

## Christocentric Ecotheology and Climate Change

By  
 Ezichi A. Ituma, PhD  
*Department of Religion and Cultural Studies*  
*University of Nigeria, Nsukka*

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### Abstract

Christocentric ecotheology is a concept that examines ecological phenomena from Christian theological perspective. This research was therefore required to examine the theological implications of climate change with the aim of bridging the gaps between theological and scientific interpretation of the events. Comparative phenomenological methodology was adopted in view of the fact that theological interpretations of events needed to be compared with scientific ideas so as to ascertain the meeting point. The research noted that the areas of variance between theological beliefs and climate change are as a result of wrong interpretation of theological events.

### Introduction

Christocentric ecotheology is a religious concept that addresses ecological problems from Christian religious approach. According to Unitingearthweb (2008) "Ecotheology is a form of constructive theology that focuses on the interrelationships of religion and nature, particularly in the light of environmental concerns. Ecotheology generally starts from the premise that a relationship exists between human religious/spiritual worldviews and the degradation of nature."<sup>1</sup> With the Christian concept of ethereal heaven, the home of the faithful, many Christian adherents seem to care less for the *transient world*. This may have aroused Al Gore's question, cited in Santmire (2000), "Why does it feel faintly heretical to a Christian to suppose that God is in us as human beings? Why do our children believe that the Kingdom of God is up, somewhere in the ethereal reaches of space, far removed from this planet?"<sup>2</sup> The concept of the ethereal kingdom is so strong in the Christians, who may have interpreted some portions of the Bible out of context therefore becoming too heaven-conscious, while sometimes paying less attention to the world. But with the concept of ecotheology there is a re-awakening of interest on the earth in consonance with the biblical position "the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof." This research therefore builds on the premise that the encompassing reality of climate change observed as "global warning" is a problem that should concern every school of thought, religious

or scientist, if lasting solution is to be proffered. It is not the climatologist alone or the enlightened community that is affected. It is a problem that affects everybody. Such problem that affects everybody requires that concerted effort be adopted to find its solution. It is naivety to pretend that the greenhouse effect is a problem that will be solved only by the scientist. Such will be a mistake that will yield adverse effect, more devastating than the problem that is currently facing humanity. The theologian must therefore lend his voice to proffer solution. All hands must be on deck before the present climatic epidemic turns out a religious nightmare called “hell fire” advertised in the religious books. But the present trend of liberal and philosophical theological mindset is observed in endless arguments on the purpose of man on earth from the standpoint of one who wants to extricate God from all intellectual dispositions. H. Paul Santmire has identified two most formidable schools of thought in ecotheology as reconstructionist and apologists,<sup>3</sup> each towing lines of endless arguments why a new course of biblical interpretation must be extricated from the traditional hermeneutics. The reconstructionists, identified with McFague, hold that the cosmos is the body of God, therefore everything is the sacrament of God. Santmire represents the core of the apologists as an anthropological framework that accents the idea of good stewardship, insisting that human beings must “manage our resources” regardless of God’s mandate. Santmire himself has diffused these views thus “The reconstructionists fail to connect with the core convictions of the Christian community, while the apologists fail to address that community’s need for a theology of nature shaped by central Christian faith commitments.”<sup>4</sup> Whether reconstructionists or apologists, none would deny the fact that Christians need to come to terms with the global environmental crisis. It is proper at this point to note that neither the reconstructionists nor the apologists represents the Christian faith. Solution must be proffered, practical terms as against a eulogy of imminent coming of Christ to usher in a different world of bliss. Christians will need to live here on this imperfect earth to prepare for the perfect earth yet to come. Until that perfect earth of bliss comes this present earth must remain habitable. This is God’s creation. Christian theology recognizes the active participation of God in ecological redemption and sustenance. God is very interested in the earth. The earth is the Lord’s and everything in it (Psalm 24.1).

