

A Christian Approach To The Question Of God And Environment With Particular Reference To Kaplong Community, Bomet County, Kenya

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Abstract: This paper investigated the role Christians play in the conservation of the environment. The Christians referred in this research are all those believers whose background, history and theology is traced to biblical teachings. For the understanding of this work, the researcher used the biblical stories and teachings that are relevant to the conservation of the environment. These include stories of creation in Genesis and the parables of Jesus in the New Testament. On the other hand, the operational definition for the term environment is that essential physical and spiritual condition or domain which enables the possibility of the harmonious coexistence of all beings in the ecosystem. Without the environment, there is no possibility of ecosystem, hence, no life on earth. This paper has one objective namely to determine the importance of Christian belief in God vis-à-vis the preservation of the environment, The theoretical framework of this paper is the hierarchy of beings as advanced by S.J. Mbithi. In this theory God is the apex of the hierarchy without which all other beings cannot exist. The spirit of team play is portrayed in this theory which is vital in the preservation of the environment. It is the essence of coexistence and life ceases to be if there is disruption in this system of coexistence. The literature review is drawn from the African Bible, the Jerome Biblical commentary particularly on the creation stories and the parables of Jesus in the New Testament particularly where Jesus used the examples from the environment to explicate about the unseen world of the Kingdom of God. Also the writings of S.J Mbithi on the African traditional worldview on the environment. The authors finally conclude that, the power of faith in God is the only instrument that can salvage the present day destruction of environment. Greed of materialism and power is making human beings to reach their extinction very fast. The Bible which is the Christian scripture is relevant in promoting the conservation of the environment. This is because according to the teachings of Genesis, man is a steward and not the owner of the environment. The researcher's findings concluded that lack of awareness on knowledge and skills by the public on the enacted laws contribute to the degradation of the environment.

I. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The researchers investigated on how the Christian belief in God is a force behind the conservation of the environment. The target respondents of this study were the Christians of different denominations with particular reference to the teachers of Kapcholyo High school and the opinion leaders from Kaplong community in the county of Bomet. This area was particularly identified because historically, the two main Christian churches namely the African Inland Mission (AIM) and the Roman Catholic Church were the pioneer missionary churches in the region. But since then, numerous other

evangelical churches have since emerged. Hence, the area is assumed to have a rich heritage on Christian background and values including matters on environmental conservation.

Bomet County being along the Mau basin also provides very rich natural resources including the Mau forest which despite being overlapping with the counties of Kericho and Narok also extends to this county. The Mau forest is significant because it is a source of the Mara River which apart from providing water to the people and the wild animals of the Mara national reserve is also a source of river Nile. At the regional level, the county actively participates in the Mara-Serengeti Days celebrations which bring together the

stakeholders from Kenya and Tanzania both from the government and the conservation organizations. The main objectives include assessing of challenges on the ecosystem and to provide strategies of sustaining the life of Mara basin.

Environment is a physical and spiritual condition which gives rise to the possibility of an ecosystem. According to the Christian understanding, this condition and ecosystem have its roots from God who is the author of every being. All existing beings have a harmonious relationship within the natural environment. Science, on its part plays a vital role in shaping this environment in order to improve the life of man.

According to Green(1994),human activities including the destruction of rain forests in Brazil and other parts of the world, mainly to provide land for settlers are among the causes of the diminishing of animals and plants species. Soil erosion and desertification are ever increasing over the whole earth. In this regard, the human society needs to realize that the world, like any living organ, needs to be nurtured and protected from any harm that can endanger her longevity and life-force. It has a metaphysical *within* of a psychic-spiritual dimension and not just a mechanical entity to be manipulated for material satisfactions and political supremacy

Global warming has led to the disappearance of the ozone layer, coupled with Harmful radiation destructions of organisms. This calls to question the inability of human advancement in science and technology to respond to the current environmental crisis. It is a civilization which is destroying its own support life system due to obsession of material gain in the name of development. Ruining the environment and the earth is an indication that science and technology is not a panacea to human needs. We need a spiritual renaissance to regenerate both the human and the planet and to change the seemingly faulty perception of reality and to spur the rudimentary instinct of ecosystem.

