

## **CHRISTIANITY AND ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY: A SEARCH FOR INCLUSIVE AND PARTICIPATORY RESPONSE**

Alokwu, Cyprian Obiora, PhD.

Trinity Theological College,

Umuahia ([obicko1@gmail.com](mailto:obicko1@gmail.com)) 08036069619

### **Abstract**

*The global concern for the environment at this point in human history is gratifying. Environmental problems transcend national boundaries and jurisdictions. It is therefore imperative to seek collective solution to the challenges of environmental sustainability. In this regard, many initiatives had taken place. It is however sad to note that in these past initiatives, religious bodies and groups had been utterly neglected for the flimsy notion that religious involvement in environmental issues compromises objectivity. The age long view of Christianity's anthropocentric stand also presents it as being uninterested in environmental matters and therefore an accomplice as far as ecological sin is concerned. The aim of this paper is therefore, to bring to the knowledge of the unenlightened, the evolutionary processes of Christianity's involvement in environmental initiatives through the ages. The methodology used was critical review of eco-theological materials. The main thrust of the paper is that Christianity's involvement could be an inspiration to environmental sustainability.*

### **Introduction**

There has been a growing global concern and emphasis on environmental sustainability. Environmental sustainability is the study of how natural systems function, remain diverse and produce everything it needs for ecological system to remain in balance. The concept of environmental sustainability is an acknowledgment of the fact that human civilization and development thereof take enormous ecological resources to support human life and our modern lifestyle. It is also a reminder that if the unrestrained modern consumerist attitudes and life styles remain unchecked, the earth will be disfigured and its fruitfulness impaired, and consequently every succeeding generation of people will automatically be condemned to poverty and doom. It is also crucial to warn that if the ecosystem health is distorted or destroyed, and as a result, the earth resources are irreparably damaged or depleted beyond their capacity to renew themselves, then the future of life of the 'entire earth community' is endangered. The quest for environmental sustainability has therefore necessitated the need to adopt a more urgent and practical course of action in order to maintain the ecosystem health and enhance the ability of the earth to provide the necessary resources for the survival of the whole 'earth community' as well as for development of various kinds to meet human needs. In order to adopt the needed practical action to achieve environmental sustainability, there have been numerous volumes of literatures from different disciplines dealing

on the subject matter <sup>1</sup>. For example, the 1972 Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment served as a prelude to the United Nations efforts in development crisis of the 1980s including environmental issues. Since this conference, there have been series of other global environmental initiatives and actions and some basic organisational schemes and programmes for global environmental action. <sup>2</sup>

However, it is sad to note that a careful study of these environmental initiatives over the years indicate that much emphasis had been placed on the techno-scientific options in dealing with these challenges to such an extent that they seem to ignore and undermine the role of cultural and religious heritage in environmental protection and sustainable development in general. The above probable explanation for not according due recognition and therefore not including religion and theology as one of the disciplines in environmental discourses, which is based on the fact that it would threaten or compromise objectivity, scientific investigation, professionalism and democratic values, is too naive, paranoid, simplistic and lacking critical rationalism. The argument is simple: Environmental investigations are not always conducted from scientific perspectives. There is a social or even economic dimension to the environment. After all, the word “ecology” which has Greek connotations, links both “oikology” and “oikonomy” together. Scientific methodology is merely one way, and not the only way, to investigate and acquire knowledge in order to provide solutions to humanity’s multifarious problems. There is a wide range of avenues through which solutions to environmental problems could be pursued. One of such is religious and theological engagement. Religion has a definite role to play in conservation and environmental protection. In this regard therefore, a religious understanding and attitude contributes and shapes people’s conception of the world and the dynamics of its institutions and social arrangements. This *cosmic dynamics* has therefore necessitated the need to draw science more closely and fully into a working relationship with religion and theology.

---

<sup>1</sup> Leal, Robert. 2004. *The Environment and Christian Faith*. Australia: St. Paul’s Publications. p. 20. There has been a lot of literature from different environmentalists on the current environmental crisis, emerging from church organisations, government and corporate organisations. See Simone, A.M. 1999. *Thinking About African Urban Management in an Era of Globalization*. *African Sociological Review* 3(2) 1999, 69-98, Hossay, Patrick. 2006. *Unsustainable. A Primer for Global Environmental and Social Justice* (New York: Zed Books and global initiatives such as the United Nations Millennium Report, Declarations and Development Goals, and the World Council of Churches Peace, Justice and Creation Commission, etc.

