

## Religious Attitudes and Public Pro-Environmental Behaviour in Sub-Saharan Africa: Perspectives from Previous Research and Future Research Directions

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### Abstract

*Scholars and practitioners have increasingly postulated that the growth of Christian churches in the SSA presents an untapped opportunity to leverage the government's efforts in the fight against the degradation of natural resources. However, a systematic review of the empirical literature is lacking to uncover gaps related to the role that churches play in influencing pro-environmental attitudes and behaviour. This paper, based on a systematic review on the role of religious institutions towards environmental conservation explored trends on research on religion and involvement in environmental conservation; assessed theories and theoretical gaps over previous research that assessed the role of religious beliefs toward environmental degradation, analyzed how religious-based organizations contribute to environmental conservation and evaluated gaps in knowledge emerging from previous research and define future research direction particularly concerning theoretical, conceptual and methodological relevance particularly for governments within Sub-Saharan Africa. Results of the review indicate that two theories, that is the white theory and resource mobilization theory have predominantly informed previous empirical research related to the role of the church in environmental conservation. Previous research on the role of religion and environmentalism was dominated by scholars from the west. Integration of religion in development plays a great role thus policies can be formulated from the outcome of this review. Different scholars reported that women with religious beliefs were more willing to practice public pro-environmental behaviour than those without; theological education had significantly influenced environmental values thus leading to conservation. Future research directions relevant to the context of SSA environmental conservation are discussed in the paper.*

**Keywords:** *Environmental degradation, religiosity, pro-environmental attitudes, environmental conservation, Sub-Saharan Africa*

## **Introduction**

During the last 50 years, unprecedented environmental degradation has continued to pose threat to human civilization and socio-economic development. Global warming, loss of biodiversity, desertification, extreme climate change events, ocean degradation, loss of soil fertility, river pollutions and soil erosion, have been on the rise. It is projected that during the last 50 years, the world has experienced global warming, environmental degradation and loss of biodiversity more than any other time in the history of humanity. This systematic review paper examines the role of the church in mitigating the environmental crisis facing humanity, the theories that have informed interventions by the church, and lessons learnt that can inform the integration of faith to support government efforts in confronting environmental degradation.

## **Religious Role in Environmentalism**

There have been numerous calls for religious institutions to mitigate environmental crises globally and world leaders, as well as academicians, are looking for an appropriate solution. According to Hand and Crowe (2012), the religious role in the environmental crisis has been intensively discussed in the United States of America. The impact of the crisis hates hands in all sectors. The solution likewise is sought in every sector of human development. The United Nation has expressed interest on the role of religion in environmental conservation and have funded encouraged research and publication on this area. There has been a wake-up call that religious leaders and religion should play a very great role in environmental concerns. Religion has always emphasized human and natural harmony. The religious leaders have always pushed their faithful's to always observe environmental justice and practice environmental stewardship among other issues (Tsimpo & Wodon, 2016).

Sachdeva (2017) on the other hand sought to understand the role of sacredness in religion among the Indian community while studying its influence on saving the most sacred river from pollution and found no relationship between the sacred and conservation. Religion for a long time has been a tool for development. Historically modern civilization arose from religious involvement in development matters within the community. Modern social-economic devotion in African can be traced from missionaries and discoverers from developed nations. Religion was a tool through which the governors from Europe penetrated Africa.

## **Overview of literature review**

Environmental problems in the Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) region have worsened during the last twenty years with increasing rates of deforestation, soil erosion, desertification, and air

and water pollution threatening to reverse the region's investments to fight against poverty spearheaded by the church. United Nations demographic projections suggest that the rates of urbanization in the SSA region will be among the highest in the next 20 decades. Most cities and towns cannot treat wastewater because their rates of wastewater generation overwhelm the treatment capacity of treatment systems and thus, most sewerage ends in rivers while other surface water is partially treated or not treated at all. The rates of deforestation in the region are among the highest in the world, with firewood the main source of energy for cooking for rural households now becoming more scarce, or unaffordable.

In the last ten years, some churches have mobilized the participation of their congregations to engage in environmental conservation to reverse the trends in degradation. Tree planting initiatives have the potential to mitigate climate change, but also contribute towards climate adaptation and resilience, particularly for rural communities. Religion and church as well as governments spearheaded the development of education, health, and agriculture (Isiani, Okonkwo, & Obi-Ani, 2021). Additionally, while practicing agriculture the church took care of the environment. Their theological base reflected their mother countries approach. Some aspects of these approaches were resisted by local communities while other was accepted.

