

# A Study of Pre-Christian and Christian Africa and Environmental Sustainability: A Reflection for the Church in Africa



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## ABSTRACT

Pre-Christian African communities were environmentally friendly. The communities developed taboos, myths, sayings and ethics, and enforced them to conserve, protect and nourish the environment for later generations. On the contrary, in spite of the Bible's teachings about the need to conserve the environment, Christian African communities pollute the environment to a high rate of deterioration. The purpose of the study is to draw the attention of the Church in Africa to the level of filth resulting from failure to play her role in environmental sustainability and to provoke her into action. The study employed qualitative method to gather and analyse non-numerical data such as text for proper understanding of people's own social reality, which included their beliefs, attitudes and motivation, and those of others. The phenomenological approach focussed on studying human experiences, particularly how individuals perceive and communicate their lived experiences. The discussions showed that pre-Christian Africa served as an effective agent of environmental sustainability than Christian Africa. It is recommended that African Christians change their hearts, take hermeneutics and theology seriously, promote environmental awareness, change their negative attitudes towards African environmental taboos and be careful of the wholesale borrowing of Western philosophy and science at the expense of traditional African beliefs and practices. The study concluded that the church in Africa has a duty to learn from pre-Christian African communities to help sustain the environment. The study has contributed towards scholars' efforts to finding causes and possible solutions to environmental degradation in African communities and encourage African scholars to pay attention to traditional African methods of environmental issues.

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## INTRODUCTION

This article begins with a statement of Wangari Maathai's experience of one particular tree near her village that she loved.<sup>1</sup>

That tree inspired awe, it was protected, it was the place of God. But in the 60s, after I had gone far away, I went back to where I grew up, and I found God has been relocated to a little stone building called a church. The tree was no longer sacred. It had been cut down. I mourned for that tree. I knew the trees had to live. They have to live so we can live.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Wangari Maathai, "Can One Woman Save Africa?," *Independent*, September 27, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.theatlantic.com/daily-dish/archive/2010/10/mourning-the-trees/180557/>

This sense of sadness at seeing the destruction of a forest for the simple reason of building a church auditorium is in order. As Gifford posits, “Through all the wonderful, eventful centuries since Christ’s time – and long before that - God has cared for these trees, saved them from drought, disease, avalanches, and a thousand tempests and floods. But he cannot save them from fools...”<sup>3</sup>

Contemporary African communities are experiencing an environmental crisis. The presence of choked gutters and dirt in the cities, breeding mosquitoes causing rapid spread of malaria and other diseases and sickness such as cholera in the continent is really devastating. In Ghana, for example, the introduction of heavy machinery in illegal mining on riverbeds has turned many water bodies into chalky, muddied streams of water that make purification difficult and costly. Thus the quality of Ghana’s water bodies has deteriorated remarkably. It has destroyed marine life, forests and farmlands with their fauna flora. In many cases, illegal miners redirect the courses of rivers in the process of mining but unfortunately do not bother to direct the rivers back to their original routes after their mining activities. Situations of this nature have resulted in hunger, poverty, and diseases in many African communities.

The aim of this paper is to investigate the efforts of pre-Christian Africa in environmental sustainability and the attitude of Christian Africa towards environmental sustainability. The paper seeks to explore the ways pre-Christian African people preserved the ecosystem and how and why Christian African people have destroyed the environment. In this paper, *pre-Christian* connotes Africa before the coming of Christianity and *Christian* denotes Africa after the coming of Christianity.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The paper employed the qualitative method and phenomenological approach. The qualitative method aimed to gather and analyse non-numerical data such as text for proper understanding of people’s own social reality, which includes their beliefs, attitudes and motivation, and those of others. It is used to explore complex phenomena or to acquire insight into people’s experiences and perspectives on a given issue. The qualitative method is important because it provides ample descriptions of intricate phenomena, clarifies the experience and interpretation of events and helps express the views of the voiceless. It helps to unearth the fundamental aims for people’s behaviour.