In Kenya, the wanton and persistent destruction of forests has gone unabated. Reclaiming our forests demands an urgent and a collective responsibility both from the state and those who may have been duped to acquire the ownership by mischievous insensitive individuals. Being a natural resource it is under the stewardship of the United Nations agencies classified under the category of trust land. The organizations vested with the conservation of such land include the Bonn-based Secretariat of the United Nations framework convention on climate change and the United Nations convention to combat desertification.

Massive acquisition of public land has been a trend of post-colonial period especially in the Rift Valley. Land became a treasure for those in power to reward their communities for political gains. Hence, party politics and ethnicity are the factors derailing the process of the conservation leading to the agony of the Mau and other forests. Political good will is the most needed remedy to address this quagmire of the conservation and protection of this water tower treasure.

The black forest Located in the mountainous region in Southwest Germany, bordering France should tutor our conscience of human-nature co-existence. Walking in a thicket of dark, blue dense forest complexion of pines, the Roman soldiers named it *Silver Nigra*, meaning black forest. Unlike our Mau complex, the black forest is a canopy of social

economic grandeur. With its rich heritage, it has become a popular tourist destination. The unique features including the hot spring, picturesque shops, magnificent churches and the wood carving cottage industry of souvenirs for tourists are part of the human-environment harmony of the black forest. From as early as the 18th.century, this forest has produced the cuckoo clocks, which are now part of the most expensive and lucrative clocks of the Western society. Literary celebrities including the Grimm brothers with their exemplary fairy tales about the black forest have become a part of this heritage. We can also transform the Mau complex, not only through the conservation, but also by reaping the other resources such as bee farming. In order to attract tourists, the government should install cable ways to enable accessibility by tourists. This is because the environment is also a home for elephants and other animals.

It is worth noting that deforestation is among the causes of global warming. The United Nation Organization is also keen on responding to the problem whose effects are very alarming on the planet earth. Addressing a UN Assembly in New York in 2007, Ban Ki-Moon, the then General Secretary of the united nation, described the condition of planet earth as extremely at risk that only a few decades remaining for mankind until a point of no return.

Echoing our National Anthem, lets” dwell in unity, peace and liberty so that plenty will be found on our borders and nobody will have the phobia of greed of destruction of the forests which are our sources of livelihood. The dictum; *God always forgive, human beings sometimes but nature never*, should remind us that nature is a double edged swords that fights harshly if not taken care of.

It is worth noting that environment encompasses any condition that necessitates change in human existence. This includes the physical as well as the metaphysical milieu. This is the domain though not subjected to the physical and natural scientific experimentation is part of the reality.

As advanced by Gonzalez (1987), the ecclesiology of Augustine on the city of God, Augustine postulates two intertwined cities which though separated continue to influence one another. These are the heavenly and the earthly cities. Hence, the understanding of the environment for the Christians transcends the physical. The metaphysical spiritual environment is not a dichotomy of the physical world but exist together in a continuum process. The physical is the attributed to the metaphysical world. According to ancient Greek philosophy, this worldly environment emerged as a limitation of the next world. That is why, the struggles to perfect this world is an indication of perfection in the next world.

Christianity has a rich heritage of diverse cultural backgrounds on the understanding of environment. Hence, can be said is one of otherworldly religions the is well integrated with universal values that are essential for the conservation of the planet earth. This is especially when we are facing an impending possible catastrophe because of the excess and ruthless uncontrolled use of resources leading to global warming.

Saint Augustine, a renowned ancient church scholar introduced the theology of the city of God. This city is twofold namely the earthly and the heavenly city. Both cities are equally important. In order to merit the heavenly city one has

to live harmoniously with the earthly city. Christians are citizens of this earthly city and they are not to live separately from other people who do not belong to their creed. It is only by being good citizens that we earn the reward of the next city. Christians cannot be indifferent when governments of the world are planning to protect the environment from destruction.

Stewardship is the responsibility and the role accorded to mankind by God with respect to the environmental conservation. This is a divine obligation which guards against any abuse of God's creation by human beings. It creates a consciousness of the environmental conservation. It is an essential lesson that our creator is a moral God.

