Sapientia Global Journal of Arts, Humanities and Development Studies (SGOJAHDS), Vol.9 No.2 June, 2026; pg. 55 – 64; ISSN: 2695-2319 (Print); ISSN: 2695-2327 (Online)

AN AFRICAN ECOTHEOLOGICAL AND CHRISTOLOGICAL READING OF ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Nigeria is experiencing extreme environmental adversities including oil pollution, deforestation, gas flaring, desertification and the effects of climate change. These environmental afflictions are not just ecological or socio-economic in nature; there are also theological matters requiring an African ecotheology and Christology. This study utilized an African ecotheological and Christological framework to explore environmental issues in Nigeria and argue that the salvation of creation is integrally tied to the salvific work of Christ and the stewardship responsibilities of humanity towards God's creation. With the contextualization method, this study identified ways in which Christology informs ecologically responsible ethical practices and demonstrates how African world views support the sacredness of nature. This Study indicated that a comprehensive vision for the resolution of environmental disasters in Nigeria will require an integration of ecological justice, Christocentric understanding of creation, and traditional indigenous environmental ethics.

Keywords: African Ecotheology, Christology, Environmental Crisis, Creation Care.

Introduction

Global environmental crisis is considered today one of the major threats facing humanity in the twenty-first century and Nigeria is no exception. The numerous ecological problems presently affecting the entire nation include oil pollution in the Niger Delta; deforestation in the southern rain forest zones; desertification in the northern regions of the nation; gas flaring; urban waste accumulation and effects of climate change on the nation ((World Bank, 2022:45) which has contributed largely to farmer-herders' conflicts and attendant loss of lives and properties. These unprecedented environmental misfortunes have serious implications for human health; food security; economic stability and quality of life. Beyond their scientific and political implications however, these disasters pose significant theological and moral questions about human relationships with creation and with God.

In many discussions of environmental issues, these are viewed solely as technical and/or policy issues. Such views while valuable do not adequately capture the full range of moral and spiritual dimensions contributing to the loss of the natural environment. From this perspective, theology particularly African eco-theology and Christology provides an essential hermeneutical lens to understand the current environmental disaster in Nigeria. Eco-theology emphasizes the inter-connectedness of all forms of life; the sacredness of creation; and the moral obligation of humans to protect the environment (Nwaoru, 2012: 23). This view incorporates both traditional Christian theological formulations and indigenous African

worldviews which frequently view nature as alive and therefore spiritually relevant (Mbiti, 1990:56).

Christology expands upon this understanding of Christ as Savior not just of humanity but also as creator and reconciler of the cosmos. In Colossians 1:16-17 Jesus is depicted as the One through Whom all things were created and in Whom all things exist. Therefore, ecological devastation represents not simply an ecological issue but a disruption of the cosmic order ordained by God in Christ (Bauckham, 2010: 32–35). Thus, ecological renewal must be seen as integral to the overall redemptive mission of Christ and His Church.

With this background in mind, this paper offered an African ecotheological and Christological interpretation of the current environmental crisis in Nigeria. The argument advanced here is that ecological deterioration in Nigeria is caused not only by economic exploitation and lack of effective government but also a deeper spiritual/moral dislocation in humanity's relationship with creation. Through combining African theological perspectives with Christological viewpoints, this study provided a comprehensive framework for interpreting and addressing ecological challenges.

Although there are abundant extent literature about the ways humans are degrading the environment, there are still many gaps in this area of study. The first gap is that most of what has been written about environmental issues in Nigeria has been from a scientific perspective, focused on economics, or based on public policy. Therefore, very little has been done to develop a theological approach to this issue. The second gap is that while there has been discussion about the application of African ecotheology to address ecological crises within Africa, and discussions regarding Christological approaches to understand our relationship with nature; there has been too little conversation about how these two approaches could be used together to address the environmental challenges in Nigeria.

