

The Role of Interreligious Dialogue in Environmental Protection in Nigeria

By

Omorovie Ikeke

Department of
Religious Studies and Philosophy,
Delta State University,
Abraka, Nigeria
drikeke@delsu.edu.ng

Abstract

The environmental crisis is affecting every region and country of the world. The environmental crisis is manifesting in Nigeria through various environmental problems present in the country such as deforestation, desertification, soil erosion, land and atmospheric pollution, and mismanagement of solid and chemical waste. Unless these environmental problems are attended to the country runs the risk of suffering more environmental degradation, health hazards, and so on. All social agents have a duty to contribute to abating the environmental crisis. Among these social agents are religious bodies and institutions. This paper argues that it is not enough for religious bodies as separate groups to be interested and engage in environmental protection, but that they need to be involved collectively to be more effective. To do this, they need to engage in interreligious dialogue of social action of engagement. In Nigeria, it is rare to see religious bodies doing interreligious dialogue for social and environmental projects. The paper uses analytic and hermeneutic methods to examine these issues. The paper concludes that this form of religious dialogue is extremely necessary for promoting environmental protection in Nigeria.

Keywords:

Religion, dialogue, environment, conservation, advocacy.

Introduction

Environmental crisis remains one of the most precarious problems threatening the existence of human beings and all lives on earth. In many of its forms, the environmental crisis is caused or precipitated by human activities and actions. Human activities have led to pollution of air, land, and marine resources, deforestation, desertification, soil erosion, climate change, forced migration, noise pollution, ghettos, urban violence, unplanned urbanization, and so on. In Nigeria, environmental problems include gas flaring, oil spillage, and pollution, biodiversity destruction, mismanagement of solid and chemical waste, insecurity, food crisis, and so on. Usman (2012) rightly asserts that anthropogenic causes of environmental degradation include- mining, industrial activities, agricultural activities, oil exploration, waste disposal, and overfishing.

Environmental problems need to be tackled for the well-being of human beings and

wildlife. This can be done by protecting the environment in all ways from pollution, degradation, and destruction. In tackling environmental problems, social agents need to be involved and actively participate. This paper argues that among the social agents that carry tremendous power in the engagement and solving of environmental problems in Nigeria are religious leaders. Yet, it is not enough for religious leaders to be involved as individual denominations, groups, or sects, but collectively as a body. This is where they should dialogue among themselves and present a common and concerted front in contributing to solving environmental problems in Nigeria.

The paper through analytic and hermeneutic methods assesses the role of religious dialogue in helping to protect the environment in Nigeria. By way of procedure, the paper shall examine the meaning of some basic terms, and examine the current environmental predicament in Nigeria. It shall examine the features of religious dialogue and present the role of religious dialogue in working for environmental protection in Nigeria. The paper also notes that there are many dimensions to the topic of this paper such as reasons for religious dialogue, history of inter-religious dialogue in Nigeria, forms of dialogue, obstacles to dialogue, and so on. The focus shall be on how religious dialogue can foster environmental protection in Nigeria.

Conceptual Clarifications

There are many theories on the origin of religion and what religion is and is not. On the theories of religion, Greenway (2007) writes that the theories of religion include sociological, psychological, functionalist, interpretive, and rationalist. The sociological concerns the pragmatic social function of religion in sustaining social order. The sociological view is traceable to Emile Durkheim who sees society as sacred and the basis of religion.

E.B. Taylor traces religion to primitive animism. The psychologist Freud saw religion as a childhood neurosis, just as children look to their parents so some humans in an illusionary manner project a being out there who cares for their needs. This position asserts that religion will become unnecessary when people are able to cure their neurosis and illusion. With regard to the functionalist, religion like other segments of society is to sentimentally and emotionally foster social cohesion. From the phenomenological viewpoint of looking at the history of religion, Mircea Eliade and Rudolf Otto see religion as the manifestation of the sacred, the ultimate reality.