According to Weber, the responsibility of human beings in this world is a divine calling. To be a Christian is to accept the divine call to participate in all the activities that promote human development in this world. Christians are citizens of this world as well as being citizens of heaven. Those who can inherit the heavenly kingdom are already known by what they are doing in this world. There is no dichotomy between this world and the next.

The mission of the church is to continue the mission of Jesus Christ who is seen to be interested in the works of creation through the dismantling of the kingdom of Satan and establishing God's rule in this world.

Pope Francis I issued an encyclical *Laudato SI* (2015) in which he decries the wanton destruction of the environment through the mishandling of the goods endowed by God. The Pope observes that the earth is groaning because it has been maltreated. Yet, human beings who are finite cannot do without the earth. This is because our bodies are made up of the elements like the air we breathe. Since the earthly environment is a home for humanity regardless of race, religion or status, everybody should strive for a sustainable and integral development. Our future is at stake without the care for the environment.

To destroy ecology is not just the question of the destruction of the environment but a social issue. It is an injustice against the poor who are vulnerable with respect to the basic needs. Creation is a granary of God where everybody is endowed with basic needs. In order to sustain this granary, it is essential to protect the environment (Pope Benedict, 2011).

The worst threat to human life in our times is not about the nuclear war among nations like the world wars of the 20th.century. The first and the Second World War and subsequently the cold war. Today in the 21st.century, the worst threat is the global warming which can lead to the total annihilation of the entire civilization.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Conservation of environment has been an integral part and parcel of the Christian mission of evangelization down the ages. However, there is no evident of any activity documented on the conservation of the environment initiated by Christians in Bomet County in the 21st.century. Hence, the purpose of this journal was to collect data from the Christian denominations and opinion leaders and present findings in order to close this gap in knowledge.

OBJECTIVES

There was only one objective for this paper as follows; to establish how Christians in Bomet County inculcate their belief in God with the conservation of the environment.

JUSTIFICATION OF STUDY

This paper is a discussion of the role of the Christians in Kenya on the conservation of the environment. The topic was identified because of two main factors as follows; first because all religions including Christianity regard nature as a divine phenomenon. Hence, protection of the environment is part and parcel of worship and reverence to the deity. Genesis story of the accounts of creation portrays God as a sole designer of the beauty of nature. God also mandated human beings to take care of what He had created. Human beings, therefore, are the stewards who are supposed to take care of the environment.

Secondly; it is easy to mobilize Christians and to engage them in the activities related to the conservation of the environment because of their numeric nature and internal harmony facilitated by belief in God and respect to the authorities. A case at hand is the history of coffee planting in Colombia which is attributed to a Jesuit priest. It is alleged that leaders were worried when at first the local people resisted the planting of this new crop that it was taking long to mature. Then a priest by the name Francisco Romero devised an idea where instead of the usual penance at confession, he told them to plant tree or four trees. The bishop of Colombia then ordered Christians to accept the idea making Colombia the second largest producer of coffee in the world.

The leaders of the church in the twenty first century can also use similar strategy to convince to mobilize their Christian faithful to plant trees as well as educate them on the importance of the conservation of the environment.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Conservation of the environment is fundamental because it is about protection of life and the existence of all living species. Hence, findings of this study were expected to benefit all human beings in providing knowledge in the existing gap on matters of conservation of the environment.

The journal will also be useful to both church and the county government of Bomet in enacting and implementing of laws pertaining to the conservation of the environment. It is evident that the Kenyan government is keen on the protection of the environment and natural resources especially by eliminating processes and activities that are likely to endanger the environment (The constitution of Kenya, 69 g, 2010). But, despite this concern by the government, there is still a need to strengthen such laws in order to ensure that they are implemented to the letter.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

INTRODUCTION

This chapter discusses the selected literature from relevant books, documents of the church including the Popes' encyclicals, the African Bible particularly the Genesis creation stories. The discussions are arranged according to the objectives of this paper.

CHRISTIAN BELIEF IN THE CONSERVATION OF THE ENVIRONMENT

According to Gutierrez (1973), the word about God is at the same time a promise to the world. In other words, Christianity is a historical institution hence cannot be indifferent to the worldly activities that relates to the promotion of human development. Hence, is an integral part of the worldly environment and the entire universe? Christians as such are citizens of this physical environment as well as being citizens of the heavenly city. The heavenly city can only be established through the daily activities that are undertaken in this world.