It is also unfortunate to observe that the complacency in many African societies as well as the near-mythologized approach of the religious societies concerning climate change is worrisome. Many Africans think the global warming is a problem created by the Westerners and therefore should be solved by the Westerners. Some other Africans think that the problem is such a complex scientific issue that only those technologically and scientifically advanced societies

can solve it. These are erroneous positions that should be corrected and this paper is poised to achieve that.

The aim of this paper is to establish that biblical Ecotheology from African perspective can go a long way to proffering solution to the global warming. It stands on the matrix that Africans are not passive recipients of Jewish Christianity and Western technology. Africans are very active in these cultures, receiving and contextualizing. The paper insists that it could be far reaching to realize that in the African society man as a cognate entity exists in a series of integrated relationship. It is African culture for human beings to interact healthily with the super humans – spirits, divinities and ancestors as well as animate and inanimate creation. Any upset of this equilibrium brings untold hardship that could be very devastating and calamitous.

Africans can contribute their quota in an African way to solving the environmental problem of climate change. There is African approach to ecological theology on the matrix of which climate problems could be positively addressed. This establishes the genuineness of African initiative in ecotheology and takes its bearing from there to address the climatic change. Akumu, in Okeowo (2007), is of the opinion that "There's not much Africa can do — unless other countries cut their greenhouse emissions, our efforts will be undercut."<sup>5</sup> However, this paper insists that Africans can do so much if theological approach is given adequate attention. For example, Africans are highly religious. It is all a good approach to turn their religious energy into religious implications of disregarding divine injunctions which results in disasters. If the warnings of the African meteorologists are religiously heeded to, it is obvious that closed drainage systems will be opened up for the flood to have its course. Surprisebaba (2012) noted that on Sunday 22<sup>nd</sup> July 2012 Gangare, Tundun Osi, Anguwan Rogo and Kwanan areas of Jos metropolis was hit by heavy rain disaster - 38 dead, 50 missing, as floods wreak havoc in Jos – it is said that the people were warned quite early that heavy rainfall should be expected so people should clear the drainage systems that had been blocked, that warning was disregarded.<sup>6</sup> But if the religious implications of such warning are highlighted, the Africans who are highly religious will follow every possible step to averting the disaster. Even the rate at which Africans represent their religious zeal abroad could influence the Developed nations to approach ecological warnings with seriousness. To a large extent, it is a matter of appealing to the conscience of human beings to do the right thing. The nonchalant attitude to the ecological warning, observed in Jos, may not be unconnected with the concept of *paradise-bound* as against an interest in the world. According to Robinson (2005) the Islamic theology holds to the ethereal Janna<sup>7</sup> for the faithful. Another report of destruction by flood was made on 11<sup>th</sup> September 2012 within the same Northern Nigeria by Asemota (2012) that, "No fewer than two lives were lost and property worth about N27 million lost to flood that affected over 500 houses." The report, according to Asemota (2012)

continued, the Chairman of the committee set up by the Daura Local Government Area, Katsina State to assess the level of damage of the flood, Jafaru, “noted that most of the affected houses were built on waterways, appealed to people to desist from erecting structures or dumping refuse on the waterways.”<sup>8</sup> The Chairman of Transition Management Committee of the local government, Kabir Musa Royal received the report and concluded with prayer that God may prevent a recurrence of the disaster. Meanwhile the investigation committee had noted that houses were built on water ways. The drainage system was also obstructed because people were dumping refuse on the waterways. So, religion has been brought into the matter. If religion must be brought into every ecological disaster it is necessary that religion experts should find a way of re-interpreting parts of sacred writings that bear ecological instructions. This is what this paper is advocating. It is only in this way that the African, who is very religious, can partner with the scientist to reduce the problems of the greenhouse effect.

### **Climate change**

Climate change describes “the variability or average state of the atmosphere or average weather over time scales ranging from decades to millions of years.”<sup>9</sup> This is not a new phenomenon. Just as weather changes day by day the climate also changes though noticeable over a long period of time – decades to millions of years. These changes could be caused by natural processes or by human activities. Over the long period of the history of the world the earth has gone through series of climate changes.