For Karl Marx, religion is an instrument, a weapon that the ruling class use to socio-economically oppress the people while alienating them from the benefits of their labour. The previous explication of religion is presented by Greenway (2007) who concludes his exposition by stating Geertz's position that religion provides explanation and meaning to human beings in the midst of life bafflement, confusion, suffering, and vicissitudes. The theological position on established religious bodies and sects is that religion is divine, supernatural, and revealed by the Supreme Being. Tillich (1963:6) opines that:

Religion is the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern, a concern which qualifies all other concerns as preliminary and which itself contains the answer to the question of the meaning of our life. Therefore, this concern is unconditionally serious and shows a willingness to sacrifice any finite

concern which is in conflict with it. No matter the position that you take, the fact is that many people believe that religion plays a pragmatic function in society in helping human beings navigate through the multitudes of problems that they face. In this paper, religion shall be used to designate the established Christian religious bodies or denominations such as the Roman Catholic Church, Anglican Church, Methodist Church, and other churches. Included in religion here are also African Traditional Religion, Islam, Hinduism, and so on.

Now that the term “religion” has been explained, it is important to explain the term “dialogue.” Clark University (2023:1) writes that:

For some, dialogue is a focused and intentional conversation, a space of civility and equality in which those who differ may listen and speak together. For others it is a way of being—mindful and creative relating. In dialogue, we seek to set aside fears, preconceptions, the need to win; we take time to hear other voices and possibilities. Dialogue can encompass tensions and paradoxes, and in so doing, new ideas—collective wisdom—may arise.

Combs (2019:1) defines dialogue as: “...a communicative process in which people with different perspectives seek understanding.” To be in dialogue means that participants are not only engaging each other in light of their different views but are also striving to achieve a degree of mutual understanding.” Dialogue can involve more than two persons or groups. It can involve multiple persons or groups. The people engage in dialogue with their different viewpoints while trying to understand the other (s).

What then is religious dialogue? Religious dialogue refers to conversations or interactions, discussions, and networking among the religions on issues that affect them or human society. Here, religious dialogue is not merely the discussion and conversations over doctrinal issues or beliefs. It includes interactions on social, political, economic, cultural, and environmental issues and how the religious bodies can collectively contribute to peacebuilding, environmental protection, human promotion, and so forth. Society of African Missions (2013:1) writes that: “Interreligious dialogue... is about people of different faiths coming to a mutual understanding and respect that allows them to live and cooperate with each other in spite of their differences. The term refers to cooperative and positive interaction between people of different religious traditions...”

The concept of environmental protection also requires explication. Environmental refers to all the conditions, situations, and circumstances that surround a being or organism. Human beings are part of the environment and they are also surrounded by the environment. Bellamy (2007:154) defines environment as: “That which surrounds an individual or a community; at any point in its life cycle physical and cultural surroundings. The environment is also sometimes used to denote a certain set of circumstances surrounding a particular occurrence.” Mayhew (2009:154) says “The natural environment includes the nature of the living space (sea or land, soil, water), the chemical constituents and physical properties of the living space, the climate, and the assortment of other organisms present.”

Bellamy (2007:155) defines environmental protection as: “The process of protecting the environment. The part of resource management that is concerned with the discharge into the environment of substances that might be harmful or with harmful physical effects e.g noise or the release of radiation and with the safeguarding beneficial uses.”

The Current Situation of Environmental Protection in Nigeria

The current environmental situation in Nigeria is a critical one. Dick and Ede (2021) write that it was the 1988 dumping of toxic waste materials in Koko, Delta State Nigeria that brought environmental issues to the limelight and people began to pay more attention to environmental issues. These two authors note that the Koko incident may have precipitated the 1988 founding of the Federal Environmental Protection Agency (FEPA), and then in 1999 Federal Ministry of Environment and other relevant agencies. Nigeria has many environmental instruments and agencies. Environmental Law Research Institute (2021) names environmental laws and regulations in Nigeria to include: the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999), the National Environmental Standards and Regulations Enforcement Agency (NESREA) Act, the Environmental Impact Assessment Act, The Land Use Act, Harmful Waste (Special Criminal Provisions) Act, Hydrocarbon Oil Refineries Act, Associated Gas re-injection Act, The Nuclear Safety and Radiation Protection Act, and Niger-Delta Development Commission (NDDC) Act.

