

Research Note

Abuse of religion and environmental pollution in Nigeria: An Islamic perspective

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Abstract: The proliferation of places of worship and the increase in the number of devotees of religions are considered by many to be a welcome development, but their adverse effects on environmental degradation have hardly been considered. This paper attempts to study the role or the abuse of religion on environmental pollution and its implications for sustainable development in Nigeria. Based upon primary and secondary information, this study found that religion has largely been misused by its practitioners resulting in environmental pollution, with a serious negative influence on sustainable development. The paper further suggests possible solutions to this problem on the basis of Islamic injunctions for sustainable environmental development.

Keywords: Environmental pollution; Nigeria; sustainable development; ecology; religion.

Abstrak: Kepesatan pembangunan tempat-tempat ibadat dan peningkatan bilangan penganut-penganut agama masing-masing telah dianggap oleh ramai sebagai satu perkembangan yang dialu-alukan. Namun, kesan buruknya terhadap kemusnahan alam sekitar langsung tidak dititikberatkan. Kertas kerja ini cuba untuk mengkaji peranan atau penyalahgunaan agama ke atas pencemaran alam sekitar dan implikasinya terhadap pembangunan lestari di Nigeria. Berdasarkan maklumat primer dan sekunder, kajian ini mendapati bahawa agama telah disalahgunakan secara meluas oleh pengamal-pengamalnya, justeru telah mengakibatkan pencemaran alam sekitar yang memberikan kesan

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negatif yang serius terhadap pembangunan lestari. Kertas kerja ini seterusnya mencadangkan penyelesaian terhadap masalah tersebut berdasarkan peraturan Islam demi pembangunan alam persekitaran lestari.

Kata kunci: Pencemaran alam sekitar; Nigeria; pembangunan lestari; ekologi; agama.

It is well established that everything in this universe, including the sun, moon, stars, and galaxies are created by Allah (SWT) with a purpose and in a balanced way. The Qur'ān (15:19-20) states categorically about the proportionate nature of everything created by Allah (SWT). It also informs that the environment is not meant for human beings alone, but for all of His creatures. This is beautifully summarised by Abdullah Yusuf Ali (1978) in his commentary on the above verses of the Qur'ān (15:19-20) as follows:

And every kind of thing is produced on the earth in due balance and measure. The mineral kingdom supports the vegetable and they in their turn support the animal, and there is a link of mutual dependence between them. Excess is eliminated. The waste of one is made the food of another, and vice versa. And this is a chain of gradation and inter-dependence.

It is evident that man and the environment are partners in progress. The environment is subjected to man to use to his satisfaction but man must, in return, render services to the environment as he is dependent on it. The implication of this, in the opinion of Omer (2004, pp. 17-18), is that man will witness no peace in a situation where his attitude towards nature and the natural environment is based upon exploitation, aggression and war.

Ahmad, Hashim, and Al Hachim (1997, pp. 14-17) identify five major pollutants of the water, land, air and atmosphere: natural phenomena like sunshine; toxic chemicals and gases; fossil fuels like coal, gas and oil; minerals like mercury; and the nuclear explosion. There are scientists, however, who preach the gospel of anthropogenic (man-made) carbon dioxide-generated global warming. Some human factors attributed to environmental degradation include deforestation, industrialisation, urbanisation, wars and conflicts and overpopulation, among others. Relying upon this, Ologunorisa (2011, p. 17) identifies

four salient causes of climatic variation ascribed to human activities: increase in the CO₂ content of the atmosphere; artificial generation of heat; interference with the ozone layer by pollution; and alteration in the earth's albedo.