The phenomenological approach focuses on studying human experiences, particularly how individuals perceive and communicate their lived experiences. It investigates the day-to-day experiences of people without any predetermined assumption by the researcher about the phenomena. It interprets the people’s feelings, perceptions and beliefs to clarify the essence of the phenomena under investigation. This paper therefore analysed data and texts to evaluate the environmental sustainability of pre-Christian and Christian Africa and generate new ideas on the subject matter. It looks at experiences and perceptions of pre-Christian Africa and Christian African people on the sustainability of the environment.

## **PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Pre-Christian Africa and Environmental Sustainability**

#### ***The African Universe***

The African concept of the universe plays an important role in understanding how their beliefs and practices promote environmental sustainability. For Africans, the universe comprises both visible and invisible realities. They believe that the Supreme Being created the universe and continues to control and sustain it. By this, Africans see the universe and life within it in religious terms and so interpret everything in it religiously. Thus, the people’s assumptions, beliefs and interpretations of the universe – God, humankind, society and nature - are connected to the social, political and economic establishments and goals of the people. The people believe that the sacred reveals itself and permeates in and through all animate and inanimate nature.

It is important to note that Africans do not believe in the separation between the sacred and the mundane because in their interpretation of the universe, the visible world depends on the invisible world.

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<sup>3</sup> Terry Gifford, *John Muir: His Life and Letters and Other Writings* (London: Baton Wicks, 1996), 373.

In the universe, the spirit beings control the material world and so humans depend on the spirit beings for their needs; humans in turn feed the spirit beings.<sup>4</sup>

### ***African Traditional Beliefs and Practices on the Environment***

In accordance with their concept of the universe, Africans believe that the natural environment has life and so the natural environment is as important as human beings. African traditional communities accord respect for nature and interrelate with it. For them, all forms of life are given an innate value. As a result, they put into place strictures and taboos to conserve nature. In fact, among the Akans of Ghana, the seven traditional matrilineal clans are each represented by an animal (totem), which is treated like human beings in all respects. Such animals are not consumed by their respective clans. In the Australian Aboriginal concept, traditional owners are responsible for caring for the land and a deep sense of identity with their birthplace and their skin totems. The common saying, “This land is mine” is unknown among the Aboriginals; for them, it is, “This land is *me*”.

Taboos served as ecological guardians in traditional African communities. *Taboo* derives from the Polynesian term *tabu*. It literally means “forbidden”. Taboos are unrecorded or oral social rules that order the behaviour of a group of people. The constrictions regulate human social life; they also shape many elements of the local natural environment. Although we may not know the actual reasons for such constraints, locally, taboos help to preserve natural resources, species and ecosystems.<sup>5</sup>

Although the modern mind might not appreciate taboos, it is important to state that taboos have within them “germinant principles of social progress and moral order” therefore “the cornerstone of the whole social order”.<sup>6</sup> Thus taboos regulated and governed every part of the traditional African social system and served as the key that binds all the associations and dealings of the people. As Cassier shows, with time, religious leaders integrated taboos into religions and made obedience to them religious compulsory responsibilities.<sup>7</sup> It is important to note that African ancestors knew that the taboos played some psychological role that made compliance possible, at least, at the time.<sup>8</sup>

### ***Efforts of Pre-Christian Africa on Environmental Sustainability***<sup>9</sup>

Traditional African worldview on the human-earth relationship helps to sustain the environment. This worldview leads to African environmental ethics used to sustain the environment. This ethics connotes the interrelatedness of all creatures in the universe. Ogungbemi labels it as “ethics of nature-relatedness”.<sup>10</sup> He explains it as an ethic that makes humans co-exist peacefully with non-human forms of life and so treat non-human life forms with care and concern for their survival and sustainability. Tangwa calls this environmental ethics “eco-bio-communitarian”, which is the “recognition and acceptance of interdependence and peaceful coexistence between earth, plants, animals and humans.”<sup>11</sup> Twumasi-Ankrah draws attention to the important role the Akan worldview of human-earth interconnectedness has played in conserving the environment.<sup>12</sup> He explains that the Akan believe that their sustenance and survival in the world depends on the earth and so considers the earth as a goddess. It is a goddess because of its high value and therefore do everything to sustain it. For them, land is a scarce resource, limited in supply, a resource that humans cannot increase or expand. So, the human-

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Nweke Ezeanya, “God, Spirits and the Spirit World,” in *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs*, ed. Kwesi A Dickson and Paul Ellingworth ( London: Lutterworth, 1969), 30–46.