There is also the need for greater contextualization of the cosmic Christology theory to specifically deal with environmental challenges facing Nigerians today. For example, how does Christ's redemption extend beyond humanity to include ecosystems? How can Christ be seen as redeeming polluted rivers in the Niger Delta, or helping communities experiencing desertification in northern Nigeria? Clearly there is a great need for a more holistic, contextually grounded theological framework that combines aspects of African ecotheology and Christology to help us better understand God's role in redressing environmental degradation.

The primary objective of this study is to demonstrate that a Christ-centered ecological ethic rooted in African indigenous values may significantly enhance environmental sustainability in Nigeria. Furthermore, the study presented the role churches, theologians and Christian communities can play in promoting ecological consciousness; responsibility; and activism within Nigeria.

This study utilizes a qualitative and interpretative descriptive research model to explore environmental disaster in Nigeria from the African ecotheological and Christological perspectives. A qualitative model was used due to the focus of this study being to

conceptually and theologically understand environmental crises, rather than statistically measure them.

Sources utilized for collecting data were documentary, as thematic and hermeneutical analysis models were used to identify several major themes including: Ecological deterioration, stewardship/creation care and cosmic Christology. This study also used an African theology which is informed by an integrated theoretical framework of African ecotheology and Christology that provided the lens for interpreting environmental disasters as a moral-spiritual as well as ecological issue. The geographical boundaries of this study were limited to the environmental issues occurring in Nigeria with specific reference to oil pollution, deforestation, desertification, and climate change degradation.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This study is guided by an interdependent theoretical structure combining African eco-theology and Christology. Both structures support the idea that environmental destruction has more to do with religious and moral issues, more than they have to do with economic/social issues; since the root cause of environmental problems stems from the loss of our relationship with God, other people and nature (Boff, 1997: 67–72, McFague, 1993 :105–110).

Ecotheology from Africa has roots in traditional African views of the world, and Christian theology. Traditional African world-views often emphasize the interconnectedness of life, and that creation is alive, imbued with spirit, and communal (Mbiti, 1990:106–110; Magesa, 1997: 51–58).

Many traditional African communities see rivers, forests, land and animals as having spiritual meanings; they also see them as being part of a system that supports the well-being of human and spiritual life. Within Christian-African theology, ecotheology builds upon this viewpoint by asserting that creation is inherently good, and that it is owned by God. Therefore, within Christian-African theology there is an affirmation of stewardship and responsibility towards the natural world. Scholars in African-Christian theology claim that environmental degradation is a sign of moral failure, and a disruption of God's original plan for creation (Dube, 2010: 123).

Therefore, African-Eco-theology provides a normative approach to environmental ethics; one that encourages a relational/communal approach to nature that emphasizes the need to live in harmony with the natural world, as opposed to viewing nature solely as a resource for exploitation. The most significant contribution that African-Eco-theology offers is an understanding of relational ontology. Relational ontology understands that "to be" means to relate with others (human and non-human) in community. Therefore, when we speak about environmental destruction, we are speaking not just about an ecological issue but also about relational injustice that involves God, humanity, and nature.

Christology serves as the second dimension of this theoretical structure. Christology provides a theological framework for understanding how Jesus Christ mediates ecological restoration. According to classical and contemporary Christian teachings Christ is not only the Saviour of humanity but also the creator and sustainer of all creation (Colossians 1:16-17).

Cosmic Christology extends the concept of redemption beyond humanity, to include all of creation. Therefore, according to cosmic Christology, environmental destruction indicates a dislocation from the divine order established through Christ. As such, ecological restoration is intrinsically related to Christ's redemptive activity (Gregersen, 2012:370). In addition, Christ's incarnation adds weight to this position by emphasizing God's solidarity with matter. Through His embodied presence among us, Christ affirms the worth/value/dignity of physical existence. Additionally, this theological affirmation opposes a dualism that separates the spiritual from the material; thus, promoting an integrated view of salvation that includes ecological restoration and healing.