However, many years later and after the formations of modern states, gaps have started emerging on the role of religion in social-economic spheres. Religion has been blamed for the environmental crisis facing Kenya and the world at large (Schultz, Zelezny, & Dalrymple, 2000). Nevertheless, the advocates of religion dispute the claim. The proponents argue that Christian scripture encourages environmental degradation through the command from genesis that man should till the earth and subdue it. National as well as county governments, the superior agent of environmental conservation through national environment management authority have been criticized for doing very little. This has affected economic growths by negatively impacting the ecosystem, reducing water resources, food and industrial activities (Zeng, Wu, & Liu, 2020).

This widening social-economic gap keeps on expanding leaving citizens exposed. Though White theory blames religion, the church and religious institutions remain a force to reckon with in environmental conservation. Nevertheless, her role in influencing belief, attitude and behaviour toward the environment remain unclear (Sachdeva, 2017). There have been numerous calls on church and religious leaders at the grassroots to exercise their role in curbing environmental and climate change. According to Tsimpo and Wodon (2016) church

at the grassroots level is better placed to deal with climate change. She is within the society that has already identified with it. The church also has acquired the status of change agent. On one hand, the church has moral authority within the society which can be utilized to further environmental development. This brings harmony and the proper relationship between man nature. On the other, morality emphasized in the church brings about personal ethics which is crucial for change of pro-environmental attitude and behaviour.

### **Denominational and individual response to environmental issues**

Some denomination lacks programs that address the environmental issue because of lack of exposure or over-emphasis on eschatological and prosperity gospel. To them, God cannot destroy the world which he created for his people being good and complete. Nature can rejuvenate by itself and conserve itself even without conservation programs. While other denominations have been surrounded by nominalism and a lack of focus on the core mission of the church but have been focusing on financial prosperity (Bomberg & Hague, 2018). Others do not have eco-theological training in their syllabus which they use to train their personnel for the ministry. Thus, they lack knowledge of environmental stewardship. They lack training on the integral mission of the church which is very key to the furtherance of environmental conservation. When leaders lack this knowledge, the follower will not have it either. While others have lacked support from the follower who believes that environmental conservation is government work (Rushton and Hodson, 2012). Nevertheless, environmental conservations require resources that are needed for undertaking various environmental mitigations activities. Thus, whereas they realize the danger the natural crisis poses on human development they do not have the means to overcome this crisis for lack of financial resources. A vocation for environmental conservation is an expensive venture because in some cases the degradation is too severe and requires massive resources to reverse (Hand & Crowe, 2012).

Other scholars however believe that empathizing with degradation will not mitigate environmental degradation. Empathy without action is equally useless and better than not having it. What makes environmental conservation complicated is the belief that Christians are connected to nature through a supernatural being and thus, the creator of the environment will take care of it just as he takes care of humanity. Those who follow this school of thought hide behind this belief and continue degrading the environment because the creator will reconstruct it. Just as in western protestant Christian churches who viewed the environment in

terms of materialism so do some of the Kenyan churches. Thus, to convince such denominations of the need to conserve the environment is an uphill task. Those with such a worldview will always exploit nature without regard to degradation that happens later.

Personal belief, value and attitude towards the environment play a key role in environmental conservation. The majority are from mainline churches that are outspoken on issues of environmental. They have programs for environmental conservation. The unilateral conclusion that Christianity or religion is to blame for the crisis of the environment is awkward unless proven otherwise (Sachdeva, 2017). Although environmental conservation is biblically-based from the beginning, some scholars, however, attribute the modern environmental problems to religion especially Christianity.

### **Research Methodology**

An intensive search of published empirical research on churches and involvement in mitigation of the different forms of environmental degradation was conducted. Religious environmental intervention material studies have been used by scholars to understand the role of religion in environmental conservation. Synthesis of the data was done in line with the topic of religious attitudes and public pro-environmental behaviour in Sub-Saharan Africa. The studies done and posted in form of PDF and in the English language in major academic sites which included Google scholar, Springer, Taylor and Francis, research gate were searched. The search yielded 20 journals and because of scarcity in this area, the period limit was 5 years but was expanded to 23 years. The 21 journals were scrutinized and those that were not peer-reviewed, research thesis or dissertation reports and not essay to read were removed. In addition, for a paper to be included in the sample of papers for systematic review, the paper needed to include an abstract, methodology, data collection procedure, area for future research. Empirical data was a requirement together with the specific location where this data was collected. All the 11 journals were individually reviewed. The information extracted from the reviewed journal through literature review template containing (date, title, author, context, the gap being addressed, theoretical framework, study design, geographical location, sample size, study population, findings and future study) was systematically written down.