<sup>5</sup> Robert E Johannes, “Traditional Marine Conservation Methods in Oceania and Their Demise,” *Annual Review of Ecology and Systematics* 9 (1978): 349–64.

<sup>6</sup> Ernst Cassier, *An Essay on Man* ( New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

<sup>7</sup> Cassier, *An Essay on Man*. P. 108

<sup>8</sup> Yaw Adu-Gyamfi, “Indigenous Beliefs and Practices in Ecosystem Conservation: Response of the Church: Church and Environment,” *Scriptura: Journal for Contextual Hermeneutics in Southern Africa* 107, no. 1 (2011): 145–55.

<sup>9</sup> Adu-Gyamfi, “Indigenous Beliefs and Practices in Ecosystem Conservation: Response of the Church: Church and Environment.”

<sup>10</sup> Segun Ogungbemi, “An Africa Perspective on the Environmental Crisis,” in *Environmental Ethics: Readings in Theory and Application*, ed. Louis J. Pojman, 2nd ed. ( California: Wadsworth, 1997), 265–70.

<sup>11</sup> Godfrey B. Tangwa, “Some African Reflections on Biomedical and Environment Ethics,” in *A Companion to African Philosophy*, ed. Kwasi Wiredu (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 387–95.

<sup>12</sup> Emmanuel Twumasi-Ankrah, “Akan Worldview on Human-Earth Relations for Environmental Conservation in Ghana,” *The International Journal of Humanities & Social Studies*, August 28, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.24940/theijhss/2023/v11/i6/HS2306-028>.

earth relationship worldview of traditional Africa did well to sustain the land. This interconnectedness goes beyond the land; traditional Africans have value for animals. Investigations by Nkansah reveal that the Akan believe that animals experience pain and can express different kinds of emotions depending on how they are treated and related by humans. He explains that animals can be sad, moody, grieved and happy. He posits that when animals are inflicted with pain, the perpetrators suffer physical and spiritual consequences.<sup>13</sup> As a result, the Akan expect pets to be properly cared for and maintained by their owners.

Secondly, African traditional leaders sustained the ecosystem and development by using taboos to regulate the moral use of the environment. This is seen in their behaviour towards the land, forests, trees, waterbodies and game. First, pre-Christian Africans perceived land as sacred and a gift from the Supreme Being, which was to be sustained for past, present and future generations. Restrictions were made to make this possible. For example, farming was forbidden on some days to reduce overexploitation of the land. Second, sacred groves were created on forestland, water catchment areas, riverbeds and river edges. Taboos were enacted to keep people away from these areas to protect and sustain the ecosystem. Third, taboos were used to sustain trees. Knowing that tree leaves, roots and bark were used for medicine, depleting them would be a disaster for the community. In addition, to avoid depletion of trees such as cedars which were few, they were not allowed to be felled without the chief's or priest's knowledge and permission. The belief was that cutting such trees without the performance of some ritual would result in blood oozing from the caught tree. Fourth, taboos were used to sustain waterbodies. Some parts of waterbodies were declared sacred, resulting in the forbidding of fishing. Ultimately, these sections of the waterbodies became the breeding ground of the fishes. When these fishes leave these sacred areas to other parts of the river they are caught for food. Aside from sacredness, pre-Christian Africans adopted strategies. First, human dwellings were located more than half a mile away from rivers to avoid pollution of the waterbodies from household waste, which in turn prevented the spread of water-borne diseases. In addition, bathing, swimming and washing domestic animals were performed downstream far from where water was fetched for drinking. Fifth, taboos were used to sustain the game. Hunting in the forest was forbidden during those parts of the year when animals were believed to be procreating. In fact, it was a bad portent to kill a pregnant animal.

