

THE ROLE OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION IN GHANA

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ABSTRACT

Several studies including De Witt (2000), Tucker and Grimm (2001), Motawalli (2002), Dryzek (2006) Ntiama-Baidu (2008) and Deneulin and Bano (2009), have shown that religion or faith-related organisations are among the key players that can assist in instilling environmental or ecological consciousness in people. Similarly, Religious Education (RE) is one of the avenues through which environmental or ecological consciousness can be transmitted to people, particularly the youth. Nevertheless, RE has not been effectively used to play this role in Ghana's quest in the fight against environmental or ecological problems. A major reason is that majority of instructors of RE lack the requisite skill to carry out the task. This paper focuses on how ideas, beliefs and practices of religions can help to ensure sustainable use of natural resources for the present and future generations. Much emphasis is placed on the extent to which RE can be used as a conduit of such ideas, beliefs and practices to address some of the environmental problems of sub-Saharan Africa, using Ghana as a case study. In doing this, the three dominant religions in Ghana—African Traditional Religion, Christianity and Islam—are used to illustrate the point of the paper. The paper argues that with the right application, RE can help inculcate into the citizenry the needed values and morals that can ensure that the environment is treated with the dignity that it deserves.

KEYWORDS: Religious education, environment, degradation, conservation

INTRODUCTION

The impact of industrialisation on the environment has been monumental of late. This has attracted the attention of well-meaning people, particularly environmentalists worldwide to draw the attention of people most especially industrialists, governments and other stakeholders whose activities impact directly or indirectly on the environment to the need to find a sustainable means of dealing with the environment in order to avoid the catastrophe that awaits humanity (Postma, 2006, Attfield, 1983, Guha, 1989, Carson, 1962).

Ghana's State of the Environment Report for 2004 painted a bad picture of the country's environment. Some of the seriously affected areas include land degradation, erosion of all forms, pollution of water bodies--rivers, streams and lagoons--and deforestation.(State of the Environment Report, 2004). This was corroborated by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) of Ghana when it notes that the environmental degradation is accelerating on all fronts (E.P.A., 2004). Attempts have been made by successive governments to address this problem but the desired results

have not been achieved. In this paper's view, one other element that can be brought on board in the fight against this environmental canker is Religious Education (RE). Several studies including De Witt (2000), Tucker and Grimm (2001), Motawalli (2002), Dryzek (2006) Ntiamua-Baidu (2008) and Deneulin and Bano (2009) have also shown that religion is one of the key avenues that can assist in instilling environmental or ecological consciousness in people. One area connected with religion that is of interest to this paper, is Religious Education (RE). RE has variously been defined. Thomas, (1991) for instance, sees RE as the teaching of a particular religion and its varied components such as beliefs, doctrines, rituals, customs and personal roles while Asare-Danso views it as attempts to educate people to have a religious view of life (2018). In this paper, however, RE should be understood as any conscious effort to impart into people, especially, the young ones the various beliefs and practices/cherished values influenced by religion of a people in a community or state/nation.

Due to the nature or the constitutive elements of RE, it is viewed as one of the avenues that can be used to create awareness, impart knowledge and skills, change attitudes and encourage participation, but this is an area which is not offered the deserved attention in the fight against environmental or ecological problems in Ghana. This paper focuses on how ideas, beliefs and practices of religions can help to ensure sustainable use of natural resources and conserve nature for the present and future generations with much emphasis on the extent to which RE can be used as a conduit for such ideas, beliefs and practices to address some of the environmental problems of sub-Saharan Africa, using Ghana as a case study. In doing this, the scope of the study will be limited to the three dominant religions in Ghana, namely: African Traditional Religion, Christianity and Islam.

It must also be stressed that this paper is not about the debate on the need for RE in schools, particularly, in the secular ones, neither is it on a particular religious' tradition, but the concern or the focus rather is on how ideas, beliefs and practices of religions help to ensure sustainable use of natural resources for the present and future generations. The qualitative research methodology was used to gather the primary data. This was complemented with review of related literature.

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN GHANA

From time immemorial, indigenous Ghanaians have been providing religious education in their various indigenous societies. This kind of traditional African education was provided by helping people to acquire knowledge about the Supreme Being, the ancestors, divinities, and deities through songs, proverbs, folktales and myths, inter alia (Asare-Danso, 2011, 60). It also provided formal training for the religious functionaries like priests and (Awuah-Nyamekye, 2010). However, RE as we understand it today (being part of formal education), could be traced to the time that the Gold Coast people, now Ghanaians, had contact with the Western Europeans (Awuah-Nyamekye, 2010).