<sup>2</sup> Gosovic, Branislav. 1992. *The Quest for World Environmental Cooperation*. London and New-York: Routledge. p.xii For subsequent effort towards global environmental sustainability especially issues relating to the formulation of the Earth Charter, see Hessel, Dieter and Rasmussen, Larry. 2001. (eds) *Earth Habitat. Eco-Injustice and the Church’s Response*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.p.101-121.

## **Justification for involving Christianity in Environmental engagements**

The important observations emanating from the various conferences and initiatives are clearly not just lack of information or planning. It is erroneous to believe that information and education is all that is needed to provide solution to the environmental crisis and achieve ecological sustainability; and that awareness is not sufficient to global actors and spectators on the global environmental crisis. The environmental crisis has to be viewed from moral and ethical perspective. Failure to comprehend the problem from moral and ethical dimensions is a sign and indication that the values underlying our dominant cultural and economic practices have become bankrupt. According to Conradie, the problem lies not outside but inside ourselves, not in the ecosystem but in the human heart, in the collective psyche.<sup>3</sup>

Patricia Mische's view which corroborates Conradie's statement is very pertinent. She was of the opinion that there is need for religion to interface with other disciplines working together to seek solution to the environmental challenges of the time. She therefore insists that:

Science and technology alone cannot resolve ecological threats. Nor can governments or the laws they promulgate ... Sustaining the integrity of creation thus requires not only the external laws governments enact to deal with belligerent behaviour, but also inner governance, laws internalised in our hearts and minds and the will to live by them... Church praxis has special relevance for the development of inner governance and a culture of ecological responsibility. Religions carry the archetypes, the symbols, meanings, values and moral codes around which people coalesce and define themselves, their sense of the sacred, and their relationship with each other and the natural world.<sup>4</sup>

In the same manner, a "declaration on the Environment" signed by Patriarch Bartholomew and Pope John Paul 11, easily comes to mind. The declaration reads:

What is required is an act of repentance on our part and a renewed attempt to view ourselves, one another, and the world around us within the perspective of the divine design for creation. The problem is not simply economic and technological; it is moral and spiritual. A solution at the economic and technological level can be found only if we undergo, in the most radical way, an inner change of heart, which can lead to a change in lifestyle and of

---

<sup>3</sup> Conradie Ernst. 2008. *The Church and the Climate Change*. p.25

<sup>4</sup> Conradie, Ernst. 2008. *The church and Climate change*. p.64

unsustainable patterns of consumption and production. A genuine conversion in Christ will enable us to change the way we think and act.

Similarly, the former head of the global Anglican Communion, Archbishop Rowan Williams says this about the justification for Anglican involvement in environment and development initiatives “Anglicans are in international development because of a certain set of convictions about humanity”.<sup>5</sup> In order to live out this conviction, he posits that we will need to change our attitudes and behavior. Corroborating with the declaration referred to above, he emphasized behavioral change as a requisite solution to sustaining the earth, and solving the current environmental crisis. This, according to him, is in recognition of the fact that a combination of factors; which includes but not limited to, industrial pollution, deforestation, soil erosion, mineral and fossil fuel depletion, species extinction, over-population, over-consumption, and even unregulated tourism and development, are having devastating global effects on our environment.<sup>6</sup>

In the light of the above conversations, and in spite of bias against Christianity as a religion that not only promotes heavy anthropocentrism, but “otherworldliness” it has become obvious that government alone cannot provide solution to the challenges of the environment and therefore it has become necessary that the religious dimensions of the environmental crisis have to be sought for. After all, man, they say, is a religious animal.

In this regard, Christianity has been involved in many other projects such as the United Nations Development Programme’s (UNDP) project on the environment because of its deep concern for social development in general. A recent project in the above direction is the Earth Bible Project which was developed by a team of scholars from Australia. The significance of the Project is that it encourages writers from around the world to read the Bible from the perspective of justice for Earth. Eco-justice principles are therefore used as guidelines to ask the questions about a particular text to determine the following (a) whether a given text value or de-value Earth (b) whether the voice of Earth is heard or suppressed. (c) Whether humans are portrayed as 'rulers' over Earth or kin with Earth. (d) Whether Earth suffers unjustly.<sup>7</sup> The importance of the Earth Bible Project lies in the fact that it develops eco-justice

---

<sup>5</sup> Williams, Rowan. Undated. <http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/1> (Accessed on 13th March 2009)

<sup>6</sup> Coleman, R. 1992. (ed) *Resolutions of the Twelve Lambeth Conferences*. p.57 The above resolutions were adapted from the Lambeth Resolutions on the Environment