Environmental issues in Nigeria were also brought to serious national and global awareness through the crusade and campaign of Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) for the human and environmental rights of the Ogoni people of the Niger Delta. Outside the MOSOP, you have groups like Environmental Rights Action, Friends of the Earth, the Catholic Church's Justice, Development and Peace Commission (JDPC) that have and continue to struggle for environmental protection in Nigeria.

The reality is that despite the many environmental agencies, and environmental crusades in Nigeria, environmental problems have continued unabated. One of the environmental problems that Nigeria like other nations is facing is climate change. Tella (2016) writes that Nigeria has not been spared the effects of global climate change. A few years back, unprecedented rains swelled a dam in Cameroon and the release of excess water led to flooding in many states such as Delta, Imo, Benue, Rivers, etc in Nigeria. The effects are better imagined. There was the destruction of lives and properties. There was the displacement of people and forced migration. Many people lost their businesses and means of livelihood. Students and pupils could not go to school during the period. On returning back after the flood many saw that their houses and business premises had been swept away. Joseph and Aye (2018) propound that climate change does impact food security in Nigeria as it leads to low agricultural productivity, inflation, and insecurities.

A major cause or source of environmental degradation in Nigeria, especially in the Niger Delta is oil exploration. The oil and gas companies often do not follow the same high standards that they follow in European and other Western countries such as the United States and Canada. The Nigerian government because of benefits from the companies to the states and many forms of corruption finds it difficult to restrain the oil companies. Nigeria for

instance has given many deadlines for the stoppage of gas flaring, but to date, it is still going on. Oil companies prefer to pay fines and go on with their businesses. Writing regarding the Niger Delta of Nigeria, the United Nations Development Programme (2006:9) states the "...region which contributes enormously to the nation's exchange earnings is suffering from administrative neglect, crumbling social infrastructure and services, high unemployment, social deprivation, abject poverty, filth, squalor, and endemic conflict." On environmental degradation and suffering of human persons, the Ijaw Youths of Nigeria (1988) state that the damage affecting the fragile environment and to people's health is mainly caused by uncontrolled oil exploitation activities such as gas flaring, indiscriminate felling of forests and lack of ecological exploitation.

Another environmental problem facing Nigeria is pollution. Tella (2016:22) states that "Changes in our environment that negatively affect health, survival or activities of humans or other organisms denote pollution. These changes if left unchecked can cause annoyance, illness, death or even extinction of species." One of the most polluted areas in Nigeria is the Niger Delta. Decades of oil exploration consequent upon gas flaring, oil spillage, seismic activities, and ejection of chemical waste into land and marine sources, have all poisoned land, marine, and atmospheric resources. The consequences of all these are that many people suffer from health issues as a result of poisonous gases, the water sources are contaminated and this has reduced clean water sources, and the land can no longer yield as it used to in the past. Sacred groves and other sacred places have been excavated for the passage of pipelines. The neglect of the region has also led to youth restiveness, kidnapping, and hostage-taking and impacted the development of the region. Noise pollution is common in Nigerian cities from rickety vehicles. The indiscriminate disposal of waste materials has led to an environment that is not aesthetically okay.

Deforestation is another issue plaguing Nigeria. Deforestation is very common in Nigeria. When you move through many of the rural villages you see women and others felling trees for firewood and other domestic purposes. Factories and industries cut trees at will even without permits for their business purposes. Oil exploration activities also cause deforestation. In order to drill for oil, and give passage for heavy-duty vehicles, oil companies fall trees. Bush burning which is also common among farmers also leads to deforestation. With regard to deforestation, Oyesola (1998) notes that increasing human population requires more land to be cultivated for human food and industries to take care of human needs thus, causing virgin forest to be encroached upon. This has also led to biodiversity loss.

It is impossible to enumerate all the environmental problems in Nigeria. Aware of the enormous environmental problems in Nigeria, the Federal government of Nigeria (2011:30) states: "The State shall protect and improve the environment and safeguard the water, air and land, forest and wild life of Nigeria." This duty is not limited to only the State but includes the duties and responsibilities of Nigerian citizens in preserving the environment. This is precisely why the State has made environmental laws and regulations.

Features of Religious Dialogue

The foundation of all religious dialogue is the Supreme Being, the ground of all existence.