Thirdly, Agyarko and Cilliers show that African proverbs sayings, and myths play significant roles in ecosystem conservation.<sup>14</sup> They cite two Akan sayings “*Wo bu kɔtɔ kwasea a Nyame hwe wo to*” (“if you cheat the crab, your nakedness is exposed before God”) and “*Aboa a oni dua, Onyame na opra ne ho*” (God is the protector of tailless animals) to testify to the fact that non-human forms of life are not for just human consumption. They show that God cares for non-human forms of life just as he does for human beings. They cite a myth that has preserved monkeys in a village, Buabeng-Fiema, in the Bono Region of Ghana. Monkeys and human beings live in a 4.5 km<sup>2</sup> virgin forest because the myth indicates that the monkeys are sacred and so should not be killed. When a monkey dies it is buried in the same way that human beings are buried. A similar myth has kept crocodiles in Navrongo in northern Ghana. These myths provide “ontological relativeness of human and non-human forms of life.”<sup>15</sup>

Fourthly, these myths lead to totemism, which serves as a tool among Africans to conserve animals. It is used to assimilate animals into communities. Totem animals are considered as part of the community. It is believed that they have an ancestral connection with the tribe, clan, or community and that as patron spirits they protect the community from harm and guard them. It is believed that these animals are sources of good or bad fortunes to the community. As a result, the people accord them respect and make sure that they do not eat, kill, or trap these animals. These animals are integrated into the life of the community and become part of its history, culture, and supernatural and spiritual life.

Fifthly, African communities use farming methods to sustain the ecosystem. The Asante people adopt the method of bush fallowing. Each year they would clear a new area of land and farm on it. After one or two years, they would have harvested their food crops and allowed the land to fallow for some years before they would clear the land again for farming.

<sup>13</sup> Stephen Nkansah Morgan and Beatrice Okyere-Manu, “The Belief in and Veneration of Ancestors in Akan Traditional Thought: Finding Values for Human Well-Being,” 2020.

<sup>14</sup> Robert Owusu Agyarko, “God of Life,” *The Ecumenical Review* 65, no. 1 (March 4, 2013): 51–66, <https://doi.org/10.1111/erev.12026>.

<sup>15</sup> Agyarko, “God of Life.”

In sum, traditional African communities made every effort to sustain the environment. The use of ethics, taboos, sayings, myths and ethics serve as tools for the protection and nurturing of the ecology. They have helped Africans to respectfully coexist with non-human life forms and care for and protect the God-created earth.

## **Christian Africa and Environmental Sustainability**

### ***Teaching of the Bible***

As Fenshaw and Travis posit the two creation stories of Genesis 1 and 2 reveal the place of human beings in relation to the environment.<sup>16</sup> In Genesis 1, the name “Adam” relates to the Hebrew word *adamah*, which means earth, dust, or mud. Thus human beings are both “of” and “in” the earth as an environment. Genesis 2 shows that this human who is of and on the earth is also associated with the care and service of God’s garden. In addition, whilst the first account describes human beings as the image of God (*imago Dei*), the second account presents human beings as the image of the earth (*imago mundi*).

Psalms 24:1 and 115:16 clearly show that the environment belongs to both God and humankind. As Scott shows, it belongs to God because he made it and it belongs to humankind because God has given it to them.<sup>17</sup> This does not indicate ownership; humankind’s possession of the earth is leasehold, not freehold, therefore, humankind must not devastate the earth that has been entrusted to them to keep and preserve. Thus the Bible teaches stewardship of the environment. The creation account in Genesis defines humankind’s relationship with the created order in such a way that their responsible dominion is expressed in their care and respect for nature. Thus from a biblical viewpoint, God commissioned humans to be stewards of the created universe, implying ruling over, caring for and maximizing creation.<sup>18</sup> So Christians are responsible for managing the created order through care and respect for nature.

As Young opines, stewardship implies “delegated authority because only God has absolute authority and dominion”.<sup>19</sup> Dominion over nature does not imply ownership of nature and so entailed to exploit it but trust in humankind.<sup>20</sup> According to scripture dominion belongs to God (Job 25:2; Ps 22:28) and so humans’ dominion over nature is a delegated dominion. Thus humankind should think of their authority to care for creation as a function, extension, or derivative of God’s dominion. In other words, “God delegated responsibility to us, and we are responsible to the delegating authority for how we handle the charge”.<sup>21</sup> As Jakonda notes, from creation, man had been made a steward of the resources of the earth to manage it and to account to him. So, all resources are a trust from God, which lays a huge responsibility on human beings, particularly Christians who are the redeemed people.<sup>22</sup> The Church therefore has a great responsibility in the management of the environment.