From the above, it could be seen that the emission of greenhouse gases is due largely to an ever increasing rate of human population which culminates in human struggle for survival through agricultural and industrial activities which consequently lead to ecological degradation, global warming and greenhouse gases emission. The new religious movements in Nigeria, however, have joined the band of environmental polluters in their evangelisation bids and serious competitions among themselves through acquisition and clearing of vast land for camp purposes, with no regard for their adverse implications on the environment. This paper aims at studying how religious activities have resulted in excessive burning of fossil fuels, artificial generation of heat and deforestation and land clearing, all of which are the causes of environmental pollution. The focus of this study is on Nigeria where adherents of Islam and Christianity compete in exploiting the environment. There are also the African Traditional religion practitioners who carry out activities that cause environmental degradation.

Religious factors in environmental pollution

Religion has been considered by scholars to be relevant to any climate change discourse. This, according to Coward (cited in Posas, 2007, p. 38), is for three reasons. One, religion is a major part of human civilization and its wisdom may offer guidance. Two, many people believe in one or another religion, and hence an appeal for individual environmental responsibility could be affected by using the instrumentality of religion. Finally, religion can also facilitate diverse states to cooperate at international level to tackle environmental problems such as global climate change. Yet, adherents of religions are contributing directly and indirectly to environmental pollution. The proliferation of places of worship, retreat camps and religious villages has influenced different religious bodies to adopt means of exploiting the nature in order to meet their objectives. It has been observed that most of these activities are carried out for commercialisation rather than spiritualisation. Rev. Mathew Kukah is highly critical of the insincerity of the Pentecostal pastors and the merchandising of religion. According to him, "many

prosperity pastors today have no time for those on the periphery of our national life where the poor are. Poverty is a crime and a sin. The main focus of these brands of religion now is Fellowship and Business with religion sprinkled to add flavour” (Kukah, 2007, pp. 38-39). That church owners compete among themselves for land acquisition and construction of multi-million naira churches is beautifully captured by Abioje (2011) in such newspaper headlines as: “Prophet T. B. Joshua’s Synagogue Splashes N18m on 38 Plots of Land: Plans to Build Multi-million Naira Cathedral”; “Pastors Bimbo & Taiwo Odukoya Buy N250 Million Land”; “Bishop Mike Okonkwo Renovates Church with Millions of Naira”; and “Kris Okotie Squanders N30m on Presidential Project: Can’t Pay His Workers.” Many so-called religious luminaries prefer, according to the Catholic Bishop of Issele-Uku Diocese (quoted by Waapela 2006) to remain in the “business of religion” because it is more lucrative than being an editor of a newspaper. There are other religious activities in Nigeria that lead to environmental pollution which need to be discussed.

Use of powerful public address system

Just as manufacturing equipments in industries, vehicles, aircrafts and guns are sources of noise pollution in the environment; mounting of amplifiers during religious programmes is also considered to contribute to noise pollution. Using amplifiers to call devotees to *ṣalāh* (daily obligatory prayers), is understandable. Its use, however, for non-obligatory purposes may lead to noise pollution. It is not sure whether these religious bodies are conversant with the dictate of their religion on neighbourliness. The Qur’ān, for instance, enjoins thus: “And be moderate (or show no insolence) in your walking, and lower your voice. Verily, the harshest of all voices is the braying of the asses” (Qur’ān, 31:19).

Likewise, there are many churches that use powerful loudspeakers and other musical instruments during night vigil, open air crusade service, Sunday service and others causing disturbances and inconvenience for those living in the vicinity of these churches. This has forced some people, especially the tenants, to abandon their homes and relocate to other less-noisy areas. Adesupo (2011) reported that in Ibadan, the Oyo State capital, a landlord abandoned his home and relocated to another area as he could no longer tolerate sleepless nights as a result of night

vigil programme of a nearby church which used powerful public address system and musical instrument. Those who could not vacate their homes are forced to endure and tolerate the noise from places of worship, all in the name of God.

Noise pollution is also caused by conferences of different religious bodies, especially the New Religious Movements situated along Lagos-Ibadan Expressway. Falako (2010, p. 6) describes the noise pollution as follows:

[N]oise pollution [is] occasioned by heavy traffic during conferences, sirens from V.I.Ps who attend religious programmes, mobile record players and jingles during mobilization for religious programmes, generating plants and indiscriminate blowing of horns by drivers who become impatient and aggressive on the highway during such programmes.