What becomes a problem in climate change is an accumulated body of noticeable evidence creating a reasonable impact on the habitat within a short space of time. Climate change could cause a decrease or increase in the surface temperature over a long period of time.

There is an overwhelming consensus among scientists that the globe is experiencing rapid climatic change. The change is very significant because its effects are felt noticeably around the globe. There is increase in temperature, ice caps are melting faster, hurricanes, and other natural disaster are experienced in various parts of the globe quite regularly and thousands of people are already becoming climatic change refugees. World Health Report 2002 says that “climate change was estimated to be responsible in 2000 for approximately 2.4% of worldwide diarrhea, and 6% of malaria in some middle-income countries. Epidemics of weather and climate-sensitive infectious diseases such as malaria and meningitis will have a devastating effect on human health and socio-economic development and severely overburden health systems in many parts of the world.”<sup>10</sup> These are the express effects of climate change as observed in the world. But for some Christian faithful to interpret the global warming as the destruction of the earth by fire and subsequent hellfire is quite understandable. The Bible has said so much about the destruction of the earth by fire and the hellfire that awaits the unrepentant human being. Those Christians who are disgusted with injustice, corruption and other unchristian lifestyle in the world will definitely

want to see the realization of the biblical concept of destruction by fire. But these events, whatever they represent, cannot be interpreted in the literal forms that such Christians want them to be interpreted. Besides, the “earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof.”

### **Greenhouse Effect**

It has been said that the present climate change is caused mainly by the greenhouse effect. The greenhouse effect is not a hypothetical ideology. It is such a practical experience that could be explained even from our daily experiences. It describes the trapping in of solar energy in the surface earth due to the blanketing gaseous layer in the atmosphere. It could be described in simpler terms with examples from daily experiences in a greenhouse experiment.

A glasshouse will usually allow sunlight into the house. But this trapped sun energy does not leave the house at the rate it came in. In fact much of the energy is trapped inside. This trapped energy causes the house to heat up. The same experience is observed when a car is packed in the sun. Because the glasses are wind up sunlight goes into the care. Once absorbed the solar energy is trapped inside the car making the car to be very hot. If the glasses are wind down the solar energy easily escapes into the atmosphere outside the car.

Greenhouse gases include water vapour, carbon dioxide, methane, nitrous oxide and certain industrial gases. They allow sunlight enter the atmosphere. Once this sunlight reaches the earth surface it is released back into the atmosphere. Some of the energy passes back into the space but much of it still remains trapped inside.<sup>11</sup> “Over time, if atmospheric concentrations of greenhouse gases remain relatively stable, the amount of energy sent from the sun to the earth’s surface should be about the same as the amount of energy radiated back into space, leaving the temperature of the earth’s surface roughly constant.”<sup>12</sup> There is an order or arrangement of things which naturally sustains stability in the atmospheric concentration of greenhouse gases. However, if this natural order is upset then the consequences will be atmospheric imbalance.

### **Global Warning**

It has already been observed that climate change could bring about increase or decrease in global temperature. Temperature change could fluctuate but the average will usually be expected to be relatively stable. If there is a noticeable average increase it becomes global warming. Global warming may not always be a point of deep concern except where it becomes worrisomely obvious. Lindinger (2010) has noted that the global problem “is not only about how much the earth is warming, it is also about how fast it is warming.”<sup>13</sup> The rate of increase of global warming is becoming a serious threat to human life. Scientists have noted that “out of the 20 warmest years on record, 19 have occurred since 1980. The three hottest years ever observed

have all occurred in the last eight years, even.”<sup>14</sup> It is also on record that “the world has warmed 0.74<sup>0</sup>C in the past hundred years and scientists are clear that the world will get warmer this century due to further increase in greenhouse gas concentrations. Global average temperature is forecast to rise 4<sup>0</sup>C (7.2<sup>0</sup>F) towards the end of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.”<sup>15</sup>