The Supreme Being is not a solitary being. The Supreme Being lives in communion and harmony with other beings or divinities. Many Christian bodies speak of God as a trinity of persons. God also lives among the angelic beings. African Traditional Religion acknowledges the existence of God and other gods and divinities who equally relate to God. Islam sees God, Allah, the Supreme Being as living in paradise. Human beings are created to relate with one another and not to live as solitary individualistic beings. There is a ground for them to interact, commune, and dialogue with one another. It is undeniable that before human beings acknowledge or come to the knowledge of religious dimensions in their lives, they are first and foremost human beings. Their humanity then is a fundamental ground for dialogue. Panikkar (2013:xv) writes that: "Dialogue as a human and human act has never been so indispensable in all fields as in our age of endemic individualism" especially in the light of global challenges of individualism and self-sufficiency. Arinze (2002:72) writes: "There are many human problems that do not respect frontiers of religion or race, and sometimes even of the country. Examples are war, hunger the refugee problem, unemployment, and drugs. If the followers of the various religions strive to face such challenges together, they will be building peace." The common humanity of all human beings is a reason for dialogue.

Religious dialogue is a conversation. It is not dogmatism. It is not the imposition of one's religious beliefs on the other. With regard to the environment, it is the same environmental problems that face the people of one religion that also confront the people of the other religions. The goal is to arrive at a common ground on how to approach religious actions regarding the environment. Dialogue is not a monologue or lecture. In religious dialogue, it is not one religion, taking a moral high ground to proclaim her religious truths or beliefs.

It is true that most religions would want the people of the other faith to convert to theirs. But that is not the goal of religious dialogue here. They are not dialoguing on how to embark on common environmental programs and projects with the hope of making believers. Religious people are first human beings and share a common humanity. There is a basis to unite as human beings to confront environmental problems. It is to look at the resources of their own religious faith, which includes their sacred writings and oral history to harness ideas and wisdom that are eco-friendly. They bring all these to other religions and harmonize them to foster common environmental projects. For instance, the religions in Nigeria can gather to create a common curriculum or topics that speak of environmental protection from the viewpoint of the religions and push for it to be taught in Social Studies, Civic Education, History, Government, and so on. Nothing like this currently exists in Nigeria to the knowledge of this author.

Religious dialogue is critically open to tolerance. It sees the other religious people not as enemies but as friends and collaborators in the Common Earth Project. You don't have to agree with all the religious beliefs of others. What you are concerned with is the fate of the earth and human destiny in it. You are willing to dialogue even with those you bitterly disagree with in terms of doctrine. But for the sake of the common good of the earth and her people, you enter into dialogue. There is so much that the religions share together. They should be open to learning from one another.

Dialogue is aimed at mutual understanding. This also applies to religious dialogue. If one group does not desire mutual understanding, that group should not even enter into dialogue. Understanding does not mean you agree with the other's entire beliefs. Understanding implies you are able to see from the other's point of view. You can engage in dialogue even if you do not like or love the other person.

Within the purview of this paper, all these elements of interreligious or interfaith dialogue are applicable to religions when they strive to collectively embark on environmental protection projects. Adherents of different religions should be willing to listen to each other's perspectives on environmental issues, willing to learn from one another, seek pragmatic common ground, engage continuously in the process, and foster their common humanity as they confront environmental problems and other social problems. No one religion has the entire solution to the environmental problems.

Interreligious Dialogue in Environmental Protection

The environmental question is one that religions should not run away from. Theoretically, there is a religious basis for the religions to be collectively engaged in environmental protection and projects. Harrison (2007) has noted that both religion and politics are seen by many as fundamental human concerns and they should not be divorced from one another. This thinking, he notes has produced political theology, liberation theology, black theology, and so on. Harrison (2007:263) argues that: "One of the most significant issues of the late twentieth century was, undoubtedly, the degradation of the environment." Obaje (2018) in explaining interreligious dialogue writes that different religions come together to try to understand themselves and possibly cooperate in promoting tasks in peaceful co-existence. Peaceful co-existence should be broadened and understood to mean also a peaceful harmonious relationship with the natural environment. Obaje (2018) further cites Ajibola to assert that the purposes of interreligious dialogue are attending to the realities of a global village, strengthening harmony, and finding joint solutions to common problems. Obaje (2018) cites Ajibola saying that it is not enough for religions to dialogue in understanding their religious doctrines and beliefs, they should also engage in a dialogue of action.