<sup>7</sup> The earth Bible Project. <http://www.webofcreation.org/earth-bible accessed-20> October 2009.

principles appropriate to an earth hermeneutic for interpreting the Bible and for promoting justice and healing of Earth.<sup>8</sup>

### **Christian Response to Environmental Crisis**

In a continued search for inclusive and participatory response to the environmentally challenging situations, a number of discourses over the years have brought scientists, environmentalists, other disciplines and theologians together in a concerted effort for solutions to the current environmental challenges and other socio-economic concerns of our time.<sup>9</sup> In this regard, numerous interdisciplinary conferences, seminars and workshops have been held and the current anthropocentric attitude to nature has often been blamed on the influence of Christianity teachings on nature.<sup>10</sup> The critiques of ecological thinkers make two fundamental accusations. First, bible and Christianity are very anthropocentric and thereby teach that human beings are divinely ordained to rule over and dominate nature. Second, many Christian writings and theologies especially from the Western world<sup>11</sup> denigrate nature and matter generally in comparison to the divine, which is equated with the spirit alone. As early as the second century, both Tertullian and Saint Irenaeus of Lyons were insisting that when God shaped Adam, he was foreshadowing the image of the incarnate Christ, the second Adam. Man shares in great measure, God's transcendence of nature. Many eco-theological scholars have attempted to articulate some classical theological thoughts about nature in its attempt to further develop an all inclusive ecological theology that seeks to protect the integrity of creation. A careful survey of the evolution of Christian thought regarding nature reveals some major components of eco-theological motifs collectively exercising a formative influence on Christianity at different periods in its history emerges.

In spite of the accusations against Christianity for being responsible for the global ecological crisis, Christianity has shown genuine commitment to ecological issues. This is not sounding apologetic. The reasons for this commitment are discussed below.

---

<sup>8</sup> The earth Bible Project

<sup>9</sup> Gosovic, Branislav. 1992. *The Quest for World Environmental Cooperation*. London and New-York: Routledge. p.xii, see Hessel, Dieter and Rasmussen, Larry. 2001. (eds) *Earth Habitat. Eco-Injustice and the Church's Response*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.p.101-121.

<sup>10</sup> Sowunmi, Adebisi.A. 1995. "Giver of Life-Sustain Your Creation" in Hallman, David.G.1995(ed) *Ecotheology. Voices from South and North*. New York: Maryknoll. p.149

<sup>11</sup> MacKinnon, Mary and McLntyre, Moni, 1995. *Readings in Ecology and Feminist Theology*. Kansas: Sheed and Ward. P.

### **The Reasons for Christian Ecological Involvement**

In his brief unpublished document, Steve de Gruchy suggests five reasons why Christianity have been committed in the current efforts towards environmental sustainability. The five reasons are:

- a. God created this world and it belongs to God
- b. If we care for life we must care for the environment
- c. Our humanity depends upon the environment
- d. Creation is bound up with salvation
- e. The earth crisis is a crisis of culture to which the Gospel speaks

Expanding on de Gruchy's framework, we now identify the following key themes, which will serve as the building block for our discussion.

### **God Created this World and it Belongs to Him (Stewardship Responsibility)**

The fundamental standpoint for church's engagement in the environment and poverty issues emanates from its belief that God created and loves His world. He values and cares for it independently of human existence. By this very fact, it is expected that human beings, bearing the image of God (particularly Christians) and as an integral part of that creation, should imitate the concern of God for maintaining and taking care of the earth.<sup>12</sup> In imitating this loving and caring attitude of God, humans are expected to live in a wholesome relationship with the rest of creation so as not to cause such destruction that species, ecosystems and indeed large numbers of people are threatened. In this regard, Steve de Gruchy, cautiously notes that we cannot *ipso facto* commodify the environment, but are obliged to respect its integrity and honour its creator and owner.<sup>13</sup> Unfortunately, people's non-appreciation of the environment, which is based on a very strong anthropocentric attitude towards nature, is to a very large extent the cause of the current environment and poverty problems.

Closely related to the above reason why the church should be engaged in the current "double earth crisis" of environment and poverty, is the Christian understanding of the implication of the concept of stewardship. In the opinion of Mc Donagh, God's command in Gen. 1:28 should be seen as a key text in re-shaping the human-earth relationship from the perspective of stewardship.<sup>14</sup> The mandate to exercise dominion over the rest of the creation should not be seen as a warrant for domination and exploitation that it has so often been taken to imply. For Mc Donagh, this mandate suggests that human beings as stewards have the role of managing and

---

<sup>12</sup> Spencer, Nick and White, Robert. 2007. *Christianity, Climate Change and Sustainable Living*.p.75

<sup>13</sup> De Gruchy, Steve. 2004. Theology and Development Studies Handout on Five Reasons why African Christians Should be Concerned about the Environment.