## **Results of Systematic Review**

### **Role of religious beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions on environmentalism**

Most of the researchers focused on religious roles on, beliefs, attitudes, perceptions and environmentalism. Religion had been blamed for the environmental crisis facing the world. The majority of the studies were motivated by the white theorists who argued that anthropocentrism originated in Judaism as expressed in the Hebrew bible that man was mandated to name all animals thus having dominion over them and the creator made the world for man. The environmental crisis facing the world today was solely blamed on Christianity based on this command in the book of genesis. With the Environmental crisis facing the world today most of the scholars were looking for a course on religion and how it can be used to solve the problem. Most of the researcher has pointed out that religious belief; attitude and perception can lead to environmental degradation or conservation. Religion has been used in the process of domination to degrade the environment resulting in the current crisis (Tsimpo & Wodon, 2016).

Nevertheless, religion has also been shown as being on the frontline in mitigating the environmental crisis. Several studies found that contrary to the view that Christianity is to be blamed science is to be blamed more. As scientific and technological advancement increases more degradation has been experienced. Most mainline dominations have programs on environmental conservation and the scripture on dominion was misinterpreted. Other scholars were motivated by curiosity to defend Christianity against white allegations. Thus, they researched religion and secular environmental attitudes, values and beliefs and compared the result. A study by Sachdeva (2017) from India, was motivated by curiosity to find out whether sacredness attributed to particular objects contributed to conservation. His focus was the river Ganges believed to be life-giving and holy by the Indian community. He thought that the Ganges River will be the less polluted river in the world. Only to be discouraged to find that it was the most polluted in the world because they believe if it can give life, it can also rejuvenate from pollution. The researcher addressed the gap, does the belief attached to sacred places minimize the pollution risks of the environment. The previous scholars had argued that belief in sacredness minimizes the pollution of mountains, rivers, and churches or temples. Hand and Crowe (2012) sought to understand religious denominations significance on environmental belief and behaviour change.

For many years conservative Christianity in the United States has been blamed for environmental degradation due to its command in the scripture to till the earth and have dominion and subdue it. Much research done before the current realization of environmental problems has confirmed the concerns, but others found out that it was not religion alone but also cultural aspects.

### **Sustainable environment, religion and policy**

Tsimpo and Wodon (2016) while addressing the Connection between sustainable environment, religion and political goodwill realized that sustainable environment was a major milestone policy passed on Paris agreement on sustainable development goal. This was seen as a solution to climate change among other environmental issues. Yet there was no political commitments and willingness to search for long term environmental solutions. Unless something is done, global warming will have a major long term negative impact on the population. Shock waves will be a disaster among other environmental problems. There was completely no connection between policy and religion. While religion was viewed as a tool for mitigation of the crisis the policy to enforce the conservation drive was lacking in the United States. The finding indicates the gaps that exist between different players in the environmental conservation drive.

### **Religious belief and Christian denomination approach**

Hand and Crowe (2012) sought to understand religious denominations significance on environmental belief and behaviour change. For many years conservative Christianity in the United States has been blamed for environmental degradation. The command in the scripture to till the earth have dominion and subdue has been used as a sole source that further the crisis. Much research was done before the current realization of environmental problems and has confirmed the concerns. However, others found out that it was not religion alone but also cultural aspects.

According to Schultz, Zelezny and Dalrymple (2000) by late 2008 there was increased churches awareness of her role in environmental conservation. However, while the majority of the mainline united states of American church officials embraced the idea, churches have little significance in addressing environmental problems. Few studies exist to assess whether or not the concerns have made any progress in religious involvement. He had sought to establish whether religious denominations significance on environmental belief and behaviour change had any effect on conservation. Schultz, Zelezny, and Dalrymple (2000) had the same ideas he observed that there has been a claim and counterclaim on whether Christians and non-Christians different in the environment.

On the other hand, there was a notable difference across denominations and Christian traditions about environmental issues. In line with this, the researcher was out to investigate a Christian non-Christian independent view on the issues. While previous empirical studies focused on the United States investigations on the relationship between religious identification and environmental issues,

Bomberg and Hague (2018) were more general. They observed that belief that man was made to conquer, have dominion and subdue nature has dominated western Christianity. They have not focused on culture which is believed to bring about ecological crisis. Many theologians and social scientists have been studying this issue, but a very limited number have researched the relationship between religious beliefs, environmental attitudes and behaviours. Majority of the discussion has been on reconciliation between environmentalism and Christian beliefs without testing white theory. Very sparse research has been done to investigate how religious beliefs attitudes and practices influence lay opinions of an individual denomination. Marangudakis (2000) observe the claim and counterclaim whether Christians and non-Christians differ on environmental views for some time. On the other hand, there were notable differences across denominations and Christian traditions about environmental issues. In line with this, the researcher was out to investigate a Christian non-Christian independent view on the issues. While previous empirical studies focused on United States investigation on the relationship between religious identification and environmental issues.

