light of contemporary environmental problems manifesting in global warming, environmental degradation, deterioration, contamination, and littering of the Earth among others.

The work which is premised on theory of environmental ethics pioneered by environmentalists the likes of Carson, White, Hardin, Leopold, Baxter, Taylor, Botkin, Callicott and Nelson and Martin examined the attitudes both negative and positive of Christians to the Nigerian environment. The research approach is both descriptive and argumentative and was carried out mainly from the context of biblical ethics. Upon a critical review, It is evident in the field work that many churches abuse the environment through illegal sitting of the churches, the use of drum-size loudspeakers during religious programmes which sometimes resulted to environmental pollution and there is too much emphasis on dominionship over the environment as against stewardship towards it as evident in the teachings of the Bible and Church traditions. Based on this, we suggest that the Nigerian government, individuals, and corporate institutions should help sensitize and orientate Nigerian Christians and non-Christians as well to develop good understanding, using, sustaining, preserving and managing of the environment. This task becomes urgent as the contemporary Nigerian environment poses threats to human survival especially in Nigerian cities.
STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The fact that the Bible is replete with duties of Christians towards caring for and sustaining the environment has been strengthened by Biblical scholars who employed different interpretative models in the Bible and the environment discourse over the ages (Aderibigbe and Ayegboyin, 1999). The same has also been heralded by individual Christians, including church leaders, the world over with much leave borrowed from the church traditions (Brown Taylor, 2005). However, little or no attention has been paid to assessment of the practical attitude of Christians, particularly Nigerian Christians, to the environment in terms of whether or not they hold tenaciously to the environmental ethics so emphasized in the Bible; this is the vacuum this work intends to fill. This task becomes expedient in light of contemporary environmental problems, such as Global warming, which is the accelerated warming of the Earth’s surface due to anthropogenic (human activity-related) release of greenhouse gases due to industrial activity and deforestation (Microsoft Encarta 2005) and environmental pollution, which manifests in environmental degradation, deterioration, contamination, and littering of the Earth, among others.

Alluding to the seriousness of environmental problem and its attendant implications, Jardins rhetorically remarks that:

At the start of the twenty first century, it is fair to say that we face environmental challenges unprecedented in human history. Largely through human activity, life on Earth faces the greatest mass extinction since the end of the dinosaur age 65 million years ago. Some estimates suggest that more than one hundred species a day are becoming extinct and that this rate could double or triple within the next few decades. The natural resources that sustain life on this planet - air, water and soil –are being polluted or depleted at alarming rates …The prospect for continued degradation and depletion of natural resources multiply with this population growth. Toxic waste will plague future generations continue to accumulate worldwide. With destruction of the ozone layer and the potential for a greenhouse effect, human activity threatens the atmosphere and climate of the planet itself (DesJardins, 2001).

One of the inferences we can draw from Jardins’ observation is that environmental problems are man-made and not God or evil made. And if we must avert dangers associated with it, we need to examine how individuals, or groups of individuals, have consciously and unconsciously aggravated environmental problems so that all of us individually or corporately would work towards preventing further damage of the environment, as well as resolving the problem. Granted that the church is a social community, it is important to alert her with responsibility towards the environment. The fundamental questions to be asked are: does the church contribute to environmental problems? If the
answer is in the affirmative, how does it happen? And if the answer is no, why do we think the Church should be involved in the campaign for prevention or reduction of environmental problems which are a problem facing the contemporary global society? Since the church is part of society and of course a social institution existing and operating in a given environment, it could not afford to remain silent in the environmental debate; this is the thesis of this essay. Our findings would help us place the contemporary churches in a position where she would contribute her quota towards prevention or reduction of environmental problems.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND
The study of the environment over the ages has brought about the emergence of theories of the environment, particularly from an ethical point of view in the light of which we speak of environmental ethics, which is a field of applied ethics concerned with those issues that arise when human beings interact with the natural environment. Environmental ethics, which does not only seek to evaluate past and present attitudes and practices, but aims to offer guidance as to how people ought to think about and conduct their relationship with the natural environment. For example, environmental ethicists debate whether the natural environment is simply an exploitable resource for human interests, or whether it has significance independent of any use that might be made of it, a value that ought to constrain certain practices. A few of these environmental ethical theories are Libertarian theories which extend human rights to non-human beings, especially animals. This brings about theory of animal rights, which presupposes that animals have intrinsic rights that should be guaranteed in the same way as those of human beings are. Ecology theory places emphasis not on human rights but on the fundamental interdependence of all biological and a-biological entities and their essential diversity. Conservation theory looks only at the worth of the environment in terms of its utility or usefulness to humans. Others include Anthropocentrism theory, which is concerned with the future of human beings as objects of moral responsibility, and finally the holistic ethical theory, which holds that people have moral responsibilities to collections of (or relationship between) individuals rather than (or in addition to) those individuals who constitute the whole. A critical exploration of these theories has brought to the limelight the works of environmentalists, such as Rachel Carson (DesJardins, 2001); Lynn White (1967) Garrett Hardin (2006); and Aldo Leopold (1949). It is important to note that some of the theories have several versions resulting from critical evaluation of them by contemporary environmentalists, the likes of Baxter (1974), Taylor (1986), Botkin (1990), Callicott and Nelson and Martin (1998).
SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