This management or stewardship role suggests protection and fosterage. First, humankind has the entitlement to use natural resources for their sustenance or nourishment such as food, fuel, shelter clothing. However, the right should be used in a sustainable manner. The rules of modicum and thrift suggest human contentment with the satisfaction of immediate needs; human beings are to respect the integrity of non-human creation and acknowledge the interdependence of human and non-human creatures.<sup>23</sup> The second aspect of stewardship goes beyond sheer maintenance; human beings are to interact with the non-human world freely and creatively. This interaction allows for arts and crafts, science and technology, and diversity and novelty in creation. These make human beings “guardians” of nature.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Charles J. Fensham and Sarah Travis, “What on Earth Is Liturgy (Leitourgia)? Liturgy and Ecology,” in *The Church in God’s Household: Protestant Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ecology*, ed. Clive W. Ayre and Ernst M. Conradie (Pietermaritzburg, SA: Cluster, 2016), 10–30.

<sup>17</sup> John R.W. Stott, *Decisive Issues Facing Christians Today* (Michigan: Fleming H. Revell, 1990).

<sup>18</sup> Emmanuel Asante, *Stewardship: Essays on Ethics of Stewardship* (Accra: Wilas Press, 1999).

<sup>19</sup> Richard Young, *Healing the Earth: A Theocentric Perspective on Environmental Problems and Their Solution* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1994).

<sup>20</sup> Asante, *Stewardship: Essays on Ethics of Stewardship*.

<sup>21</sup> Young, *Healing the Earth: A Theocentric Perspective on Environmental Problems and Their Solution*.

<sup>22</sup> Sulaiman Z. Jakonda, *Your Kingdom Come: A Book on Wholistic Development* (Jos, Nigeria: RURCON, 2001).

<sup>23</sup> Lawrence Osborn, *Guardian of Creation: Nature in Theology and the Christian Life* (Leicester: Apollon, 1993).

<sup>24</sup> Osborn, *Guardian of Creation: Nature in Theology and the Christian Life*.

To achieve this, the Bible has taboos that guided the ancient Israelites toward the sustainability of the environment. First, there were taboos on animal welfare. Humans were commanded to ensure that animals had rest on the sabbath (Deut 5:14). In Lev 22:28, for sustainability purposes, it is regulated that animals and their young are not killed on the same day. In addition, for constancy of species, different kinds of animals were not to mate (Lev 19:19a). Second were taboos of the land. In the seventh year, the land was to lie fallow (Exod 23:10) so that cultivated land could rest and return important nutrients to the soil to allow bounty yield for a longer period of time. Third, the Bible has taboos on fruit trees (Lev 19:23-25). When an army besieged a city, it was forbidden to cut down fruit trees to sustain human health and preserve the trees (Deut 20:19-20). Fourth were taboos on birds. When a bird sat on its young or eggs, the mother and the young were not to be taken for the sustainability of the species (Deut 22:6-7). Compliance is “so that it may go well with you and you may have a long life” (v. 7). Fifth, there were taboos on environmental cleanliness:

Designate a place outside the camp where you can go to relieve yourself. As part of your equipment have something to dig with, and when you relieve yourself, dig a hole and cover up your excrement. For the Lord your God moves about in your camp to protect you and to deliver your enemies to you. Your camp must be holy, so that he will not see among you anything indecent and turn away from you. (Deut 23:12-14)

Clearly, the first four sets of taboos were towards environmental sustainability. The fifth taboo was about harmony that must exist between humankind and the environment. It showed the need to fight against indecency towards the environment and explained that cleanliness was one of the criteria for holiness.