The biblical authors in the creation accounts (Genesis 1:1-2:3), placed the environment as a vital resource in which God as the author directs human beings as the steward. This is a very important responsibility with regards to the conservation of the environment in our modern society. A steward is undertaking responsibilities on behalf of the owner and he or she has to operate within certain principles given by the owner. Yet, unfortunately, people or companies of our time have taken over everything and destroying natural resources disregarding the original prime mover who is God himself. Consequently, there are serious repercussions which include, increased desertifications, erosions of soil, floods and tsunamis. There are also the impending threats of the annihilation of the planet leading to the extinction of the civilization due to global warming.

In his post-synodal apostolic exhortation, Pope Benedict (2011) decries about the serious degradation of the environment especially by the opulence of some business men and women, governments and financial groups who are involved in programmes of exploitation of natural resources that pollute the environment causing desertification. Most of these groups are from the Western nations robbing Africa of the rich natural resources but with the cooperation of local leaders. This environmental menace is rooted in the modern day's unjust order where the rich nations disregard the common good and instead go ahead to ensure their own prosperity at the expense of the wellbeing of the local population.

In the Modern era quest and understanding of the phenomenon of progress (Seewald, 2010) which in the past meant the acquisition of knowledge of reality. But it has mutated into the sphere of control and power which has led to human destruction of the environment. People no longer want to gain knowledge to better human life in terms of such fields like medicine and other technological advancement. But knowledge has turn to be a monster.

As delineated by Nouwen (1979), this is an age of the predicament of the nuclear man .A time, though with advance technology, modern people have reached a situation beyond the control of the machines responsible for polluting and possibly can cause the extinction of the entire human civilization.

Green (1994) attributes the destruction of the environment on religious and philosophical ideas which interprets creation as a mechanical commodity to be acquired, controlled by human beings. In ancient times earth was worshipped as divine but our biblical creation stories placed God outside creation making earth to lose her divinity. This idea might be brushed of as not having any consequence. But it is worth considering that many at times; Christians may have overemphasized the heavenly world after life to the detriment of this world.

Corruption is one of the oldest human vices (Theuri and Gitonga, 2011), negatively thwarts war against environmental destruction as well. It is the root cause of most of the illegal activities including logging in public forests perpetuated by the forests warders who are supposed to be the ones enforcing the law on such activities.

According to latest statistics, Kenya spends more than 37.5 million US dollars annually on timber imports to meet the rising demands that now stand at 38 million cubic meters annually. This has made timber a very lucrative business leading to over-cutting of trees that are meant for soil and water conservation.

Environmental destruction is among the underlying causes of conflicts in Kenya today. These conflicts are of varied categories. Currently there are skirmishes between communities over the ownership of some parts of the Mau forest in the Rift valley. Then the human and animal conflicts that have ensued due to population pressure especially within the Maasai Mara in Narok County. Finally the conflict between the government law enforcer's personnel and the community. Recently, the Independent Medical-Legal Unit (IMLU), a human rights organization revealed that serious conflicts have been going on at Kapyego in Marakwet East, Elgeiyo Marakwet County, between the local community and the forests guards. Consequently, this has led to the death of some people. The local community alleged that the Kenya Forests guards are responsible in the illegal logging of timber and they become hostile and even harass them for fear of being exposed to the authorities.

According to Vatican council two document (Gaudium et spes 40, 1965) the church is not only concerned with eschatological values but also being present in this world as a historical institution is also experiencing the same earthly lot which the world has., in their pursuit for eternal aspirations, Christians should always They are citizens of two equally important cities; one earthly and secondly heavenly. Both cities intertwined to bring about the quality of life as the creator intended. When one of these cities is overemphasized, and then there is a destruction of the environment. The existence of the environment is to serve human needs; there can be no environment without the existence of human beings who are the apex of God's creation. That is why all other creatures were created first before finally, human beings were created according to the image and likeness of God.

As stipulated from the creation stories, human beings were not to lack anything in terms of the endowment. The resources were bountiful for everyone irrespective of social status. It is in this view that the church must condemn any form of unjust order which, according to Pope Benedict XVI, "under the pretext of reducing poverty, has often helped to aggravate it".