### **Christian religious education and environmentalism**

Rushton and Hodson (2012) observed that Environmental theology had increased interest among the Christian faith due to environmental problems. Various books and journals have been written on these areas dedicated to environmental problems. Church of England has a majority following with the 70% of the total population being members. This indicates that that the church has a high probability of reaching a large population with a faith-based message on climate change and other environmental problems through clergy and leaders. Thus, it is impotent for those training for ordination to have environmental attitudes, values and beliefs impacted on them through training reflections on climate change and environmental issues facing the church.



### **Influences of religion on public pro-environment behaviour**

Zeng, Wu and Liu (2020) on the other hand focused on ascertaining group's differences and the influences of religion on public pro-environment behaviour. China religious believes cannot be underestimated. For some time, most of the research on religion and pro-environmental behaviours have been western-based. The studies on this area have been lacking in China. Nevertheless limited studies have been done on the internal relation between religion and environmental behaviour. However, studies on religion and pro-environmental behaviour are still limited and missing in China.

Meanwhile, Guth et al. (1995) observed that Conservative Protestants and evangelicals in the United States have been preoccupied with social issues. They have lagged due to suspicion associated with environmentalism. Fundamentalists and Pentecostals address issues of the environment suspiciously. Although theologians and churches have realized challenges and are confronting environmental problems, the issue has attracted enthusiasm among scholars and journalists. Lundberg (2017) previous qualitative research focused only on religious activism without focusing on the denomination. There were an increased number of religious environmental movements researching on the denomination and equally focusing on various eco-theologies and different standard denominational identities. On the other hand, other scholars focused on nature as sacred and its intrinsic value. There was a diversion, and the researcher was focusing on the actual impact of religious environmentalism. Several studies have focused on the limitation and problem of religious organization environmental movement, and their ability and impact beyond policy and state. Denominations have not done enough as expected which the current scholar will focus on them. The gap was to assess the Lutheran denomination's constructed environment as a faith issue.

Sehannie (2010) focused on Exploring the environmental practice and attitude of Christian churches of two Virginia communities. For several decades, historical crises on the environment have found their way into faith-based environmentalism. There is mushrooming debate among religious frontiers. Interest in faith-based stewardship based on beliefs that environmental protection is a valuable societal goal. The answer to promoting a religious solution to conservation is an idea whose time has come. Limited research on this area has focused on the religious influence on environment, while others have focused on perception. However, the researcher on this study focused on Exploring environmental practice and attitude of Christian churches on two Virginia communities.

## **Discussion**

This review examines a limited number of peer-reviewed journals written in English from 1993 -2010. The non-English journal had limitation in understanding the language, expenses of looking for an interpreter and translator was avoided. Most of the journals picked lacked important information for the proper and coherent study. Some lacked data collection procedure while others were not peer-reviewed, lacked results, no clear methodology, and sample population Nevertheless some contained this information but were dissertation and report. Religious beliefs, values, attitudes and pro-environmental behaviour are very important in the modern climate-changing world. Religious leaders have an inherent God-given forum to address the faithful every Sunday and within the week. Understanding religious environmentalism is important as a source of information for effective mitigation of environmental issues. However, religion especially Christianity has been blamed for crisis for the command in the scripture and white theory allegation (Hand & Crowe, 2012).

Religious people in ancestral worship were willing to support environmental conservation while Christians and more religious people had a feeling that global warming was not the most pressing environmental issue. There was no connection between environmental concern and the environment as expressed by the religious leaders and followers. Religious people and Christians seem to be out of the reality of global warming. Probably global warming is not very visible like garbage or water pollution, ocean pollution requires consistent measuring to notice. Hovers the effect is visible. Could it be they focused more on eschatology than environmental crisis or they thought that the creator would save the world? This observation indicates a dangerous trend. Focusing on eschatology alone is missing a mark because Christians are living in the world and must take care of the world before they get to heaven. Young people are more concern with economic growth than environmental conservation. They have low priority on environmental problems compared to middle-aged and older people. One might argue that pervasive unemployment amongst young people makes them inclined to economic growth over preferences to environmental. The environment does not affect their day-to-day life directly. One may posit that older people may have experiential knowledge and concerns related o the need to protect the environment. There is an urgent need for a study to understand why religious people are not concerned about the environment problems and why young people allocate low priority to the environment