### **The Meeting Point of Science and Religion in Ecotheology**

Science is human beings’ effort to explain, through systematic observation and empirical means, God’s infinite design. The more human beings enquire into the profundity of the unknown, the more they realize that there are so much unknown, and the more they want to know the unknown. By divine enablement, called knowledge, human beings could grab, though very insignificantly little, relative to what is unknown, God’s design that human beings call nature. God has given human beings the command; “Be faithful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it” (Gen.1:28). The English Version that has “subdue” is not a better interpretation. It has been shown, by Jewish parallelism that both expressions “fill the earth” and “subdue it” convey the same idea. It is therefore a poetic repetition of thought. In this case it means to be in full grip of the earth or to control events on earth. It is an adumbration of Genesis 2.15, “The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.” For human beings to take care of the creation, this divine declaration confers on them the ability to understand creation. Therefore the “subdue it” clause confers on human beings the ability to study natural phenomena and to take advantage of the knowledge to restructure a better environment for living things, including human beings and other living beings. This knowledge could be called science, technology, philosophy, or whatever human beings choose to call it. Both the living and the non-living beings are there to fill some gap so as to sustain stability in the world. By the knowledge of this divine empowerment human beings are able to simulate the creation of God to achieve some scientific goals. Consider the ship, for example, it is a simulation of the fish; aeroplane is a simulation of the birds of the air. Even the computer is a simulation of the human brain and its environment.

### **God, a Perfect Designer**

God has created nature, designing some recycling process which maintains the equilibrium. There is nothing that human beings can create out of nothing. Human beings rather recycle natural or divine creation to sustain ecological effects. God has put the greenhouse effect in place, for example, to ensure that life continues. Thilo Kunzemann (2010) Seen from space, “our atmosphere is but a tiny layer of gas around a huge bulky planet. But it is this gaseous outer ring and it’s misleadingly called greenhouse effect that makes life on earth possible”<sup>16</sup> God in his

wisdom has designed some processes to maintain equilibrium. When the sunlight reaches the earth, passing through the blanket of greenhouse gases the solar energy is sent back into the atmosphere. The greenhouse gases will usually allow some of the energy to escape back into the space while some are trapped in the atmosphere. The reduction of the level of greenhouse gases accumulation through photosynthesis and other natural processes are divine arrangement to allow some level of anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions without upsetting the atmospheric equilibrium or nature balance. When this is done the temperature of the earth's surface remains relatively constant.

### **Man, an Imperfect Maintainer**

The Christian theology presents human beings as custodians of God's creation. The implication is that human beings are expected to maintain creation and to be accountable to God for whatever goes wrong in creation. That human beings are custodians is an indication that things can go right or wrong depending on the activities of human beings. The divine declaration that creation is "very good" (Gen 1:3) is an indication that nature by itself is not created to work against human beings. It is the mismanagement of nature that results in artificial or man-caused disaster.

Against the idea of "control" or "be in charge" as the right interpretation of Gen 1:28 human beings read "domination" and end up exploiting the earth. By exploiting the earth human beings exploit themselves. It is wrong for one to exploit oneself. The earth was created for God's glory and not for man's glory. It is in the process of promoting God's glory that human beings derive joy in God's creation. Respect for nature is a result of respect to God. Custody rather than manipulation should be the watch word in scientific experimentation if the idea of exploitation of nature is to be removed. The present technological manipulation of a recalcitrant environment is not the purpose of God and is eventually working against human beings.

### **Ecotheology**

Ecotheology is a combination of the terms, ecology and theology. It stems from the understanding that the natural world is God's creation and good. In the human society God has allowed three laws to guide interdependence. These include the Revealed Law, the Natural Law and the Conventional Law. There are highlights to these laws in the Christian scriptures. Conventional Law refers to customs which could be enforced by a court or, at least, form the basis of litigation.<sup>17</sup> Natural Law refers to the understanding of inherent principles in the nature of things which can be observed by rational creatures in the light of reason.<sup>18</sup> Divine Law is a particular disclosure about the way human beings can find favour with God and as a result

maintain good relationship with fellow human beings. Christian theology maintains that divine law culminates in the incarnation. The Bible itself becomes the written deposit of divine revelation which contains divine law. Jesus is the incarnate God, therefore represents divine law. Obedience and submission of one's will to Jesus is obedience to divine law.