Thus, this integrated framework guided the interpretation of environmental crisis in Nigeria by framing ecological degradation not simply as a technical failing but as a theological concern requiring a culturally-based ecological ethic centered in Christ.

Environmental Crisis in Nigeria: An Overview

Nigeria faces multiple, interconnected environmental crises at the intersections of ecology, economy, politics, and society. Although Nigeria possesses large amounts of natural resources (crude oil, forests, rich soils), the country still experiences a level of severe environmental degradation due to anthropogenic actions and inadequate environmental regulations. The World Bank reports that "the poor environmental conditions of Nigeria stem primarily from the country's extensive dependence on fossil fuels" (World Bank, 2022:15).

The environmental crisis in Nigeria can be identified as having several principal components. First, the environmental crisis in Nigeria can be described as one caused by oil pollution in the Niger Delta. For decades, the exploitation of crude oil for export purposes has resulted in regular oil spills; however, gas flares also occur regularly; and, more importantly, both activities pollute the waterways and the soil. As a result, aquatic ecosystems continue to deteriorate rapidly; soil quality is greatly decreased; and the livelihoods of people who rely upon fishing or farming continue to be seriously disrupted. In addition to the loss of ecosystem integrity and productive land resources, widespread oil pollution has had devastating social impacts, such as poverty, social strife between the oil producing communities and the Nigerian government; and conflicts between local communities and resource extraction companies (World Bank, 2022:15). Oil production has an immense and wide-ranging environmental effect on Nigeria. This can include air quality degradation, ground water pollution and loss of biodiversity (United Nations Environment Programme, 2011: 9).

Secondly, there is a critical need for action concerning deforestation in Southern Nigeria. Deforestation is occurring at alarming rates throughout southern Nigeria because of widespread logging and conversion of forestland into agricultural land for growing crops. Urban development also contributes significantly to deforestation. Deforestation results in an immediate decrease in biodiversity; further degradation occurs when topsoil is lost through erosion; climate stability is threatened; and ultimately the long-term viability of ecosystems decreases dramatically (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2020: 22).

Thirdly, desertification/land degradation exists as a pressing environmental issue in Northern Nigeria. Desertification and land degradation in North Central Nigeria results from a combination of factors, including desert encroachment and changing climates, combined with grazing and over-grazing of rangelands and other forms of environmentally destructive land use. As a direct consequence of land degradation and aridification, fewer hectares become available for crop cultivation; less productive land results in lower yields per hectare; increased food shortages exist; and increased numbers of people migrate from rural areas to urban areas (United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification, 2020:18). This has led to North-South migration by herdsmen in search of greener pastures.

Lastly, many Nigerian urban centers suffer from significant levels of environmental pollution, specifically, solid waste management issues arise through improper disposal of household garbage and waste materials; emissions produced by generators and power plants and vehicles contribute to poor air quality; and lack of sanitary sewage treatment facilities exacerbates public health concerns while degrading living standards in numerous urban environments. Climate change intensifies environmental problems in Nigeria. Climate change increases ambient temperatures; disrupts precipitation patterns; leads to increased occurrences of flooding and extreme weather events; creates negative impacts upon agriculture; affects availability and accessibility of freshwater resources; and has serious implications for population settlement and density patterns (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2022:1289). Furthermore, some segments of the population face disproportionate adverse consequences due to their limited capacity to adapt to these climatic changes.

Ultimately, Nigeria's environmental crisis represents more than just a simple ecological dilemma. It also represents a systemic structural challenge and an ethics-based question regarding sustainable development practices and how humans perceive themselves in relation to nature.

African Ecotheology and the Sacredness of Creation

At its core, African ecotheology promotes a way of thinking about God, humanity and the natural world using African culture and religion. African ecotheology was developed out of an understanding that ecological problems in Africa cannot be solved simply by using the Bible alone, however they could be resolved through combining Christian theology with African views of how we relate to our environment (Dube, 2010: 123–130) African ecotheology asserts that the earth is sacred, relational and full of divine presence. Rather than viewing the earth as just something we have so we can use it for our own purposes, (Mbiti, 1990:106-110) the earth is viewed as a gift of God, given to us so that we may live in harmony with all of creation.