<sup>14</sup> Gitau, S. K. 2000. *The Environmental Crisis*. Nairobi: Action. p.61

preserving the creation for God. Similarly, George, S. Johnson, gives deeper insights of stewardship when he observes that:

The biblical understanding of stewardship implies accountability and participation. To move beyond guilt and powerlessness, we need to move from mastery, control and ownership attitudes to an attitude of stewardship toward all of life. This means becoming caretakers of creation with a sense of identification and partnership, rather than dominion and exploitation. To be a steward of creation is to embrace the world, to love as Christ did, and to be willing to sacrifice for the world rather than escape from the world.<sup>15</sup>

In a similar emphasis, the retired Archbishop of the Province of the Niger and the Bishop of Awka Diocese, Maxwell Anikwenwa, in his Synod Address delivered to the First Session of the Sixth synod asserts that we have no right over the earth, since we are caretakers called to responsible exercise of control over it. He therefore cautions that:

Our possession of the earth is not a freehold, but leasehold. This means that we are all tenants and not landlords-of all the lands. This includes where you were born, which you call your family land and the freehold you secured from those who think that they were landlords of the piece of land.<sup>16</sup>

Talking about the need for proper care of the earth in an inter-generational and non-theological terms, but also reflecting the theological concept of stewardship, Michael Watts and Richard Peet, made reference to a quote credited to Karl Max in which he stated that: “Even society as a whole, a nation, or all existing societies put together, are not owners of the earth. They are merely its occupants, its users; and like good caretakers, they must hand it down improved to subsequent generations”.<sup>17</sup>

Furthermore, in an attempt for a renewed effort for Christianity’s commitment to the concept of stewardship, a declaration was made in Assisi, the home of St. Francis in 1986 during the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the World Wild Fund (WWF). World Wild Fund is now renamed World Wild Fund for Nature (WWFN).<sup>18</sup>The Assisi declaration reads thus:

---

<sup>15</sup> Johnson, G. S. 2000. *Beyond Guilt: Christian Response to Suffering*. Cambridge: Adventure Publications. p.118

<sup>16</sup> Anikwenwa, Maxwell.S.C. 2002. *Our Common Future-Human Environment*. Presidential Address delivered at the First Session of the Sixth Synod of the Diocese of Awka, Anambra State-Nigeria.

<sup>17</sup> Peet, Richards and Watts, Michael. 2004.(eds) *Liberation Ecologies, Environment, Development, Social Movements*.London and New-York: Routledge.p.3

<sup>18</sup> Gitau, Samson. K. 2000. *The Environmental Crisis. A Challenge to African Christianity*. Nairobi: Action. p.80

“God declared everything to be good, indeed, very good. He created nothing unnecessary and has omitted nothing that is necessary. There exists a divinely willed harmony because the creatures have received their mode of existence by the will of their creator. Dominion (by human beings) cannot be anything other than a stewardship in symbiosis with all creatures”.<sup>19</sup> All the quotations above refer to the stewardship role of humanity towards sustaining the earth. The overarching issue emerging from all of the quotations is a caution that humans are not the owners of the earth and therefore cannot treat it irresponsibly. Stewardship is further treated in greater details in the chapter six under the discussion on the generation of ecological motif.

### ***Creation is Bound up with Salvation***

We learn from Steve de Gruchy in his five reasons for African Christianity’s involvement in the environment, that the Noahic covenant in (Gen.1:15-20) that Christ created all things and has dominion over all things, and in him all things hold together. We also know from Romans, that creation groans awaiting its redemption- and that we share this groaning as we await the return of Christ. So, our relationship to nature and our harmony with it is a way we express not just our understanding of creation, but also our expectation of redemption. Unfortunately, the violation of God’s laws concerning the nature, continually reflected in environmental exploitation, has consequently led to increasing mass-poverty (in certain parts of the world in the twenty first century) despite technological, scientific, and economic advancements.<sup>20</sup> As part of the effort to restore the divine order and God’s love for His creation, Christians are obliged to continue working for the fulfilment of what is regarded as the Jesus manifesto in Luke 4: 18-19-“The spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me: He has sent me to announce good news to the poor, to proclaim release for prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind; to let the broken victims go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour”. The establishment of God’s rule on earth is part of the whole redemption package epitomised in the mission of Christ. The church views salvation to entail not only the redemption of an individual from his or her sin, it also entails the renewal and transformation of all aspects of creation, including its social and economic structures.<sup>21</sup> Lending his support for the church’s engagement in socio- economic and political concerns as part of this redemption agenda, Leonardo Boff, a proponent of Liberation theology, says that:

---

<sup>19</sup> Gitau, Samson. K. 2000. *The Environmental Crisis. A Challenge to African Christianity* P.80

This stewardship concept was popularized by the rule of St. Benedictine monastery. Monastic life does not exist only for itself and profit but for the sake of others. This is how the idea of stewardship should be understood by Christians in dealing with environmental issues.

<sup>20</sup> Thomas, Leonard. M. 2006. (ed) *Encyclopaedia of the Developing World*. Vol. 3 O-Z Index. New York: Routledge. p.1316

<sup>21</sup> Kent, A. Van Til. 2007. *Less Than Two Dollars A Day*.p.92



The gospel is nothing but the proclamation of the reign of God: the full and total liberation of all creation, cosmic and human, from all its iniquities, and the integral accomplishment of God's design in the insertion of all things into his own divine life. Concretely, then, the reign of God translates into community of life ... in a universal communion of brothers and sisters in solidarity with one another in the use of the fruit of the earth and the work of human hands.<sup>22</sup>

### **Our Humanity and Well-being Depends upon the Environment**

God's relationship to creation is not the only reason why the church is obliged to care about the environment. Another important reason or motivation is seen in what Nick Spencer and Robert White wrote about what the bible teaches regarding human relationship to the rest of the creation. The opening chapters of Genesis highlight the commonalities between humanity and the rest of the animate creation. Genesis 2 uses the same word to describe how animals, birds and humans were formed from the ground. Humans were formed specially from the dust of the ground - that hardly constitutes an accolade of superiority. Humanity shares the same food as other animals and the same breath of life is given to animals and humans alike. To care for the creation is therefore to care for a system of which we are a part and upon which we are utterly dependent.<sup>23</sup>

The implication of the above is that human flourishing and the well-being of the rest of creation are inextricably linked in the biblical narrative. As a result, we need the beauty of the world around us-the air, mountains, rivers, birds, animals, to experience the fullness of the life God has created. Apart from the perspective of aesthetics, the truth is that we also need water, air and food to survive. But, with the loss of each species, and the ugliness of pollution, we do not only dehumanize ourselves and those around us, we are also faced with water shortage and food security threat. The way we respond to our neighbor and all living things is a pointer to our humanity. When we denigrate the environment, we denigrate ourselves.

### **The Earth Crisis is a Crisis of Culture to which the Gospel Speaks**

A deeper analysis of the current earth crisis suggests that:

it is not the environment that is failing-but it is the dominant culture of economic growth and indiscriminate use of nature's resources to satisfy our desires-that is really failing". Thus, the environmental crisis is really a cultural crisis-a crisis of values, of meaning, of purpose and vocation. The Gospel speaks to this

---

<sup>22</sup> Boff, Leonardo. 1989. *Faith on the Edge: Religion and Marginalized Existence*. San Francisco: Harper and Row. 73

<sup>23</sup> Spencer, Nick and White, Robert. 2007. *Christianity, Climate Change and Sustainable Living*. p.82

crisis-and if Christians have a message to proclaim, then they need to speak about the environment and how we live in and with it.<sup>24</sup>

In the light of the above, the duty of the Church is expressed in the use of its theology and other faith resources to speak and act against the dominant culture of economic growth which does not recognize the integrity of creation. In this regard, the Marxist literary critic Fredric Jameson has greatly contributed to our understanding of the negative effects of the culture of economic growth without boarder or consideration.<sup>25</sup> His examination of the emergence of the cultural dominance of capitalism in the era of postmodernism is insightful and useful particularly for our theological reflection on the crisis of culture with regards to the current environmental crisis. This is because the way he describes the postmodern era as “a time when capitalism penetrates the pre-capitalist enclaves of nature and the unconscious, reducing all human action, including politics to some form of consumption”<sup>26</sup> is precisely at the centre of our theological argument against the current global economic structure hugely determined by the system of global governance. Our theological engagement should therefore be responsible to the integrity of creation. Integrity of creation, as we have noted earlier, is at the heart of the WCC engagement in development issues when it employed such phrases as “just, participatory and sustainable society” and “justice, peace and integrity of creation” to express its deep concern for a new environmental order.<sup>27</sup>

Having discussed in details the reasons for Christianity’s commitment to ecological issues, let us now briefly look at different stages of Christianity’s involvement in environmental issues.