Dialogue of action is geared towards projects in the development of values and human liberation. With reference to Nigeria, there is very little dialogue of action taking place in the light of the numerous religious bodies and houses in the country. Though religious bodies in the country especially Christians and Muslims do speak once in a while on political matters, common projects in environmental protection are rare. But it should be noted here that declarations are not enough, the paper is urging for practical common efforts and actions on environmental matters.

Arinze (2002) rightly notes that if religions refuse to grapple with and attend to the realities of today's world such as issues of war and peace, and human hurts, then religion would become marginal. Religion has no option but to engage in helping to resolve social and environmental problems that plague human beings. The Catholic Bishops (1963:1) at Vatican II rightly stated: "The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to

raise an echo in their hearts.” Social and environmental issues should not be seen as outside the sphere of concerns of religious people. The founders of the world's religions such as Jesus Christ, Buddha, Confucius, and Mohammed, were all concerned about society and that is why they proposed certain forms of ethical conduct.

There are religious foundations for religious adherents to be engaged in political issues, economic affairs, and environmental engagement. The Parliament of World Religions (1993) has spoken of the need for common global ethics. In speaking of this need they noted that people of all religions intend to live in interdependence, mutual harmony, and respect for the earth and the ecosystems shunning pollution and over-exploitation of the earth's resources. The Parliament also notes that in the religious, cultural, and spiritual traditions of humanity, people are called to shun greed and all forms of destruction. There is a basis for religions to collaborate and engage in environmental care. As a result of the challenges coming from the environmental question, eco-theology was given birth to, as Harrison notes. Eco-theology is not limited to the works of Christian thinkers about the environment but extends to Islamic, Buddhist, Hinduist, and African religious scholars. Phiri and Ryan (2016) opine that religions in Africa are major actors-partners in promoting peacebuilding activities, education, mediation, and transitional justice. The missing link often is environmental justice.

In Nigeria, as this paper notes, not much has been done on this front. In Islam, God created the earth and entrusted it to human beings to keep and preserve. Human beings are God's vice regents. Islam prohibits the excessive consumption of resources the planet provides to humanity (Qur'an 7:31, 6:141, 17:26-27, 40:34). In fact, Qur'an mentions wasteful consumption (*Isrāf*) as the thirty-second greatest sin. In 2015, the Islamic Climate Change Symposium adopted the Islamic Declaration on Global Climate Change.” Ikeke (2020) shows that in Hinduism, the belief in *Tat Etam* (One Reality) implies that all realities and beings are interconnected and deserve respect. In Buddhism, all things are interrelated and should be shown respect and things like selfishness, greed, and consumerism are to be shunned; in Islam, human beings are God's *Khalifa* (regents) to take care of the earth; in the Judeo-Christian tradition, nature is sacred as it comes from god and human beings are placed on earth to be stewards who till and cultivate the garden; and in African Traditional Religion the spirit of the supreme creator God is manifest in all things, and though human beings can make use of the things of the earth, it is to be done in moderation and gratitude to the creator.

There are very few interfaith environmental projects embarked upon by religions in Nigeria. It seems many religions in Nigeria want to engage in environmental protection projects on their own. Yet united and concerted efforts can yield more results. This is why this paper is calling for more religious dialogue among the religions in Nigeria when it comes to environmental projects. Religions can engage in common environmental projects such as re-forestation, curbing desertification, campaigning against all forms of pollution, environmental sanitation projects, and so on. The religions in Nigeria such as Christianity and Islam and others have a role to play in environmental preservation. Oyeshola (2019) writes that people of faith in Nigeria should collectively and individually since they believe the earth is created by God, desist from destroying the earth, take the challenge of sustainable development and climate change seriously, and collaborate with the government and

promote human security. The need for collaboration on the part of the religions in Nigeria is crucial and extremely important. Many Nigerians are ardent adherents of one religion or the other. They equally have faith and trust in the messages of their religious leaders.