Methodologically, the work is strictly an examination of the attitudes of contemporary churches to the environment; therefore, the approach is both descriptive and argumentative, carried out mainly from the context of biblical ethics. For the purpose of emphasis, Biblical ethics consists of the standards of behavior for Christians as laid down in the Bible cum Biblical-Environmental ethics (Smith, 1991:17). This definition provides basis for some of the questions often asked by Biblical-environmentalists, such as: Should we continue to fell all of the trees in the forests for the sake of human consumption, without adequate provision made for replacing them? Should we continue to make gasoline powered vehicles, depleting fossil fuel resources while the technology exists to create zero-emission vehicles? What environmental obligations do we need to keep for future generations? Is it right for humans to knowingly cause the extinction of a species for the (perceived or real) convenience of humanity?

Theoretically, biblical ethics is deontological because it holds that actions are right or wrong in terms of whether or not they are fulfillment of duty. Relating this to the environment, the biblical ethics presupposes that Christians are and ought to be trustees or stewards in caring for the creation, including the environment, that is the natural world which God pronounced as “very good” in the opening chapters of Genesis.

One of the tools employed for doing this is Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), which is of American origin, is a formal process of evaluating how the activities of people in an environment affect everything therein in the given environment. The advantage of this tool is that it would help us to fashion environmental policy that would enhance good environment desirable for all. The measurement is done through interviews conducted in selected residential areas of Ibadan. It is important to note, that there are seven major resident districts in Ibadan - the core, older suburb, newer eastern suburb, newer western suburb, post-1952 suburb, Bodija estate, and reservations(Mabogunje,1962:56-77). In recent times, several resident districts have sprung up at Agbowo (opposite the University of Ibadan). In the core district, which is the high-density area, occupied mainly by the indigene of the town, there is no layout of buildings or road networks in this area. The older suburb, shares virtually the same characteristics with the core district except that more Yoruba immigrants may be found there. The newer eastern and Western suburbs and the post 1952-suburb are characterized by lower housing density. Districts consist of people who can be regarded as middle-class. The GRA, Bodija Estate and Oluyole Estate may be regarded as low-density areas. The Agbowo area is occupied by low to medium income groups, working mainly in the University, at Ojoo along Oyo road and along Ife, Abeokuta and Ijebu Ode roads.
Information derived via this channel is supplemented by personal observation and experience, which span over a decade. In the end, the information would be analyzed within the ambit of. Because environmental ethics is very broad, we shall advance our argument within the context of Biblical-environmental ethical theory earlier alluded to.

FIELDWORK REPORT
The fieldwork reports cover two major issues: environmental matters arising from sitting of churches in the areas of study and liturgical activities taken place in the churches. By sitting of churches, we mean where the churches are geographically or physically situated, with emphasis on how such has implication for the aesthetic of the environment, on the one hand, and whether or not the sitting is in accordance to the philosophy behind building qua building procedures in the residential area, on the other hand. The second, about liturgical operation, is concerned about how operations of the churches - such as singing, clapping, dancing, organization of open revival activities, street evangelism - affect the community in terms of timing of the program and consequences that the activities produce, among others, all of which have implications for the environment. Here are the reports:

SITTING OF CHURCHES IN IBADAN
In terms of sitting of churches, we discover that there are no less than seven to ten churches located on an average street in residential areas in places like Ajibode, Molete, Beere, and Oke Ado, to mention a few. Statistically, average residential areas of Ibadan city have 50% of churches housed in a rented one room apartment, 20% are domiciled in kiosk and a few shades in front of residential buildings, and 30% domiciled in approved church buildings. In other words, today, churches are increasingly springing up in residential areas, which under the law and normal circumstances, should not be so. Because ordinarily residential areas are places that are designed with concern for the aesthetics. There is always lay-out there and the hoses to be built there should be residential with a right to serene environment. We found out that builders in residential areas usually get approval for building a house in a residential area and churches discover that after a while, part of the building (so approved in the mane of residential building) is converted first to a fellowship centre, which later metamorphosised to a church building. All of these happen in the name of church planting, which over time has resulted to what scholars call proliferation of churches (Obiora, 1988:73).