Among the causes of serious damage to the environment in Africa and the entire world include governments and financial groups involved in the exploitation of the natural resources. Others are the multinationals who exploit the resources for the creation of wealth in their homeland with the complicity of those African leaders in power. They amass wealth at the expense of the local people who are rendered poor and perennially dependable from those powerful opulent nations.

The church must be the voice of the poor whose environment though endowed with resources, are continuously depleted by the greedy individuals and organizations. Politicians must not abdicate their role in ensuring that the fundamental goods like land and water is protected for human life of the present and future generation.

THE ROLE OF CHRISTIAN DENOMINATIONS IN ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION

The idea of the environmental conservation did not start with the coming of the Western European Nations. Even in Africa, communities have engaging in activities that kept the environment interwoven which kept it sacrosanct. The modern day's conservation of the environment is a new development which is traced to the period of the Industrial revolution of the 19th century. Hitherto, Africa and the entire world did not suffer from the environmental pollution and the threats posed by the global warming. Hence, the early missionaries who arrived in Africa were already cognizant of dangers from their home countries. It was from such a background that they had to inculcate their missionary activities with the conservation of the environment.

Talking to one of the opinion leaders from Kaplong Community(OI), the researchers established that the exotic trees which are still part of the panorama of this area were introduced by the missionaries of the then African Inland Mission(AIM) and the Mill Hill Missionaries of the Roman Catholic Church as early as the 1920s. The respondent pointed that Father Ferdinand Fent, a Mill Hill Missionary from Tirol, Austria, is indebted to have pioneered the planting of trees in Kaplong community particularly the eucalyptus type while the AIM introduced the cypress type of trees. Why this discrepancy regarding the types of trees typical to each church may have been due to the dominant of these trees in their home countries. Most of the Mill Hill Missionaries hailed from Italy and German and during this time all the European Nations allied to Germany may not have had access to government support due to the World War One that was going on at that time. Kenya being British allies at that time as well as from a protestant Nation could have invested more support to the protestant Christians in Kenya.

Elders from Kaplong community provided the support in the planting of the exotic trees and crops like maize. Among

those elders included the following; Barnard Kotut, Athanas Kiget, Gregory Marisin, Pius Kirui and Johanna arap Ngulolu. Apart from the latter, who was from the AIM, the rest were among the early Roman Catholic elders of Kaplong community. These elders were instrumental in facilitating the planting of the exotic trees and crops. The Kenya Uganda Railway which by then had reached Kisumu became useful in transporting the seedlings from the government nurseries in Kisumu which the missionaries obtained and supplied to their Christians. To ensure that the local people planted and took care of the seedlings, Father Fent involved the local administration for discipline measures where a heavy punishment was applied if the flock of sheep or goats destroyed them. Most of the local people who could not cope with such rules vacated the area.

It was possible for religious leaders to get involved with the environmental conservation at the time when institutions like education was largely was in their hands before the creation of the Teachers Service Commission(TSC) which took the control of the management of education from the church. Trees were to be planted for use in building schools and churches.

The work of environmental conservation after independence is now the responsibility of the Kenyan Government and other conservation stake holders. But this process is thwarted due to the lack of the implementation of laws and the impunity that is the trend in the developing countries. Corruption has infiltrated into every sector and even public forests have been threatened with extinction due to logging perpetuated by government officials. An example is at Kapyego in Elgeyo Marakwet West. The researches obtained data from this area through the facilitation of the International Medical Unit (IMLU) a human rights organization. Conflict have been experienced between the community and the Kenya Forests Guards(KFG). The community informed these researches that the KFG often harass them fearing being reported to authorities because they are involved in illegal logging of timber(OI).

In the 21st Century, Christians have shifted the attention of the conservation of the environment to issues pertaining to motivation on spiritual tenets. Most of the programmes that were undertaken by churches before independence have now been taken over by the government. However, the mainstream churches still participate in the conservation programmes but mostly at an International level and especially through the issuances of relevant documents that are aimed at sensitizing the world on the impending catastrophe of the planet.