The annual *Mawlud Nabiyy* celebration organised by the Tijaniyyah brotherhood of Shaykh Muhammadul-Awwal in Omupo, Kwara State causes traffic congestion and hardships to people. In addition, during the prayer sessions of many churches and Muslim organisations, powerful public address system is used. Indeed, noise pollution has been identified as the source of hearing impairment, sleeplessness, stress, high blood pressure and other cardiovascular problems and nervous disorders (Abdur-Raheem, 2010, pp. 9-10).

It is worth noting that the National Environmental Standards and Regulations Enforcement Agency (NESREA) was established as a parastatal of the Federal Ministry of Environment, Housing and Urban Development. The Agency enacted a noise standard and control regulation to ensure “a healthy environment for all Nigerians, the tranquility of their surroundings and their psychological well-being by regulating noise level, prescribing the minimum permissible noise level from a facility or activity to which a person may be exposed” (NBF News, 2012). However, this Agency seems unable to enforce their rules in places of worship. The Kwara State Town Planning Authority did demolish many shops and houses at Tanke area in Ilorin early March 2013 for their closeness to the main road, however, churches and mosques close to the main road are left untouched.

Religious Festivals

Environmental pollution is also caused by religious festivals. Despite Islam's emphasis on modesty in everything, be it religious or otherwise, and on avoiding harm to others, Muslims continue to celebrate festivals in a lavish and extravagant ways. During celebration of *Mawlud Nabiyy* and such socio-religious programmes like naming, marriage and *fidā'* (post funeral prayer) programmes, roads are blocked and loudspeakers are used causing hardships to many. On September 10, 2001, a woman drove through a public road barricaded by a group of Muslim worshippers during a Friday service which led to communal riots which claimed many lives and property in Jos, the capital of Plateau State (Adebayo, 2012).

Of particular note is the month of December every year during which Christmas is celebrated with a series of threatening and frightening explosions of bangers and thunder-like knock-outs. Such celebrations often cause motor accidents and unnecessary tensions which are not favourable to human health. The December 26, 2012 inferno at Jankara Market, Lagos, was traced to a spark from a fire cracker warehouse. Explosions from the "knockouts" of the warehouse was said to have added more to the panic of the residents in the area who thought it was a bomb that exploded. The incidence claimed one life, razed eight buildings and injured forty persons. Eventually, the State Government banned the sale of such explosives in the State.

Deforestation

It is well-known in Nigeria that serious damage has been done to the nation's ecological system by different religious bodies through indiscriminate felling of trees on the vast area of land acquired for camps or retreats. Felling a tree has implications on the climate, as trees are preservers of human climate. They maintain a balance in global temperature and climate by absorbing carbon dioxide, gases and releasing oxygen for human consumption. They also provide shades for man and serve as speed breaker for winds. It is therefore not a surprise that the Prophet (SAW) enjoined planting of trees and forbade destruction of trees, saying, "even if you fear that the world would end tomorrow, you should plant a tree" (Bukhari). Falako (2010, p. 3) identifies eighteen different religious groups that occupy vast areas of land from the Old Ibadan toll gate to the Lagos end of the road. He

also observes the flooding and deforestation and fast disappearance of animals, plants and arable land in the areas acquired by them.

The African Traditional religion practitioners are also victims and participants in the destruction of the earth's environment and public health and safety. Indeed, such African religio-cultural practices like bush burning and hunting expedition attached to certain traditional hunting and fishing festivals as well as their preference for bush meat, have caused an unprecedented loss of biodiversity and so the extinction of such animals from circulation (Waapela, 2010).