It is important to note that the sitting of the churches is contrary to the environmental law because in history, church buildings were located at the outskirt of the town or city where its activities would not disturb anybody. When people who had one reason or the other to do any
business at the outskirt of the city, such as performance of rituals, which sometimes involved drumming and singing, they would maintain absolute silence whenever they got to church premises, which already had the sing post reading “*Dake ilu ati ariwo* meaning, “stop drumming and singing”.

In addition, the churches, in the name of membership drive through advertisement, litter the environment with billboards in an unusual way (in public places like banks, post offices, and motor parks) which in the long run destroys the aesthetics of the environment. The present scenario has numerous implications for the environment. One, it destroys the aesthetics of the environment because under normal circumstances churches should not be located in residential areas, which has a right to serene atmosphere devoid of noise pollution (Abumere, 1997:86-88). The question we should entertain is: Who gave licenses to these churches? The town planner, of course! This means that there is a deal among the church planters and officials of town planning and those in charge of erecting of billboards and passing of postal, which consequently leads to de-beautification of our environment. This singular fact raises question of social and moral irresponsibility on the part of the church and the officers in charge of environmental management. This happening is what Adula defines as manifestation of corruption in management of Nigerian cities (adula, 2002:177).

**LITURGICAL ACTIVITIES IN CHURCHES**

It is observed that many of liturgical practices of churches in Ibadan earlier mentioned, directly or indirectly affect the environments. For example, most of religious activities are accompanied with the use of drum-sized microphones during morning, afternoon, and evening services. These results to air pollution and social noise, which affects everybody, such as infants and those admitted in private and public hospitals that ordinarily might be expected to be on bed rest. On the menace of noise pollution in Nigeria, Soni-Ehi observes that:

> Residents of big cities are increasingly going through the process of partial deafness. Their sensitive eardrums are daily being bombarded by a continuous barrage of environmental noise overflowing from ear shattering drum–size speakers of markets, mosques, and churches (Sohi-Eni, 1984).

Corroborating the above, experts in noise studies notify that the problem of noise pollution would at first be temporary, but progressed because of repeated exposure to loud noises and in due course exposure to hazardous sounds can damage inner ear cells. Furthermore, it is believed that potentially hazardous sound levels may make it difficult for a person to hear conversation and may cause the person to hear ringing in the ears or muffled sounds. In other words, many people suffer from hearing loss, some permanent, and some temporarily. A study by the National Center for
Environmental Health in Atlanta in 2006 found that 12.5 percent suffered from noise-induced hearing problems that muffled certain high frequency sounds (http://www.eia.doe.gov/emeu/cabs/nigenv/html)

Though this development is not peculiar to Ibadan, because the story is the same almost everywhere in Nigeria, but the outstanding issue is that Nigerians are not pleased about the situation. This explains why some Nigerians have called for an end to it as reflected in one of the Nigerian newspapers as follows:

It is high time that the government should invoke relevant sections of its orders on churches, mosques and music vendors in order to maintain the acceptable noise across the state. About time is all I can say! I wish Bola Tinubu would get this done in Lagos State where you can be kept awake all night by the sound of one religious group or another blasting out “Praise Worship” next to your pillow. Why are people so unreasonable and selfish? (http://community.nigeria.com/nspace/noise_pollution_Cross_River_State_Governme
t>, placed on the Internet on 10th May, 2005-10-05, (12th July, 2006).

The churches make use of generating plant, which generate noise and air pollution This is a serious problem in Nigeria because studies carried out by the Federal Environmental Protection Agency (FEPA) in 2001 show that Nigeria emitted 23.5 million metric tons of carbon, slightly down from a high of 27.7 million metric tons of carbon emitted in 1996, but still an overall increase since 1980, when the same figure was 18.9 million. Emissions from natural gas accounted for 12.5 million metric tons (53.3%) of that total, with oil emissions making up 11.0 million metric tons (46.6%), coal for the remaining 0.04 (0.1%) (http://www.eia.doe.gov/emeu/cabs/nigenv/html>, (18th July 2006).