Ecotheology is the use of Judeo-Christian theology to examine the implications of contemporary ecology for human action. It seeks how ethical principles of theological could sustain nature as a stable equilibrium. The matrix of this position is always that nature was created by God and declared good and that human beings were basically required to take care of creation to God's glory. Ecotheology combines the principles of natural law, moral law, ecopurist, moral theology, theology of nature, environmental and bioethics. The two main purview of Ecotheolgy are nature and God. The being referred to as God is the Creator of all things in heaven and on earth. God is the source of all beings – animate and inanimate, visible and invisible. Creation belongs to him. He demands worship from human beings. He is unchallengeable, and unchangeably sovereign in creation. "Since he is not open to direct observation, a meaningful account of him can only be given by indicating at each point his relation to ourselves and the world we know"<sup>19</sup>

Therefore, ecotheology is a theological standpoint that the earth is God's sacred design and should be protected, cared for and managed in an orderly and most circumspect manner that depicts the fear of God. It maintains that managing the earth in an orderly manner should first and foremost be with the premise to glorify God. Secondly it is necessary so that human actions do not tantamount to creating imbalance in God's design. Thirdly deviance in protecting God's design may result to a chaotic and disastrous situation in the environment. It is like a man who insists on breaking the law of gravity. He climbs the telecommunication mast; he then jumps off the pick of the mast. By the time he crashes on the ground he only succeeded in breaking himself and not the law of gravity that he insists on breaking.

God created the earth and left in the hands of human beings to manage. If human beings manage the earth very well they enjoy the goodies of the earth. If they become ecological despots and insist on exploiting the earth, they suffer untold consequences which could result in a climatic "hellfire", very devastating and disastrous. The Bible maintains, "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein" (Psalms 24:1). It is fallacious and unbiblical to see the earth as a corrupt satanic abode. It is the human activities that are corrupt and desecrating to God's orderly and sacred design.

### **Morality of Human Actions**

By God's injunction human beings are required to care and protect the earth. Every godly measure that is adopted by science must be zealously pursued. There is nothing wrong that science pursues scientific issues empirically. The earth itself is empirical. God has made nature to be natural and not supernatural. Yet, God himself is supernatural. We cannot bring God into our experimental laboratory for scientific examination. This does not mean He no longer permits our scientific enquiries. If a man is hungry, for example, he gets some food. He does not go to pray that God should remove the hunger. This is a simple biological function which God Himself has put in place. If, however, human beings find it difficult to resolve human problem the Bible requires that he should go to God who Himself is quite willing and ready to provide answer to the problem. That he prays to God to help him does not mean he drops aside his mental reason and application of knowledge; this comes from God and is required by God. In fact, this God-given potential enables him to become more inquisitive. At the end he is able to discover or invent a measure that helps him to solve mundane problems. It is unscientific to refuse to acknowledge the superiority and initiative of God in scientific enquiries. Great minds think because God has made them great in thought. That a particular scientist refuses to acknowledge God does not remove God from being God. That does not also mean that there are no great scientists who acknowledge God. Conversely there are those who are neither scientific nor enlightened who do not acknowledge God. The problem of not knowing God is not a problem of a selected class of philosophical individuals but a general problem of the human heart. Yet those who know their God shall be strong and do exploit while those who do not know their God shall be weak and be exploited.

The morality of human actions requires that human beings justify the purpose of their actions in a divine context. Both actions and their purpose must be examined in the divine writ. It was human actions that brought the diluvium judgement of Genesis 7. It was also human actions that brought the post diluvium covenant of blessings and protection in Genesis 8:21f. If human actions are not controlled not only will they bring disaster to themselves and this will be theologically interpreted as attracting God's judgement on themselves.