Many traditional African religions view the spiritual and natural worlds as connected. Therefore land, rivers, forests, mountains, and animals are seen as connected and part of a larger whole of what is considered holy. These perspectives encourage people to respect their natural surroundings and strive to maintain a balance and sustainable way of living in relation to nature. According to John Mbiti, African cultures do not see a clear distinction between the "natural" and "spiritual" realms. Instead, every aspect of the world is considered a religious environment in which all parts are interconnected (Mbiti, 1990:106-110).

Therefore, African ecotheology uses this indigenous ecological awareness along with Christian theology, specifically the doctrine of creation. Scripture clearly teaches that God made the world and said it was "very good." (Gen. 1:31) Thus, the earth itself is considered valuable and worthy of honor because it was made by God. When we harm the earth, we do not just cause a problem related to development or technology. We are causing damage to God's world and disrupting the intended harmony between humanity and the rest of creation.

Additionally, African ecotheology focuses on Relational Ontology, the belief that all things exist primarily based on relationships. Humans are not separate entities from other aspects of the world but instead part of a large web of life including both visible and invisible realities. Because of this relational understanding, when one person harms another, they cause relational harm; similarly, when one person harms the environment, they also cause relational harm; it causes a disruption to the equilibrium among humans, the environment and God.

Researchers studying theology in Africa believe that ecological catastrophes in Africa are directly linked to the current ways of exploiting the natural world, colonial legacies, and capitalist economic systems that place financial gain above environmental preservation (Mugambi, 1995: 92). Consequently, African Ecotheology contains a prophetic component. It challenges systems that are unfair and calls for ecological justice, responsible stewardship and accountability. In essence, African ecotheology is centered around the sacredness of creation. It holds up that the physical world is not secular or disposable but is a portion of God's good creation deserving of respect, care and preservation. This view provides a solid theological base for addressing the significant environmental concerns in Africa especially in areas like Nigeria where environmental destruction has reached crisis proportions. Overall, African Ecotheology represents a holistic view of creation that combines spirituality, ethics and ecology. Through emphasizing the sacredness of creation it encourages a new way of relating to the environment, a way characterized by reverence, accountability and relational harmony between humans, nature and God.

Christology and Creation: The Cosmic Role of Christ

When Christology is approached with an emphasis on cosmology and ecology, the typical concentration of Christ's work as savior for humans is broadened to include all of creation. In this view, Christ is viewed as Creator, Sustainer, and Reconciler of all things, in addition to being Redeemer. This ecologically oriented Christological view has strong roots in the New Testament, particularly in Colossians 1:16-17, "all things were created through him and for him… and he is before all things, and in him all things hold together." This passage represents a major aspect of what is referred to as cosmic Christology.

This understanding is strengthened further through the teaching of the incarnation. When he became flesh (John 1:14), Christ entered into the material world thereby validating the worthiness and good of physical creation. From a theological standpoint, this negates any form of dualism that would separate the material from the spiritual or place human salvation above that of creation. Rather, it illustrates that God's purpose of redemption includes the redemption of all creation.

Pauline theology also plays a key role in developing an ecologically-oriented Christological view. In Romans 8:19-22, creation is portrayed as crying out in travail and awaiting liberation. This demonstrates that there is a direct connection between the fate of creation and the work of redemption carried out by Christ. This passage serves to support the idea that salvation is not only centered on humanity but is also cosmic in scope and involves restoring harmony throughout all of creation.

Therefore, environmental degradation should be seen as not just a physical/economic issue but also as a theological disorder that illustrates the brokenness between creation and its creator through Christ. Thusly, ecological destruction may be perceived as a disruption of the divine order where all things are intended to find unity in Christ.