### ***Christian Africa's Attitude towards Environmental Sustainability***

It is on record that Africa is becoming if it has not become, the centre of Christianity. While Christianity is declining in the West, it is flourishing in Africa. The Bible has, therefore, become a great tool in the hands of many Africans. It is quoted to defend one's actions and inactions. Therefore, one would expect Christian Africa to have been an effective agent for the sustainability of the environment. But sadly and unfortunately, Christian Africa has done little to sustain the environment. It is a fact that environmental carelessness has resulted in environmental degradation. African people, including Christians, have become adamant about environmental sustainability. The activities and attitudes of Christian Africans are appalling; they: (1) dump waste materials in streams, rivers and gutters; (2) throw away water sachets, banana and orange waste on the streets; (3) engage in illegal mining that has destroyed rivers, forests and farmlands; (4) ease themselves in rivers, the sea and gutters; (5) fell trees indiscriminately; (6) refuse to plant trees to replace the felling ones according to law; and (6) frown on environmental laws with impunity. Consequently, Africa experiences drought, diseases, poverty and the like. As Schaefer opines, “many water bodies have become unsafe for drinking, fishing, and swimming”.<sup>25</sup> In Christian Africa, people do not have any concern about the consequences of their actions toward the environment. Hardly would you see communities engaged in environmental exercises; clearing of bushes, silting gutters, and others have become nobody's job. It is extremely astonishing to see environmental decadence on a continent with a Christian majority with the Bible as its final authority. One may ask: Do Christians preach what the Bible teaches about the environment? What is the role of every individual Christian in sustaining the environment? Is the church embarking on activities to ensure a sustainable environment? Why the negative attitude and the neglect of the environment? Some attempts have been made to provide the answer.

### **Causes of the Negative Attitude of Christian Africa toward the Environment**

There may be many causes for the negative attitude of Christian African people toward the environment, some of which may be contemporary and remote. However, there are three causes that lie behind the many other causes – Western Christian hermeneutics and theology, Western philosophy and science, and Christian's neglect of traditional African practices on conservation.

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<sup>25</sup> Richard T. Schaefer, *Sociology: A Brief Introduction*, 10th ed. (New York: The McGraw-Hill, 2013).

### **Western Christian Hermeneutics and Theology**

The negative attitude of Christian Africa towards the environment is partly the result of Western Christian hermeneutics and theology. Western Christianity misinterpreted Gen 1:28. It understood dominion as domination. Dominion should be understood and interpreted metaphorically to mean stewardship. Thus, the command in Gen 1:28 should be interpreted in terms of caring, protecting, nurturing, gardening, cultivating, or serving, rather than in terms of domination or military conquest. It is the responsibility of human beings to tend the garden that God has entrusted to them for their care.<sup>26</sup>

The Western Christian doctrine of creation is found in the first clause of the Apostles' Creed – "I believe in God, the Father Almighty, creators of heaven and earth". The ecological crisis of the contemporary world can be understood by the meaning of the Western Christian doctrine derived from this clause. God gave the Bible to humankind by revelation. However, since nature is made by God, it is right to say that nature reveals the divine outlook. The religious study of nature in order to understand God was known as natural theology. In the early church, especially in the Greek East, it was the belief that God speaks to humankind symbolically through nature. For example, the ant is a message to the sluggard. However, by the 13th century, natural theology had a different meaning in the Latin West. It ceased to be the decoding of the physical symbols through which God communicates with humankind. In view of this, the rainbow ceased to be a symbol of hope sent to Noah. Natural theology rather became the effort to understand the mind of God by learning how his creation works.<sup>27</sup>

### **Western Philosophy and Science**

The misinterpretation of the Bible and wrong theology affected Western philosophy and science. Dualistic thinking of the West contributed to the destruction of the Earth. This dualism divided the world into heaven and earth, spiritual and material, male and female, mind and matter, reason and emotion, culture and nature. This concept attributed the first component of the duality to a position of superiority and more important than the second, which eventually led to the first dominating the second.<sup>28</sup> In the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, philosophers and scientists projected this dualism in medieval Christianity. As a result, Earth was perceived as a machine, God the great designer and human agents determine how the machine should work for the benefit and wellbeing of humankind. Traditionally, Earth and women were bracketed on the same side of the dualistic pairing. As such rights of Earth and women were not regarded as important. Because Earth is female, "Mother Earth" or "Mother Nature", it was subjugated and ill-treated and also denied a subject in its own right.<sup>29</sup>