### **A review of Christianity’s involvement in Environmental matters**

The long standing reflection and engagement on God’s creation by Christianity provides a necessary counter-point to not only Lyn White’s accusation against Christianity, but to all others who accused Christianity of heavy sin of anthropocentrism. White was popular in his condemnation of Christianity that he was regarded as the “accuser of the Brethren” because of his dissatisfaction with Christianity’s exploitative teaching and attitude to nature informed by its erroneous

---

<sup>24</sup> De Gruchy, Steve. 2004. Theology and Development Studies Handout on Five Reasons why African Christians Should be Concerned about the Environment

<sup>25</sup> See Miller, Vincent, J. 2004. *Consuming Religion. Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture*. New York, London: Continuum. p.63-65

<sup>26</sup> Miller, Vincent, J. 2004. *Consuming Religion. Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture*. p.65

<sup>27</sup> Dieter, Hassel and Rasmussen, Larry (eds) 2001. p 126

biblical interpretation. He, therefore, held Christianity responsible for what he called “the historical roots of our ecological crisis”.<sup>28</sup>

What is presented below is not an apologetic response to White, but an examination of Christian engagement to the environment both from the bible as well as from individual Christians. This examination would offer us an objective insight in either accepting or refuting the accusation against Christianity as having sowed the seed of the contemporary ecological crisis. It is also anticipated to inspire Christians into pragmatic environmental actions towards environmental sustainability.

### **The Biblical Witness**

It is important to note that Christianity’s involvement in environmental matters is premised on the teachings of the bible regarding the world. The Judeo-Christian traditional belief in God’s creation provides the bedrock for a Christian understanding of nature and humanity’s relation to it. There are many positive images of nature portrayed in the Bible that can be applied to the development of a more positive theological approach to the environment. In this regard, we cite just a few examples from the work of Ibe Martin,<sup>29</sup> to elucidate this point. In the Old Testament, Mosaic laws place some restrictions on how humans treat other created things: restrictions on cutting down fruit trees (Deut. 20: 19-20), command to let the land lie fallow every seventh year (Lev. 25:1-7), eating certain “unclean” animals and dietary restrictions, killing a mother and her off- spring as in the example of the birds’ nest (Deut.22:6-7), humane treatment of animals (eg. Deut. 25: 4). Psalm (96: 11-13 and psalm 148: 1-3) are vivid expressions of the natural world as alive and responding to God in a moral fashion.

There are also New Testament texts which support Christian involvement in environmental protection. Here, we consider two texts from St. Paul which expresses human affinity to the natural world. The first text is Romans 8: 22-23: “We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the spirit, groan inwardly while we await for adoption, the redemption of our bodies”. In this text, Paul portrays all humanity as struggling through a birth-process aimed at achieving spiritual redemption which is both bodily and material. In similitude to the above text, Paul Santmire, for example alluded to Augustine’s theology and its emphasis which shows how all things, creatures of nature as well as human creatures, are

---

<sup>28</sup> Attfield, R. 1994. *Environmental Philosophy: Principles and Prospects*. Aldershot: Avebury. p.164

<sup>29</sup> Ibe, Martin Joe. 2003. *Environmental Ethics and Politics in Developing Countries. Case study from Nigeria*. p.13. Ibe has done a lot of comparative work on different religious attitude and engagement on the environment.

related and have their own values.<sup>30</sup> Augustinian theology, including other Christian traditions underline the Christian understanding of working for the good of nature and society in general.

The second significant text on the issue of discussion is Colossians 1: 15-17: “(Christ) is the image of the invisible God, the first born of all creation; for in Him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominations or ruler or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together”. Christ is presented in this text by St. Paul both as a product of the creative activity of God and the perfect image of God. Appreciating this text, Paul Collins observes that “The passage actually sets up a striking trinity: God-Christ-Creation. It suggests an intimate link between Christ and the cosmos so that one may well be able to argue that to destroy that natural world is to destroy the image of Christ, who is the image of God”.<sup>31</sup>

Recognizing its captivity to earlier generations of ecological thinking, and developing a more adequate understanding of the relationship between humans and the earth, would help Christians to give proper interpretation to such passages that were hitherto construed as being heavily influenced by the dominion thought and “otherworldliness” and view them with appropriate lens befitting the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In doing this, Christianity would not only be seen as expressing its long standing historical heritage of commitment to the environment which is seen as a foundation or basis for Christian engagement in environmental issues, but would actually be seen as being practically upholding same. This practical involvement in social responsibility would therefore reaffirm the notion that God is not only concerned with the supernatural, but is active to humanize the world as we know it, and his power is active in the secular life of humankind.<sup>32</sup>