Pollution/filth hazard

Another serious threat to the ecological system caused by abuse of religion is filth hazard from human wastes, nylons of sachet water called "pure water" and other wastes. Places where religious programmes like *Mawlud Nabiyy*, revivals or retreat take place are littered with different types of filthy human wastes and nylons of sachet water. Organisers of such religious programmes do not make adequate provisions for human and material wastes. These are left at the discretion of those who attend them. Though the provision for water for ablution is taken care of by organisers of religious programmes, no provision has been made for adequate disposal of human wastes. Similarly, many mosques leave their urinals channel to the nearest gutter which causes not merely offensive odours but also provides breeding grounds for mosquitoes.

Additionally, some places of worship are built close to flowing rivers where baptism is performed. Some churches, especially the Aladura Movement, the Celestial Church of Christ use the rivers for healing rituals (Olayiwola, 2003, p. 99). During these programmes, the devotees are given a bath, after which the soap and sponge used to perform the bath are thrown into the water. Most often such flowing water is a source of drinking water for others, spreading diseases among those many that drink from the water.

In African traditional religion, sacrifices and offerings are crucial. Awolalu and Dopamu (1979) identify some categories of sacrifice in West African religion and materials offered to divinities in the form of sacrifice. Such items like sheep, goat, fowl, cow, pigeon, egg, yam, rice, porridge and other food items are used for different categories of sacrifice. They equally explain the phenomenon of human beings buried

alive as sacrifice in the past. Such sacrificial items are thrown into the rivers to appease the divinities of the waters, rivers, lakes and streams and thus pollute water. The consumption of water from such source leads to dysentery, typhoid, cholera and other water-borne diseases. Sacrifices made and presented to the idols in their shrines or at cross-roads also constitute health hazard, as they are mostly left to decay and become contaminated.

Religious crises

It has been observed that religion is being dragged into communal feud, political favouritism and some other ideological misconceptions in Nigeria. During such religious conflicts, burning of people's property and places of worship no doubt adds to emission of hazardous gases. The religious conflicts are either between Muslims and Christians or between Muslims and the traditional worshippers. Salisu (2009) identifies instances of bloody clashes between the Muslims and the traditional worshippers of Egungun in Abule-Okuta, Bariga suburb of Lagos; and the Muslims and Oro worshippers in Ijebu-Ode, Ogun State. Such clashes had led to obstruction of commercial activities, marauding, looting of merchandise and blocking of traffic flow. During any of such religious clashes, tear gas and other threatening instrument are used by the law enforcing agencies to bring normalcy to the crises areas, while soldiers with armoured tanks are seen patrolling the streets and sirens blown all over the areas. Added to this is the high rate of the migration of people from trouble spot to places of safety. This no doubt constitutes another means through which hazardous gases are burnt to the air.

Implication for sustainable development

Attempts are being made at different levels to check the menace of environmental pollution in recent times. The June 1972 world conference on human environment in Stockholm which was attended by 112 countries and which consequently led to the creation of the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) marked the beginning of such steps. Twenty years after, in June 1992, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) met at Rio de Janeiro and came up with some principles which are relevant to sustainable development. In Nigeria, the 1987 dumping of toxic waste in Koko village in Delta State forced the Federal Government to promulgate the Harmful Waste Decree 42 of 1988, which led to the

establishment of the then Federal Environmental Protection Agency (FEPA). The Agency and other relevant Ministries were later merged to form the Federal Ministry of Environment in 1999. To address the challenges of effective enforcement of environmental laws, standards and regulations therefore, the National Environmental Standards and Regulations Enforcement Agency (NESREA) was established in 2007 (NESREA, 2013).