The proximity to the environmentally affected areas influenced the attitude, value belief of the community. Sachdeva (2017) discovered that the more educated people who were far away from the river Ganges acknowledged the sacredness of the river. Proximity and knowledge influenced behaviour towards the river. However the contrary to the expectation of the researcher, the belief in sacredness was not a factor to influence the perception of the environmental risk because the river Ganges was the river in the world. There is the belief that because of its sacredness it has the power to self-cleanse most polluted. Thus religious environmental education needed to be enhanced among churches and religious communities .environmentally degraded areas cannot rejuvenate unless the degradation is stopped. There was the assumption that the value and belief of the objected will lead to conservation which the study proved wrong.

However, several studies from the United States exploring the effect of religious affiliation on to environment discovered that fundamentalist denominations were more pro-growth and lower than environmental. The two studies from India and United States respectively indicate lower pro environmentalism among religiosity. These facts could be different in Africa where the masses are notoriously religious. While the Indian and united cases were the same, the European case was different Other than focusing on the negative side of religion they focused on the positive resources that can be used to address the problems in the environment. They discovered that spirituality has a reserve of hope which motivates Christians and others. This can be a borrowed deal with the long-term effect of climate change by behaviour change. They viewed spirituality as the mirror of resources. This study was unique in its way because the researchers used a sociological approach and had a different view of resources. They included human, organizational and cultural resources that are shared by groups. Sociologists also identified special values and attribute own by the religious community involved in social issues. Environmental degradation is a social issue thus if religion could be used to address the crisis it should focus on a sociological perspective. Social life in Africa has cooperated in some regions thus It will be most appropriate.

Religious and non-religious communities do not differ in terms of environmental concern there is no pure religious community without non-religious people. Thus, churches need to focus on a different perspective that will address the environmental crisis as well as religious matters without diverting from either. Moreover, religious education was explored and found very appropriate for the personnel leading religious institutions.

Religious education curriculum that contained environmental education influenced attitude, beliefs, values and pro-environmental behaviour. Thus, environmental education inclusiveness in religious institutions is crucial in addressing the environmental crisis in churches. However, some denomination does not send a leader to theological institutions. Their focuses are more eschatological than worldly living. This becomes a challenge to addressing the environmental crisis. Nevertheless, they are numerically weak thus their impact is inconsequential. It was also noted that generalization of religious environmental belief, value, attitude and pro-environment did not give correct real information. While denomination focus of religiosity and pro-environment behaviour gave correct and true focus. There are conservative and liberal Christians who have different perspectives on environmental issues. This observation was key in future studies. The general outlook of the religious environmental study was will not yield the correct result. The researcher noted that environmentalism did not rise from religion, but it was the role and responsibility of the religion to develop environmental care from within.

### **Conclusion**

From the systematic review, numerous gaps exist which are potential grounds for the generation of knowledge and especially in Africa where very little empirical work exists on the role of integration of faith into mitigation of environmental degradation in the SSA region. It was apparent from the review that religious theological education influences beliefs and values among the students' pro-environmental behaviour and orientation. The review found that religion has some influence on mitigation if efforts were targeted to specific environmental degradation. However, belief in sacredness as the only method of conservation cannot be inadequate as a strategy to mitigation of environmental degradation because people have a different perspective of sacredness and its implication. All the empirical studies reviewed were from outside of Africa; thus, the relevance of conclusions drawn might be contestable in implementation in the SSA context. Religiosity in the SSA may be greatly influenced by the varied cultural and socio-demographic and ethnic contexts. Thus, future researchers will either be required to replicate the above study to find out whether the same result will be realized or different outcomes will be gained.

### **Recommendations**

From the above studies, there are very relevant areas that can be utilized to further knowledge on religious involvement in environmental conservation. However, future research should

examine religiosity and environmentalism at specific denominations and congregations, rather than across denominations. Religiosity and environmentalism further shed light on the role of denominational involvement in environmental conservation. Additionally, there is need for research in Kenya to investigate the influence does environmental education in their syllabus influence their beliefs values and pro-environmental behaviour during their schooling and after school. Integration of environmental policy within a religious sector will enhance environmental conservation because religious leaders have an inherent God-given position to meet with the faithful every Sunday. In addition, researchers need to explore religiosity and environmentalism within particular denominations.

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