This view on the important role of religion in environmental concerns and the need for a relationship between religion and science was also supported by the one-time General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, Philip Potter, as far back as 1979. In a keynote address at the Conference on “Faith, Science and the Future” in that year, Potter posited that an intensification of the dialogue between science and religion would chip away the wall of separation that once stood between science and religion. This dialogue, in my opinion, is an expression of the religious response and

---

<sup>30</sup> Santmire, Paul. H. 1985. *The Travail of Nature: The Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christianity*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press. p.15

<sup>31</sup> Ibe, Martin Joe. 2003. *Environmental Ethics and Politics in Developing Countries. Case study from Nigeria*.p.14

<sup>32</sup> Tsele, Molefe. “The role of the Christian Faith in development” in Belshaw D, Calderisi R and Sugden C. 2001.*Faith in Development. Partnership Between the World Bank and the Churches of Africa*. Oxford: Regnum. P. 214

willingness to engage in environmental discourse. The dialogue will create a platform in which both theologians and practitioners in other various fields of sciences would feel at home to engage in meaningful discussions about not only the very existence of the universe, but mainly on the need for its conservation and its governance.

This initiative for the interface between religion and science, in general and environmental conservation in particular, is based on the conviction that such collaboration could help create a self consciously moral society, which would enhance environmental conservation grounded on respect for God's creation. It could also regulate individualism, materialism and the anthropocentric-induced desire to subjugate nature as well as engender the much needed religious commitment, moral and ethical engagement to transform the environmental crisis from an issue on paper to one of effective policy; from rhetoric in print to realism in action. It is hoped that it would provide a lean way to the search for the inclusive and participatory engagement to environmental sustainability.

On individual Christian levels, creative attempts have been made especially by eco-theologians to produce theological framework and resources for the church as part of the needed inclusive and participatory engagement in the current ecological challenges. For example, Alokwu's work on the concept of *oikos-theology*, is a new contribution from African Christian perspective on the environmental involvement of the church. This work is built on the attempts of Warmback, whose earlier work on the same agenda was fraught with Western ideologies. Both Alokwu and Warmback were concerned with the pragmatic exigencies of the Oikos (earth) that has been ecologically decimated and economically impoverished and the concern of the church to construct an eco-theological missional, inspired by contextualized theological reflection to synthesize with ecological ethics. The distortion of the values of the environment necessitates a rethinking of the church's theological contribution to the global environmental challenges. From the church's perspective, it is more appealing and inspiring to employ the "oikos" metaphor in relation to either ecological or environmental discourse. The use of oikos as a metaphor is to portray the essence of interrelatedness, interdependence and solidarity within the faith community as well as the earth community. Oikos metaphor inspires us to create a new eco-theological sensibility that addresses our destructive attitude toward creation. It proposes a change of our socio-economic structure and behavioral patterns that fuel despoliation of the environmental resources. It therefore offers an overarching framework for the re-visioning of religious engagement and the en-visioning of eco-theological spirituality that supports the abundant life that Christ came to give as expressed in the gospel of St. John 10: 10, not only to us humans, but the entire ecosystem.

The need for the collaboration of efforts and pulling together of resources earlier mentioned was evidently inspired especially in the decade of the 80s which was marked by a retreat from social concerns *per se* to broader issues of the environment. Scientists brought to the attention of the people of the world, the urgent but complex, environmental problems bearing on their survival and that of the earth. 'Wake-up calls' from different concerned individuals and international organizations became the order of the day. For example, while Kovel calls for eco-socialism, others like Schumacher call for simplicity of life in order to reduce ecological foot print.<sup>33</sup> It was in this decade that for the first time it was discovered that the earth's ozone layer which filters out much of the ultraviolet rays from the sun, was facing the risk of depletion.<sup>34</sup> Other issues such as the green house effect (global warming), acid rain and deserts consuming agricultural lands were highlighted on a serious global note.<sup>35</sup> Even though these environmental catastrophes were seen mainly as a problem of wealthy nations and a side effect of industrial growth, the 'wake -up call' had become so intense such that all the people of the world should reconsider their use of the earth's non-renewable resources.