There also exist various religious injunctions concerning man's interaction with the environment for sustainable development. However, it seems that both the divine laws and man-made laws on environmental preservation are not respected by the so called "men of God". The story of Prophet Yusuf narrated in the Qur'ān is highly relevant here. Prophet Yusuf received a report that the king had a dream where he saw seven fat cows devouring seven lean cows and seven green ears of corn, and seven withered ones (Qur'ān, 12:43). Prophet Yusuf interpreted the dream to mean seven years of abundant harvest to be followed by seven years of famine. To ensure sustainable food and economic development, Yusuf suggested that "for seven years you shall sow continuously, then what you reap leave it on the ear, except a little whereof you eat" (Qur'ān, 12:47). In essence, Islam enjoins that unless the excesses in utilization of the resources are checked, no sustainable development can take place. Religious bodies are therefore expected to save for the rainy days and to think of the future generation. As Taeb and Kambu (2008, p. 25) explain, "the quest for sustainable development is to ensure the future generations to enjoy life as much as we do." This is also the essence of the Brundtland Report which sees sustainable development as a development that "meets the need of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs" (Reid, 1995). The proliferation of places of worship may be seen as a sign of development, but if spirituality is downplayed, such a development is not sustainable. Spirituality should be such as to affect the mind and spirit, and reflect in the actions and deeds of those who profess the religion.

It has been argued by many that the ultimate aim of the concept of sustainable development, which is to ensure promotion of human well-being through material acquisition and rise in income and wealth, may not be attainable as long as it is seen as an end in itself. It could be attained if sustainable development is seen as a means to an end. In other words, celestial comfort should be seen as the ultimate end and

not the terrestrial one. Spiritual development is a source of mental peace and happiness which is a strong weapon for sustainable development. Religious bodies are yet to pay much attention to this aspect of spirituality which would make them eschew reckless exploitation of the environment and causing damages to the nature unjustifiably.

Conclusion

Evidently, the adherents of religions particularly Islam, Christianity and African Traditional religion, have contributed to environmental pollution through their activities. It is observed that religious clerics act contrary to the scriptural teachings of their religions as far as their relationship with the environment is concerned. There are some practices and attitudes of adherents of religions which are not environment-friendly, yet such are not the teaching of the religions. As such, religious leaders need to be educated on the use of the environment so that their activities that are negatively affecting the environment are discouraged. They need to be informed of the implications of their actions on other creatures of God. This could be done effectively if the Ministry of Environment in each State of the Federation could organise enlightenment programmes for leaders of religions in form of seminars, conferences and workshops in collaboration with Muslim and Christian experts in environmental issues. This step becomes important in view of the imperativeness of religious ethics in modern science and ecological discourse. This is attested to by Seyyed Hossein Nasr when he observes: “man cannot save the natural environment except by re-discovering the nexus between the Spirit and nature and becoming once again aware of the sacred quality of the works of the Supreme Artisan” (cited in Solihu, 2007, p. 67). Enlightenment programmes on radio and television could also be used to educate practitioners of religion on the effects of their actions on the environment and the need for them to beautify the environment, but without excesses (*isrāf*). In addition, some of the religious organisations should focus their activities on environmental issues with the aim of rendering assistance in this regard. This could be in form of visiting mosques and churches for enlightenment programmes, ensuring the cleanliness of the premises of places of worship and monitoring the usage of public address systems for various occasions.

Simple hygienic rules taught by each religion need to be strictly followed by its adherents. For instance, urinating, excreting of body waste and bathing in stagnant or running water or relieving oneself

in the shade used as shelter for people are prohibited by the Prophet. Numerous *fiqh* rules also elaborate on toilet etiquette for the Muslims to follow. Also, in line with the advice of the Prophet that enjoined planting of trees for environmental preservation, Muslims must endeavour to plant trees in their *Ṭd* praying ground for this purpose and for provision of shelter for the congregation. By this, the environment will not only be protected but also developed positively.

Finally, intra and inter-ethno-religious crises which have enveloped the country in the recent past need to be checked by allowing for dialogue and religious understanding, as the crises are having untold hardship on the people and their effects on the environment are enormous and devastating. Apart from human-driven air pollution which accompanies burning of property and that from the tear gasses thrown by the police and which can cause different respiratory, circulatory and olfactory problems to those who inhale the air or the gas, the curfew imposed on people will not allow for health care services and other commercial and religious activities.

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