According to Mutai, A. (OI), a high school teacher at Kapcholyo High school and a Christian of Kaplong Deliverance church, conservation of the environment is manifested through the youth programmes. He told the researchers that youths have initiated a tree planting project in their church to boost their programmes of the youth camps. This is an indication that most of the programmes in churches are now aimed at collecting funds to sustain the church. It is notable that all churches are now trying to cope with self-reliance since originally most of them were being funded by the expatriate missionaries who have since handed over to the local pastors. This affect also the main stream churches including the Roman Catholic Church.

III. METHODOLOGY

INTRODUCTION

The methodology applied in this journal was purposive sampling which according to Tromp and Kombo (2013) is used when targeting group of respondents believed to be reliable for the study. As regards this paper on environment, the target group was teachers of a high school who have participated in environmental related seminars and activities both within the school and in the community.

THE TARGET RESPONDENTS

As regards this journal, the researchers targeted teachers of Kapcholyo High school in Bomet County. Among the justifications for sampling the teachers is because the school is a day school with clubs that promote the environmental conservation. We have the wild life club, Red Cross, scouting club the environmental club and also the department of Agriculture. These clubs have related activities which concern the conservation of the environment including tree planting and crops.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the analysis of the data collection from the sampled respondents identified for this journal. The respondents were identified using the purposeful design method. All the respondents were all teachers. The researchers started by briefly requesting them to fill in the questionnaires. This was done without revealing to them the nature of the research topic in order to avoid the problem of influencing and preempting their thoughts.

SUMMARY

Churches are still fundamental in the activities that promote environmental conservation Kenya though each denomination has different priorities. There is need for the Christians to realize their potential in this noble course on the environmental issues. Also the government and churches should enhance partnership for the success of this work.

According to findings (Julia Faria, 2021), the church has an advantage of the population standing at 85% according to latest findings. This means if every Christian engages on environmental activities, Kenya and the world can realize the green environment objective and make the world a better human habitat.

Christians listen to their religious leaders even more than other leaders in the secular institutions. Even if they still listen to other leaders it is due to protection of their own earthly security and not from inner Godly calling. In this regard, church leaders should take this advantage and privilege to sensitize Christians on environmental conservation.

Yet churches the African churches in the 21st.century are also facing challenges regarding donor funding of their projects. Since the expatriate missionaries handed over the

administration to the local pastors, attention in most churches have shifted to self-reliance. The local donors are now their Christians who clearly observe how every coin is spent on church projects. Consequently, the contributions are determined by the transparency and accountability by their pastors.

What is also affecting works of environmental conservation is the question of numerous cults which preach more of the afterlife than instead of the praxis spirituality which places the importance on this earthly city as a prelude for God's Kingdom (Gutierrez).

Finally corruption which is among the oldest human vices (Matthew, T.M. and Gitonga, N.I.2011), is negatively affecting the welfare of common person is also the underlying setback on war against degradation of the environment. Those responsible for executing laws on environmental management take advantage on their positions. An example is the Kenya forest guards who collude with local and International governments in logging and poaching of animals.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study investigated the importance of Christian belief in the conservation of the environment. With regards to the objective which was to determine the extent to which belief in God is essential in the conservation of the environment, the following are the recommendation:

- ✓ Due to their belief in that human beings are stewards of works of creation; Christians are best suited group that can ensure maximum conservation of the environment.
- ✓ Religious leaders have the authority over the Christian faithful to educate and mobilize them in the conservation of the environment.
- ✓ Because of the well organized and structured system of administration with a universal network, Christians can best address the challenging current problem of the pollution and other related dangers of the environment.
- ✓ Christians are not only concern with the eschatological affairs but also are part and parcel of the world heritage. Hence, the instructions of the catechesis of the 21st.century should inculcate values that concern the conservation of the environment.

CONCLUSION

Following the objective of this research which is to determine the extent to which Christians participate in the conservation of the environment, this journal concludes the following:

This journal concludes that a true Christian is one who is not only concern with the wellbeing of the neighbor but also including the habitat of the neighbor. Anybody who deliberately destroys the environment breaks the commandment of God which says thou shall not kill. Any true Christian should treat the environment with love as it is an extension of God's Kingdom. The environment is a manifestation of God's love to humanity since human God created the environment as a home to mankind. It is an endowment for livelihood.

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