From this point forward, this Christological perspective has important implications for an African eco-theological context. It illustrates that the care for the earth is central to Christianity as opposed to it as being peripheral to the Christian faith. The Church as the body of Christ is called upon to carry out Jesus' reconciling ministry by working towards ecological justice, restoration and responsible stewardship of creation.

Thus, Christology provides a robust theological base for ecological ethics by illustrating that Christ is the cosmic epicenter of creation. Through him alone all things have been created, are sustained and shall be restored. Therefore, this understanding lends credibility to the theological obligation for Christians to take an active role in caring for/protecting/restoring the environment as they fulfill their part of Jesus' redeeming mission.

The Church and Ecological Responsibility in Nigeria

An evaluation of Nigeria's environmental crisis through an integration of African eco-theology and Christology provides a comprehensive analysis of the problem of environmental deterioration by analyzing the issue within the larger relationship among God, man and creation.

Thus, activities like oil extraction in the Niger Delta, deforestation, and the rapid growth of cities in Nigeria represent not only examples of developmentally-related issues but rather demonstrate a moral crisis based upon greed, injustices against others and a lack of accountability for one's responsibilities toward creation. Therefore, African eco-theology views ecological destruction as both an ecological and moral disorder requiring repentance, restoration, and a renewed awareness of our ecological relationships (Boesak, 1978: 88; Mugambi, 1995:110). Thus, when we destroy the environment, we are distorting what has been created by Christ and disrupting the order that holds creation together. Moreover, the fact that God became human in Jesus Christ, as revealed in the incarnation, adds greater depth to this view by affirming that God participates fully in material reality.

Nigeria's environmental crisis can be interpreted as a tri-relational breakdown: between humanity and God, humanity and nature, and within humanity itself. The abuse of natural resources without considering ecological consequences illustrates a distorted understanding of dominion that is at odds with both traditional African communal ethics and Christ-centered creation theology. Therefore, ecological restoration becomes a theological mandate in this integrated approach. It calls for repentance from exploitive behaviors and practices;

restoration of justice in environmental governance; and the practice of ecological responsibility based on both African relational ethics and Christ's reconciliation activity. The Church as the Body of Christ is therefore responsible to engage in active advocacy, education and sustainable practices concerning the environment that reflect God's will for creation.

The Nigerian Church is well-positioned to shape morality and public ethics due to its large presence throughout communities; its contributions to education, social development, and spiritual formation are many. As Nigeria's environmental conditions continue to deteriorate, the Church is being asked to expand its focus from the spiritual realm and engage actively in the area of ecological responsibility as part of its broader mission of wholistic salvation. From an African eco-theological and Christological framework, this responsibility is not voluntary, it is required as part of the Church's participation in God's redemptive work in creation (Tutu, 1999:83).

African Eco-Theology affirms the Church exists within a worldview that views creation as having both sacred and interconnected elements. Since African Indigenous Traditions view land, water, forests, and animals as having sacred status as part of a "living" and sacred order the Church may draw upon existing ecological values to further develop ecological awareness and sustainability. Furthermore, if the Church combines these indigenous perspectives with Christian teachings regarding stewardship, the Church may foster a theology of care that rejects exploitative behaviors towards nature.

The Church is responsible to respond prophetically to ecological issues, particularly in areas of high environmental degradation such as the Niger Delta. As a result, the Church is called to stand up against environmental injustices, advocate for sustainable polices, and provide support to those whose lives and dignities have been affected by ecological destruction.

The Church's ecological responsibility is based upon its Christological identity as the Body of Christ. If Christ is the cosmic reconciler of all creation (Colossians 1:16-20) then the Church will participate in this reconciling mission by facilitating relationships of harmony between humans and their natural environments. This will occur through educational efforts among Christians on creation care, advocating for sustainable behavior patterns among believers, and confronting systemic failures contributing to environmental harm.