Lynn White has indicated that humans cannot solve their ecological problems with more science and more technology. For him, "our science and technology have grown out of Christian attitudes toward man's relation to nature, which are almost universally held not only by Christians and neo-Christians but also by those who fondly regard themselves as post-Christians".<sup>30</sup> For Loader, the blame should not be on Christianity or biblical faith, but interpretation and modern Christianity's emphasis.<sup>31</sup> For his part, White claims, "especially in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropomorphic religion the world has seen".<sup>32</sup> He argues that Christianity based its anthropocentric way of thinking on Genesis where God created the world for the benefit of humankind and to rule, and so the primary intent of creation is to serve human purpose.<sup>33</sup> The idea that the Earth would be destroyed by God paved the way to environmental destruction. Mante suggests that the source of Africa's ecological crisis is the influence of Western theology and philosophy that African Christianity has had for many years. He indicates that knowingly or unknowingly, Christian theologians in Africa have acceded to a kind of theological

<sup>26</sup> Ernst M. Conradie, *An Ecological Christian Anthropology: At Home on Earth?* (London: Ashgate, 2005).

<sup>27</sup> Lynn White Jr, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," *Western Man and Environmental Ethics*, 1973, 18–30.

<sup>28</sup> Norman C. Habel, "Introducing the Earth Bible," in *Reading From the Perspective of Earth*, ed. Norman C. Habel (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 25–37.

<sup>29</sup> Habel, "Introducing the Earth Bible."

<sup>30</sup> White Jr, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis."

<sup>31</sup> James A Loader, "Image and Order: Old Testament Perspectives on the Ecological Crisis," *Are We Killing God's Earth*, 1987, 6–28.

<sup>32</sup> White Jr, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis."

<sup>33</sup> White Jr, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis."

ontology that has molded their theological methodologies. As a result, they are unable to see ecological matters as of great significance in their theological construction.<sup>34</sup>

### **Christianity's Negative Attitude Toward Traditional African Beliefs and Practices**

Belhag and El-Kabir indicate that the Christian missionaries to Africa “condemned African customs and institutions and taught social norms of nineteenth-century Europe as though they crystallized a moral code of universal validity”.<sup>35</sup> Thus the Europe-made Christianity led to the negative attitude of the African Church toward traditional beliefs and practices, even those that were to preserve the environment. Garbrah, in my view, is right that the environmental crisis in Africa is due to the arrival of religious groups including Christianity which failed to appreciate the minds of the ancestors on their methods of nature preservation of the environment.<sup>36</sup> The Africans’ view of creation helped to ensure respect for the world of nature and to promote sustainable renewable natural resources. However, the introduction of non-traditional religions including Christianity undermined the taboos and other practices which ecologically were sound and useful.<sup>37</sup> The Western philosophy and science which influenced Western Christianity and the latter’s misinterpretation of Scripture made the missionaries stamp out taboos that eventually destroyed the forests.<sup>38</sup>

The Western missionaries’ negative attitude toward indigenous beliefs and practices has affected our environmental conservation methods, which has destroyed the ecosystem and continues to persist. Pentecostalism, charismaticism, and neo-prophetism have worsened the case. Adherents of these Christian groups see traditional beliefs and practices as demonic and frown on taboos that sustain the environment. In addition, their belief in having the Holy Spirit led them to challenge traditional authority. In fact, they violate traditional regulations to demonstrate the work and power of the Holy Spirit. Kiros goes far as to say that the African farmer’s refusal to cut down trees from the forest expresses economic foolishness. He argues that it is better to fall the trees to feed the hungry.<sup>39</sup> His condemnation is unjustifiable without exploring the rational explanations for the African’s taboos to sustain the ecosystem. As Agyarko and Cilliers show, African Pentecostals and Charismatics believe that non-human forms of life are meant to serve humans and be consumed by them.<sup>40</sup>

In sum, White may be right when he posits that Christianity’s destruction of pagan animism has paved the way for humankind’s onslaught and shameless exploitation of a desacralised earth, which gave away its guest spirit that it earlier hosted in its natural objects and which had formerly protected the earth from humankind’s ruthless exploitation. By displacing the guardian spirits in mountains, forests, and rivers, which were revered, “Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feeling of natural objects”.<sup>41</sup>