Apart from the above, our study also shows that some churches, in the name of street evangelism, are fond of barricading major and minor streets. At times, some of the religious activities take place in the Lagos-Ibadan highways. The development often lead to road diversion, thus, causing inconveniences for road users, including pedestrians and motorists The churches claim that they always take permission from the constituted authority, but upon investigations, this fact is not always true. The bottom line is that the practice always causes disaffection for those affected. I witnessed an occasion in which some people argue that the practice of barricading streets is a violation of the rights of others to the use of public property, like roads. To our mind, if care is not taking it could generate interreligious conflicts, especially in Nigeria where religion is always a volatile issue (Ogunbode, 2006).
EVALUATION OF THE REPORTS

Exploring what the churches are doing to the environment is one thing, probing into factors that could be responsible for their activity is equally important in order to work towards solutions. Through interview with church planters regarding the proliferation of churches in residential areas, two reasons are said to have been responsible for the church activities earlier reported.

One, they argue that one of the major missions of the church is evangelism, which must be communicated in the manner that everybody would hear. The argument is not justifiable in the context of Biblical ethics, which teaches the act of showing concern for the other, as evident in the Golden rule and love for neighbors. The questions one could ask are: Does it matter to care about what we do in our environment, especially as such affects people in our surroundings? Do we care about what others do in our surroundings affect us? Does anybody have any rights regarding the use of the environment? Do the man, atmosphere, plants and animals, birds, and fish have rights to be protected in our environment, even within the context of dominion theory?

The second reason the church proffers is that it has divine mandate to use the way they like the environment as a God-given gift to humanity. This stance could be interpreted as an appeal to the anti-environmental school of thought, which presupposes man’s dominion over the earth with little or no responsibility for caring for it. The basis of their philosophy is Genesis 1:28, where God said:

Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” Then God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth.

The anti-environmental theologians interpret this passage to mean that God gives man freedom to do anything he wants to with the planet, including bending or twisting it to satisfy his desires. And if the need arises, he can abuse or rape it of all its beauty and diversity as long as his wants are met. To our mind, this approach to environment is negative and if it is pushed further we can see that it has some problems inherent it. For example, if every man were free to exploit the environment to meet his desire, there would be conflicts among people who have the same ambition and right to exploiting the nature. Under such arrangement, the nature itself would be destroyed within a short time. Such an approach will return man to his former state of nature, which according to Hobbes is characteristically solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short” and that it is “a war of all against
all” (Hobbes, 1946). One would find it difficult to reconcile the purpose of God’s creation of the earth with complete dominion of the earth (which often goes with the sense of irresponsibility in handling the environment) in such state of disorderliness. Furthermore, the word “dominion over nature” does not implicitly imply that man could use his God-given authority over nature to degrade and destroy it; rather, it presupposes that bestowment of responsibility towards maintenance of the environment.

Conversely, it is important for the Christians who believe in the Dominionship theology to know that every coin has two sides; meaning there are also some Biblical passages which suggest care for the environment. This brings about what is called the pro-environmental school of thought. This school of thought interprets Genesis 2:15 which read: ‘the Lord took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to tend it and keep it’ to mean that man should care for the environment. They interpret the two key words underlying this passage viz: ‘tend’ and ‘keep’ to mean that Adam, who today represents humanity, was to look after, care for, watch over, and keep an eye after the garden (Ritenbaugh, 1999).

By implications, Adam was likened to a caretaker, who had a duty of maintaining and not destroying the garden more importantly that he would give account of his stewardship. This perhaps explains partly one of the reasons why Adam and his wife were driven out of the Garden of Eden for violating what apparently looks like a landlord-tenant agreement. It is within this premise that contemporary Nigerian landlords (owners of rented apartments) use to drive away erring tenants who refused to maintain their apartments (environment) as stated in the letter of tenancy agreement. What we are saying, in essence, is that man is taken as a tenant on earth (because the earth is interpreted as a possession of God) and, therefore, man have responsibility to take care of the earth (the environment) in which he lives. This, by implications, therefore, bestows on man responsibility of taking care of his environment. To back up this argument, some other biblical passages are cited such as: Exodus 21:33-34, where there is a covenant made towards protection of animals from human-produced problems and Exodus 22:6, which guides against careless handling of the environment and payment of compensation to those affected in case the other affected the environment negatively. The aspect of compensation or restitution is lacking in the relationship between the Church and people affected by church activities.