Religions in Nigeria should provide a united front. It is not enough that the Christian Association of Nigeria, Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria, Interfaith Council, and others engage in dialogue for good governance. They should extend these dialogues to fight for environmental protection. Igwe (2018) writes that though a group like the Nigeria Inter-religious Council (NIREC) was formed to foster dialogue there is very little dialogue among the religions in Nigeria, and despite all the years of investment there are still many religious clashes in the country. Tragically, if little dialogue has been taken and not much to show for it, then when it comes to environmental issues extremely very little has been engaged by the religions. Igwe (2018) notes that at the recent conference of the African Consortium for Law and Religious Studies (ACLARS) in Abuja, two religious leaders from Christianity and Islam spent time enumerating persecutions facing their religion.

Igwe (2018) also notes that the membership of NIREC is shared among Christians and Muslims to the detriment of other religions. A true religious council should be inclusive of other religions. In this situation, it becomes difficult to engage in common projects, not to speak of environmental projects. This is not to say that there are no interfaith actions with regard to the environment in Nigeria. An organization like Forward Action for Conservation of Indigenous Species (2019) has worked on environmental issues such as establishing environmental peace in two Secondary Schools in Bauchi. Every effort matters and should be encouraged. Writing concerning dialogue of social engagements, Omonukhua (2014) asserts that in Nigeria, people of different religions meet in life situations at ceremonies and fight together to fight diseases and injustice and this has helped in human liberation and integral development in Nigeria. The challenge is that when it comes to environmental common-joint efforts they are either non-existent or rare. Religions also need to be forthright in making their collaborative efforts in environmentalism known and use the media to showcase their projects. The concern of this paper is not that individual religions act for environmental care only. What is called for here is that they collaborate and engage in joint environmental care projects. Gbonegun (2019) reports that experts say the religions of the world should develop environmental programs from their teachings. The Secretary-General, Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC) United Kingdom, Mr. Martins Palmer who is also a religious adviser on environmental matters to the Duke of Edinburgh, Prince Philip since 1985, spoke at the 17th Chief Shafi Lawal Edu's memorial lecture at the Nigerian Conservation Foundation, in Lagos. He notes that religions such as Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, and others have a big role to play in environmental protection and their words are held seriously by their members.

In order to foster better collaboration among the religions when it comes to resolving environmental problems in Nigeria, the religions need to come to a consensus on environmental values and ethics. There should be more meetings, deliberations, seminars, conferences, and retreats on environmental values. In the Western world, it is common to see meetings and conferences on religion and ecology. Hill (2013) writes that Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim at Harvard University organized from 1996-1998 conferences on

each of the major religions and also joint one on all the major religions collectively and from the conferences they saw much common ground among the religions on the environmental question. In Nigeria, efforts like these are rare. Dick and Ede (2021:305) rightly note that: “Religion plays a vital role in formulating moral framework on how a man should relate with other people and his environment. Religions fashion the attitudes and values that shape and influence people's concepts of nature.... Moreover, environmental crises or ecological crises are fundamentally crises of values”. It is a crisis of how humans should live in relation to the earth. How human beings should behave with regard to wildlife. If there is no agreement on the path of the religions on the human-natural world relationship, it becomes difficult to carry out projects. In the holy book of Christianity, the prophet Amos enunciates, “How can two walk together if they cannot agree?” (Amos 3:3). The religions do not have to agree on every point on environmental doctrine. But the commonality that they share can be leveraged. In general, almost all religions agree that the Supreme Being created the world. They all agree that human beings have a right to make use of natural resources. They do agree that environmental problems are to be tackled. They do agree that human beings have direct or at least indirect duties to the natural world. Direct duties are those that human beings perform in consideration of the welfare of wildlife in itself. Indirect are those that they perform because of human welfare, as environmental problems affect human beings, Dick and Ede (2021) write that religions are eco-friendly. There is no religion that calls for wanton destruction of natural resources or the natural world. It is human beings who fail to adhere to religious principles for earth preservation.

There are many specific ways or manners that interreligious dialogue can foster environmental protection. These ways include (1) Interreligious celebration of the World Day of Environment and World Day of Peace, (2) Interreligious ecological theology courses in religious seminary and training institutions, (3) Joint interreligious student exchanges and eco-field trips, (4) Annual joint engagement in a community environmental project and (5) annual joint prayers for the environment. A brief explanation of these is necessary here.