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The discussion has shown that pre-Christian traditional Africa did much toward the preservation of the environment. It challenges the Church in Africa to do much in environmental preservation. As a way forward, first, as Conradie indicates, there should be “an act of repentance on our part and a renewed attempt to view ourselves, one another, and the world around us within the perspective of the divine design for creation”.<sup>42</sup> African Christians need a deep change of heart that leads to a change in lifestyle, which in turn would lead to sustainable forms of consumption and production. Thus a true conversion in Christ allows people to change the way they think and act.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>34</sup> J. O. Y. Mante, *Africa Theological and Philosophical Root of Our Ecological Crisis* ( Accra: Son Life Press, 2004).

<sup>35</sup> Ramadan S Belhag and Yassin A El-Kabir, *Christian Missionarism and the Alienation of the African Mind* ( Tripoli: Dar Iqra, 1986).

<sup>36</sup> Benjamin Worabea Garbrah, “The Ecological Implications of Some Akan Traditional Religions Practices and Festival,” *Trinity Journal of Church and Theology* 10, no. 1/2 (2000): 63–73.

<sup>37</sup> Garbrah, “The Ecological Implications of Some Akan Traditional Religions Practices and Festival.”

<sup>38</sup> Jacob F. A. Ajayi, *Christian Missions in Nigeria 1841-1891* ( London: Longman, 1965).

<sup>39</sup> Tedros Kiros, *Moral Philosophy and Development: The Human Condition in Africa* (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1992).

<sup>40</sup> Agyarko, “God of Life.”

<sup>41</sup> White, “Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis,” 1205-1206.

<sup>42</sup> Agyarko, “God of Life.”

<sup>43</sup> Conradie, *An Ecological Christian Anthropology: At Home on Earth?*



Second, the Church must take hermeneutics and theology seriously. It must interpret Gen 1:28 in terms of stewardship: caring, protecting, nurturing, gardening, cultivating, or serving. In addition, “the radical affirmations of the Christian faith offer the only hope for the total healing of the environment”.<sup>44</sup> This is because the Christian faith helps to redefine one’s attitude towards nature. The Christian faith provides basic interpretative stories of who humans are, what nature is, where humans have come from and where humans are going after here.

Third, the Church in Africa must promote environmental awareness at all social levels. The Church has the required leadership for moral transformation and has human, material and network resources to effectively address environmental challenges.<sup>45</sup> The Church must engage itself regularly in outreach programmes that propagate the message of the preservation of the environment. It must teach its members to value the environment by desisting from attitudes such as the arbitrary felling of trees and mining techniques that destroy forests, waterbodies and farmlands.

Fourth, the Church should change its negative attitude towards African environmental taboos. After all, the Bible has many such taboos for the preservation and sustainability of the environment. African environmental taboos are not necessarily evil; they are agents of environmental preservation.

Fifth, African intellectuals should not borrow wholesale Western philosophy and science and totally neglect their traditional beliefs and practices. They should not think that everything in Western philosophy and science is good. They should be bold to reject the bad things in them and embrace, promote and practice the good ideas of traditional African beliefs and practices to sustain the environment.

## CONCLUSION

According to the study, human beings are the primary causal agents of environmental decadence, as some people have become reluctant to adhere to activities that help to preserve the environment from annihilation. This situation puts a question mark on the Christianity that is being practiced in Africa today. The study shows that if people were demonstrating what the Bible teaches about the environment, environmental challenges would not have been a problem for Africans. It also highlights that the African good values and practices that were left behind by the ancestors to preserve nature should be examined to learn from them. To Christian African people a tree is just a tree. The idea of a sacred grove is foreign to both Christianity and the tenets of the West. Over the years Christian missionaries and contemporary African Christians have destroyed sacred groves. They do so because for them the African traditional belief that nature has spirit is idolatrous. African Christians should know that environmental sustainability depends on their ideas of the human-nature relationship. It is time African Christians sat up to make sure all efforts are made to heal the wounds of the environment.

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<sup>44</sup> Young, *Healing the Earth*, 282.

<sup>45</sup> Jacklyn Cock, “Christian Witness and Ecology,” *International Review of Mission* 83, no. 328 (1994): 89–92.

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