Examples of how the Church may demonstrate ecological responsibility in Nigeria include environmental education through preaching/teaching, planting trees, initiating waste management programs, and working cooperatively with government and/or non-governmental organizations involved in environmental protection. The Church also has a critical role to fulfill in preparing future clergy for ecological awareness/responsibility through integration of eco-theology into theological school curricula. Unfortunately, the ability of the Church to act effectively in ecological engagement is hindered by the lack of adequate theological emphasis on environmental issues along with an overemphasis on the Church's primary concern of salvific redemption of individual human souls. Eco-theology offers a correction to this deficiency by emphasizing that the redemption of God includes the renewal of all of creation. Thus, the Church's ecological responsibility should be viewed as an essential component of the Church's evangelistic/pastoral mission.

Conclusion

This study on environmental crisis in Nigeria was conducted using both an integrated African Ecotheological and Christological frame of reference. Through this, the study has clearly indicated that Nigeria's ecologically related problems, including, but not limited to oil pollution, deforestation, desertification, urban waste management and climate-related damage, are more than simply scientific and/or economic issues; they represent profoundly significant moral/theological crises.

African eco-theology understands creation as being sacred, relational, and as a network of life which merits reverence and respect. Furthermore, drawing upon African Indigenous worldview, African eco-theologians have emphasized that the act of causing harm to the environment represents a disruption of the harmonious relationship between humans and nature. As a result, while the physical consequences of environmental harm may be destructive, such harm also constitutes a violation of moral/spiritual order.

Drawing upon Christology, the study provided a deeper understanding of creation when viewed through the lens of Christ as the cosmic center of creation. According to Christology, all Things were Created through/for Christ (Col. 1:16-20); therefore, ecological restoration is one of Christ's works of redemption, thus, environmental healing cannot occur without the mission of God in Christ.

Thus, the study argued that Nigeria's Environmental Crisis should be understood as a breakdown of multiple relationships: between Humanity & God; Humanity & Nature; and Humanity/Humanity. Therefore the Church should play a critical role in promoting awareness about ecology; advocating for environmental justice; and engaging in practical initiatives that support sustainability. Thus, addressing Nigeria's environmental crisis will require more than technical solutions, it will demand a transformation of viewpoint/values. An African eco-theological and Christological Approach provides a Holistic Framework for such a transformation by affirming the sacredness of creation; the cosmic role of Christ; and the ethical responsibility of humanity.

Recommendations

1. Christian Churches in Nigeria must begin to include ecological theology in the content of their sermons and other forms of ministry (i.e., teaching and discipleship). Environmental stewardship has always been an important aspect of being a Christian, but it must become a priority rather than secondary to other aspects of Christianity.
2. Seminaries and Theological Schools in Nigeria must teach ecological theology so that the next generation of Christian leaders will have a creation care worldview.
3. Churches in Nigeria should develop hands-on environmental ministries (e.g., tree planting, waste collection drives, community clean ups) to demonstrate what it means to live out one's faith through action.
4. Nigerian governments must strengthen and enforce existing environmental regulations to limit pollution, deforestation and destructive industrial practices.
5. Governments must regulate oil extraction activities in the Niger Delta much more tightly to prevent additional environmental damage.

6. Schools and Universities in Nigeria must add environmental education and ecological ethics to their curriculum at every level. By doing so, they will produce generations of Nigerians who care about the environment and are ethically accountable for their actions.
7. Nigerian local communities must begin to adopt environmentally friendly behaviors such as disposing of trash properly, replanting trees, using natural resources responsibly, etc.
8. Indigenous Ecological knowledge, which emphasizes respect for land/nature, should be revitalized and incorporated into modern ways of thinking about how to protect the environment. Community involvement is essential to developing long-term ecologically sustainable solutions.
9. Oil and other companies involved in extracting products from the earth in Nigeria must follow environmentally responsible practices and comply with Nigerian environmental regulations. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is a concept that has evolved over time; while CSR may currently mean making financial payments to compensate for harm caused by an industry, CSR should evolve to include actively restoring damaged environments. Companies must commit to cleaning up polluted lands, investing in renewable energy and reducing their carbon footprint.

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