Common interreligious advocacy for environmental protection is not enough. Words and speeches without action can hardly accomplish any societal change in environmental protection. Interreligious dialogue in action can take the form of participating in events like the World Day of Environment and the International Day of Peace. The United Nations has enacted June 5 as World Day of Environment. The day is set aside to foster environmental awareness and encourage action to protect the earth. On World Day of Environment, the different religions in the country should come together. They can organize talks, seminars, and workshops on this day. They can meet and gather on his day in the open fields or among the trees instead of in a building. On this day they can have study sessions on how the different religions foster environmental protection. They can engage in a project such as tree planting, environmental sanitation, teach skills on environmental hygiene, etc. Also on International Day of Peace on 21st September every year, they can organize common projects. An important dimension of peace is environmental peace.

Another way that the religions can collaborate for environmental protection is by creating and teaching an interreligious ecological theological course in the different seminaries and training institutions. Ministers of different religions carry enough power and

influence over their people. They are normally informed by what they are taught in the seminaries or training houses. Formation informs how people perform in the ministry. It is not enough that future ministers study the ecological theology of their religions. They need to know how this is also related to other religions in society. An interreligious ecological theology course will mainstream the interreligious dimensions of ecological issues. Ecological or environmental problems in society affect all religious people no matter their religion. The religions should set up a panel or committee to work on such a curriculum of such a course.

Arising from the common ecological theological course, students should not just participate in the course in their different seminaries, there should be student exchanges. Students in one seminary can attend this course in a seminary of a different religion or denomination other than their own. By this, they are able to interact with people of different faiths and know the importance of this engagement. This joint interreligious ecological theological course should contain field trips. These field trips can be eco-tourism trips, nature learning sessions, collaborative eco-projects in natural settings, etc.

The different religions in a particular community should come together and embark on a community environmental project. This is a vital way of engaging in community development. The community is essential to every state and nation. One of the places to tackle environmental problems is in the community. Outside what is done on World Day of Environment and International Day of Peace as proposed above, there should be an annual environmental project in each community. It should be focused on an environmental problem that each particular community is facing. In carrying out this project the religions should engage the entire community members and carry them along.

An annual day of interreligious prayers for the environment can also be in place. A vital and common ritual in all religions is prayer. Without prayer, it is difficult to have religious worship. There is hardly any religion that does not engage in prayer. Such an annual day of prayers for the environment among the religious can focus on various environmental issues such as environmental security, environmental justice, environmental racism, environmental peace, environmental degradation, climate change, waste management, and so forth. The religions can look to the Assisi World Day of Prayers for Peace as a model. At the first Assisi World Day of Prayer for Peace convoked by Pope John Paul II held on 27 October 1986, Kodithuwakku (2021) recalls that various religious leaders from Hindus, Muslims, Jews, Christians, Buddhists, Silks, African traditional religionists, and others gathered to pray for peace. Since 1986 that event has been continuously celebrated and has marked more than 38 anniversaries.

Conclusion

The paper has examined the role of interreligious dialogue in promoting environmental protection in Nigeria. The environmental crisis is affecting Nigeria and has led to the loss of lives and destruction of properties. Many religions agree on a created earth. The creator God has given the responsibility to human beings to take care of the earth. The paper also reveals those environmental problems that respect no human being or religion. When there are environmental problems, they affect all people. It is important then that heads of different religious bodies dialogue and collaborate to engage in common environmental

projects in Nigeria. Some of the various ways that the religions in Nigeria can engage in collaboration were also presented. If these are done, it will help to create an environmentally sustainable Nigeria.