Common terms in ecotheology include balance and harmony in nature, sacredness, sustainability, health, integrity and stewardship. But these concepts are not new ideas in human philosophy. Fitzsimmons (2000) has observed that "The concepts of balance and harmony in nature have a lengthy history. Ecological historian Frank Egerton observed that Herodotus addressed these ideas as early as 450BC."<sup>20</sup> On the other hand "One bio religionist argues that what is needed is a 'treaty' or spiritual bond between ourselves and the natural world similar to God's covenant with creation after the flood."<sup>21</sup> J. Michael Beers has remarked that "A good steward does not coddle the resources entrusted to him and let them lie fallow and undeveloped.

Rather, he uses them, develops them and, most appropriately attempts to the best of his ability to realize their increase so that he may enjoy his livelihood and provide stewardship for the good of his family and other dependents.”<sup>22</sup>

### **African Insight**

The African is religiously ubiquitous. He sees God is everything. Though this was spoken from a pejorative sense and may have its shortfalls one may note that such position could still enable the African to impact positively on a climatic changing environment. The climate change is a very serious issue that is fast driving man into his doom. The present problem is largely human and human could also go a long way to solving the problem. If the African, in his usual way of observing sacredness observes respect in the creation of God obviously he would be contributing a lot in solving the problem at stake. In fact, Africans are known to have held to the sacredness of nature. It was the European missionary who taught the African that the sacred could be exploited and desecrated. It was the European missionary who taught the African that respect for nature divinities were useless, hopeless, fetish and a result of ignorance. The fear and respect for natural laws as well as ecological justice disappeared into the tin air of religious emancipation. Indiscriminate burning down of forests that ordinarily lay fallow for many years and ecological exploitation that formed taboo in African socio-economic life were given up for what was called civilization and enlightenment.

However, the African is not encouraged to worship natural objects, which itself forms hyper-ecotheology. This term means “finding God Himself in nature – much less substituting God with nature itself.”<sup>23</sup> Besides, the individualistic Western approach to life that has been imported is very alien and unfriendly to the African society. The African is therefore called upon to respect nature and natural order as he initially did and to restore sacredness in his relationship with the environment. This will enable him to see the exploitation of nature as wrong and ungodly. Godliness requires a respect to God’s order.

### **Recommendations**

- i. A change in the pattern of industrialization must be adopted to reduce the anthropogenic emission of Greenhouse gases. This requires a new approach to industrialization which could adopt a revolution to solar energy.
- ii. Regulating International Body should be instituted to control industrial emissions which increase the greenhouse gases.

- iii. African theologians should give new orientation to the pastors on a better understanding of hell fire concept and to adopt a proactive approach to global warming.
- iv. The theologian should bring a better understanding to the “dominion and subdue” concepts of Genesis to stop further manipulation of the earth as if every item in the world is there for the *benefit* of human beings.

## Conclusion

Human beings have been created and kept in the world not to destroy it but to keep it. This is the essence of christocentric ecotheology. If human beings obey God and respect natural order the world will remain very habitable. While the scientist is called upon to study the natural order, without exploiting it, knowledge will increase and this acquired knowledge will be used to take care of nature. Nature should not be seen as being hostile to human beings. It is the activities of human beings that will become hostile to human beings. Global warming, being the result of rapid climate change, could be addressed and with time order could be created. If the scientist is working hard to restore order and the religionist tows a line of destruction, with the mindset that God is being challenged by science, order may not be returned in the near future. The religionist is called to see natural order as God’s design and to respect it in a way that God will be glorified. The African is also encouraged to use his God-given dedication to respect natural order of things so as to contribute his quota to reduce the global warming and to bring stability in atmospheric order. It does not, however, call for worship of natural order as the African did in the ancient past.

## Endnotes

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<sup>17</sup>cf. "Law" New Dictionary of theology (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1998) p.377

<sup>18</sup>Ibid

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<sup>20</sup>Allan Fitzsimmons, (2000) "Ecological Confusion among the Clergy" *Journal of Markets & Morality*, Volume 3, Number 2, Fall 2000, [www.acton.org](http://www.acton.org), Assessed June 12, 2009

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Professor R. U. Onunwa

Professor Malchy I. Okwueze

Professor