In the book of Deuteronomy, chapter 20:19-20 provides insight to solving problems of global warming; Deut. 23:13-15 highlights what can be called anti-pollution laws. Leviticus 19:23-25, God gives laws regarding the growth and production of fruit trees designed for the mutual benefit of man.
and tree; and in Leviticus 25 also outlines how man should make use of the land, particularly cultivated lands to avoid degradation. From this point, we can begin to appreciate the importance of land ethics, which according to Leopold connotes morally conscious use of land; this is not merely soil, but a fountain of energy flowing through a circuit of soil, plants, and animals. On account of this thesis, Leopold concludes that a thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community, while it is wrong when it tends otherwise (1962).

Summarily, our findings show that, a large number of contemporary churches in Ibadan are not making good use of the environment. This is evident in their collaboration with town planners in creating bustling and non-environmental friendly atmosphere as an issue in environmental management earlier alluded. In our estimation, this suggests that the churches are not altruistic in their operations given the effects all their activities have on the environment; this calls for further remedy.

MAKING THE CHURCH RESPONSIBLE AND RESPONSIVE TO THE NIGERIAN ENVIRONMENTAL

In making the Church responsible and responsive to the Nigerian environmental, the church, as a social cum moral community, ought to have taken the lead in fostering good environment devoid of pollution. The need to be socially responsible, according to Barcallow, is considered as part of the ‘contract’ every person makes (implicitly) when one becomes a member of society and it is what makes life in society possible (Barcallow, 1994;160). It is equally important for Nigerian churches to learn a big lesson from Bartholomew II, the patriarchal of Eastern Orthodox Churches, who says:

Care of the environment constitutes a most urgent question for each and every human person… From this we can conclude that to commit a crime against the natural world is a sin: For man to cause species to become extinct, to destroy the integrity of the Earth by causing changes in its climate, stripping the forests or destroying wetlands-these are sins (Blachwelder, 2005).

Nigerian churches should also borrow some leaf the ‘Christian Friends of the Earth’, a non-profit environmental advocacy organization in the United States of America, which is fighting to protect the environment and helping communities, and protect themselves. This is a part of friends of the Earth International, which by all standards are ranked as the world’s largest environmental advocacy network with members and groups in several countries. In 2003, its president remarked at a conference in Collegiate, New York that:
…there is a need for all major religions today to halt the alarming destruction of all the Earth’s magnificent ecosystems and to begin the challenging process of restoration and rehabilitation in the US and worldwide.

(http://www.webdirectory.com/General_Environmental_Interest/Friends_of_the_Earth/html)

It is not too much for Nigerian Christians to join the Christian Friends of the Earth if they have not done so. And if they were members already, one would expect them to demonstrate, in practical terms, the philosophy of the association in Nigeria.

In addition to this, we suggest that the Nigerian government, individuals, and corporate institutions should help sensitize and orientate Nigerian Christians and the church toward development of good conception, use, and management of the environment. This task becomes urgent as the contemporary environment poses threats to human survival in which the very survival of the human species is at stake. Thus, in the words of Arthur Dyck, the appeal for survival should inform formulation of government policies for controlling and preventing environmental pollution (Dyck, 1977:36). Such policy should ensure that those affected by environmental pollutions are duly compensated, while future generations should not be harmed in the name of church planting and techniques for membership drive. In other words, the church and Christian organisations across the country have to create and promote educational awareness among Christians about appropriate ways they should deal with the environment, on the one hand, and solve problems associated with environmental pollutions, on the other hand. In other words, street evangelism should be done with little or bearable noise. It is not always important to use drum-sized loudspeakers for the sake of those that would be affected by church activities. We propose that those concerned with town planning and environmental management should discourage sitting of churches in residential parts of the city. Perhaps special areas could be created for the building of religious centres, to include churches, mosques, and shrines, as has been the practice in some tertiary institutions in South-western Nigeria. The FEPA should wake up to her responsibility of enhancing good environment.

In all, Christians need to live by example starting with disengagement from noise pollution often associated with their liturgical activities and sitting of their churches. On this note, it is good to conclude with the recommendation of the World Council of Churches towards formation of moral-oriented environment, stating that:
All elements of the God's earth are his creation and are to be treated responsibly. All of God's creation has value and is to be treated with reverence for the sake of its maker who accounted it good. We are commended to be good stewards of God's world. We are held responsible for it. It is not ours to do with them, as we please; rather we are it for the Lord (Albrecht, 1979).

Failure to respond responsively to the environment is to render useless the Bible (which is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete and equipped for every good works), on the one hand, and the biblical tenets regarding caring for and sustaining the environment, on the other hand. The time to do so is now.
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