References

- Arinze, F.C. (2002). *Religions for peace: A call for solidarity to religions of the world*. London: Darton, Longman and Todd Limited.
- Bellamy, P. (2007). *Academic's dictionary of environment*. New Delhi: Academic (India) Publishers.
- Catholic Bishops of Vatican II. (1963). *Pastoral constitution on the church in the modern world: Gaudium et spes*.
https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html
- Clark University. (2023). *What is dialogue?*
<https://www2.clarku.edu/difficultdialogues/learn/index.cfm>
- Combs, J. (2019). *What is dialogue?* <https://udayton.edu/blogs/dialoguezone/19-10-28-what-is-dialogue.php>
- Dick, C.J., and Ede, V.I. (2021). Religion and the control of environmental crises in Nigeria.
In Anthony Ikechukwu Kanu (ed), *African Eco-Theology: Meaning, forms and expressions* (pp.303-319).
<https://www.acjol.org/index.php/jassd/article/view/1940>
- Environmental Law Research Institute. (2021). *A synopsis of laws and regulations and on the environment in Nigeria*. <https://elri-ng.org/environmental-law-policies-in-nigeria/>
- Federal Republic of Nigeria. (2011). *1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria with amendments 2011*. Abuja: The National Assembly.
- Forward Action for Conservation of Indigenous Species. (2019). *Forward Action for Conservation of Indigenous Species*.
<https://www.peaceinsight.org/en/organisations/facis/?location=nigeria&theme>
- Gbonegun, V. (2019). *How faith-based groups can protect the planet*.
<https://guardian.ng/property/how-faith-based-groups-can-protect-the-planet/>
- Greenway, C. (2007). Theories of religion. In Orlando O Espin and James B Nickoloff (ed.), *An introductory dictionary of theology and religious studies* (pp.1153-1156). Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press.
- Harrison, V.S. (2007). *Religion and modern thought*. London: SCM Press.
- Hill, B.R. (2013). *World religions and contemporary issues: How evolving views on ecology, peace, and women are impacting faith today*. New London, CT: Twenty-Third Publications.

- Igwe, L. (2018). *For a meaningful inter-religious dialogue in Nigeria*.
<https://guardian.ng/opinion/for-a-meaningful-inter-religious-dialogue-in-nigeria/>
- Ijaw Youths of Nigeria. (1988). *The Kaiama declaration*.
<http://www.unitedijaw.com/kaiama.htm>
- Ikeke, M.O. (2020). The Role of Philosophy of Ecology and Religion. *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, 19 (57): 81-95.
- Joseph, B., and Goodness C Aye. (2018). Effect of climate change on food security and poverty in Nigeria. In Chukwuemeka U Okoye and Daniel Abah (ed.), *Dynamics of natural resource and environmental management in Nigeria: Theory, practice, bureaucracy and advocacy* (pp. 11-22). Enugu: Debees Printing and Publishing Company.
- Kodithuwakku ,K.I.J. (2021). *35th anniversary of interreligious meeting for peace in Assisi*.
<https://www.dicasteryinterreligious.va/35th-anniversary-of-interreligious-meeting-for-peace-in-assisi/>
- Mayhew, S. (2009). *Oxford dictionary of Geography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Obaje, F.A. (2018). *Religion and society*, volume 2. Lagos: Distinct Press.
- Omonokhua, C.A. (2014). *Dialogue in context: A Nigerian experience*. Kaduna: Virtual Insignia.
- Oyesola, D. (1998). *Politics of international environmental regulations*. Ibadan: Daily Graphics Publications.
- Oyeshola, D. (2019). *Sustainable development: Issues and challenges for Nigeria*. Second edition. Osogbo: Atman Limited.
- Panikkar, R. (1999). *The intra-religious dialogue*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press.
- Parliament of World Religions. (1993). *Towards a global ethic*.
<https://parliamentofreligions.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Global-Ethic-PDF-2020-Update.pdf>
- Phiri, F., and Patrick Ryan. (2016). *Inter-religious dialogue in Africa: In search of religious respect*. Nairobi: Pauline Publication Africa.
- Society of African Missions (2013). *What is interreligious dialogue*
[?https://sma.ie/chapter-1-what-is-interreligious-dialogue/](https://sma.ie/chapter-1-what-is-interreligious-dialogue/)
- Tella, A. (2016). *Critical issues in environmental sustainability*. Abeokuta; Center for Human Security of Olusegun Obasanjo Presidential Library.
- Tillich, P. (1963). *Christianity and encounter with the world religions*. New York: Columbia University.
- Usman, A.K. (2012). *Environmental protection law and practice*. Ibadan: Ababa Press Limited.