### **Conclusion**

It is worthy of note that the present global environmental concern has been unprecedented in the history of environmental awareness and commitment. The level of awareness and commitment has resulted to the increased quest for global action in a more inclusive and participatory manner. The nature and urgency of the inclusive and participatory approach requires inter-disciplinary and multi-disciplinary approach and therefore "all hands must be on the deck". It is no longer a "science exclusive and monopolistic agenda". From the discussions of the paper, we have seen that Christianity, which has suffered neglect in terms of the needed inclusive and participatory action with regards to providing solution to the environmental problems has much to offer judging from its antecedents of environmental involvement through the ages .The age long view of Christianity's anthropocentric stand which presents her as being uninterested in environmental matters is now replaced with environmental zealously and pragmatic action. This new zeal and commitment of Christianity is gratifying and therefore should be seen as an "untapped resource" in the global search for current environmental crisis.

---

<sup>33</sup> Cock, Jacklyn. 2007. *The War against Ourselves. Nature, Power and Justice*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press.P.19

<sup>34</sup> See Meadows, D (ed) 1972. *The Limits to Growth*. New York: Universe Books; Meadows, D. (ed) 1977. *Alternatives to Growth: A Search for Sustainable Futures*. Cambridge Mass: Balinger Publishing. P.73

<sup>35</sup> Conradie, E.M. 2008. *The Church and Climate Change*. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications.p.1

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Anikwenwa, M.S.C. 2002. *Our Common Future-Human Environment*. Presidential Address delivered at the First Session of the Sixth Synod of the Diocese of Awka, Anambra State-Nigeria.
- Attfield, R. 1994. *Environmental Philosophy: Principles and Prospects*. Aldershot: Avebury.
- Boff, L. 1989. *Faith on the Edge: Religion and Marginalized Existence*. San Francisco: Harper and Row
- Cock, J. 2007. *The War against Ourselves. Nature, Power and Justice*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press
- Conradie, E.M. 2008. *The Church and Climate Change*. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications.
- Darby, K. R. 2006. *Ecology, Economy and God. Theology that Matters*. Minneapolis: Continuum Press
- David.G.1995(ed) *Ecotheology. Voices from South and North*. New York: Maryknoll
- De Gruchy, Steve. 2004. *Theology and Development Studies Handout on Five Reasons why Christians should be involved in the Environment*. Pietermaritzburg
- Gitau, J, G. 2000. *Beyond Guilt: Christian Response to Suffering*. Cambridge: Adventure Publications
- Gitau, S. K. 2000. *The Environmental Crisis. A Challenge to African Christianity*. Nairobi: Action
- Gosovic, B. 1992. *The Quest for World Environmental Cooperation*. London and New-York: Routledge
- Hessel, D and Rasmussen, L. 2001. (eds) *Earth Habitat. Eco-Injustice and the Church's Response*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Hossay, Patrick. 2006. *Unsustainable. A Primer for Global Environmental and Social Justice*. New York: Zed Books
- Ibe, Martin Joe. 2003. *Environmental Ethics and Politics in Developing Countries*. Case
- Johnson, G. S. 2000. *Beyond Guilt: Christian Response to Suffering*. Cambridge: Adventure
- Leal, R. 2004. *The Environment and Christian Faith*. Australia: St. Paul's Publications.
- MacKinnon, M and McLntyre, M, 1995. *Readings in Ecology and Feminist Theology*. Kansas: Zed Books
- Meadows, D (ed) 1972. *The Limits to Growth*. New York: Universe Books
- Miller, V, J. 2004. *Consuming Religion. Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer* New York: Routledge.
- Peet, R and Watts, M. 2004.(eds) *Liberation Ecologies, Environment and Development*. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications

Santmire, Paul. H. 1985. *The Travail of Nature: The Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christianity*.

Philadelphia: Fortress Press

Simone, A.M. 1999. *Thinking About African Urban Management in an Era of Social Movements*: London and New-York: Routledge.

Spencer, N and White, R. 2007. *Christianity, Climate Change and Sustainable Living*. England: Morehouse Publishing

Sugden C. 2001. *Faith in Development. Partnership Between the World Bank and the Churches of Africa*. Oxford: Regnum.

*The Official Report of the Lambeth Conference 1998, Transformation and Renewal, July 18-August 9, 1998*. Lambeth Palace; Canterbury

Thomas, L. M. 2006. (ed) *Encyclopaedia of the Developing World*. Vol. 3 O-Z Index.

### **Internet sources**

The earth Bible Project. <http://www.webofcreation.org/earth-bible> accessed-20 October 2009.

Williams, R. Undated. <http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/1> (Accessed on 13th March 2009)