Asare-Danso (2012) has traced the historical development of Religious Education in Ghana. According to him, during the colonial period (1850-1950), the colonial governments used the castles that served as trading posts to establish Castle Schools at Elmina, Cape Coast and Christiansborg, Osu (Kwamena-Poh (2011). RE was part of the curriculum. The Missionaries also established schools in Ghana. For example,

the Basel Mission established the first set of schools at Osu in 1828, Akropong in 1843 and Aburi in 1847 (Odamtten, 1978). The colonial government followed the Basel Mission educational policy and used it from 1861 to 1987 (Asare-Danso, 2012). Under the Nationalist period (1951-1966), RE continued to be part of the Ghanaian school curriculum. In all these years, Moral Education was taught as part of RE. However, in 1962, under the regime of President Nkrumah, he made conscious effort to separate RE from Moral Education by proposing the introduction of “Moral Teaching”. Regrettably, the change could not be effected (Asare-Danso, 2012). Since 1998, RE has been taught in Ghanaian schools under the designation “Religious and Moral Education”. It is based on the three dominant religions in Ghana, namely: Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religion.

It must, however, be pointed out that in the second cycle schools, a school can concentrate on either Christianity (Christian Religious Studies (CRS), Islamic Studies (IS) or African Traditional Religion (ATR) but here again, I have yet to know any of the second cycle schools in the country that concentrates on ATR. This is the result of the long standing bias towards indigenous African religion began by the early missionaries.

THE NEXUS BETWEEN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION

This link can be traced to the emergence of the academic field known today as religion and ecology, a field, which has developed close to five decades ago. This is the result of the efforts of scholars of religious studies, ethics, philosophy, environmental history and environmental science who begun to examine ways that studies of the environment and of religion can be mutually informative (Bauman, Bohannon and O'Brien, 2011). Consequently, there are now ethical models for how human beings should relate to the other beings and the rest of the natural environment in general. This interest or discourse resulted in a body of literature examining the relationship between religion and the environment which originally emerged within the context of the West, but it is now largely globalised. Today many commentators refer to this interest of the relationship between religion and the environment, as religious environmentalism or religious environmentalist discourse. Gottlieb (2009) for instance, sees religious environmentalism as a ‘diverse, vibrant, global movement’ of ideas and activism that “roots the general environmental message in a spiritual framework’ (2009, 17, 215, 231).

Just as it has been in the West, there has been an age long debate over the foundation of morality in Africa. While some scholars like Opoku (1978), view religion as the major source of morality, others such as Gyekye (1997), Wiredu (1998) think otherwise. For them, society itself is the driving force behind morality. The latter’s view corroborates that of the Natural Secular Society of UK’s view that “presenting moral issues to young people in the context of ‘religious education’ inevitably leads to morality being conceived as uniquely associated with religion, which is deeply erroneous and leaves pupils with a skewed and very poor understanding of ethics and how normative discourse has developed and been framed throughout previous centuries” (Natural Secular Society, 2013). While this may be the case in the West and America, this is not wholly the case in the Ghanaian context because generally, religion is noted to be a key determinant in morality

or ethical issues in Africa (Opoku, 1978). The Ghanaian context corroborates the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, Department of Education, Division of Programme Development stance when it observes that '[m]ost of the values and morals upheld by any society have their origins in religious teachings' (Department of Education, 2005, 2)

Currently, in Ghana, there is a popular view that environmental issues should be part of RE. The call is due to the significant inroads that religion has made in the life of the people and also because of the alarming proportion that environment is being degraded. This call concurs with the RE Council (REC) of UK which though does not agree that religion is the source of morality yet shares this view that 'concern for nature is essential to religion and that religious awareness has vital contribution to make in encouraging a respect for nature' (Religions and Environmental Education Programme (REEP), 1994, Hammelt, 2012,70). This seems to re-echo Lynn White's view that 'more science and more technology are not going to get us out of the present ecological crisis until we find a new religion, or rethink our old one' (1967, 1206).

Again, White after criticizing Christianity for being responsible for our ecological woes, also recognised that religion has a role to play in the solution to the environmental crisis. Indeed, he went further to state that 'what people do about their ecology depends on what they think about themselves in relation to things around them. Human ecology is deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny—that is, by religion' (White, 1967, 1204). Taylor corroborates this view when he points out that 'For decades, diverse actors who understand that religion is a powerful social force have engaged in earnest efforts to motivate and mobilize religious individuals and groups to construct environmentally sustainable societies.' (Taylor, 2016, 485). The foregoing points to the fact that religion can be tapped to address many aspects of the environmental albatross on our necks today.

The above views corroborate the historic event that took place in Assisi in 1986, which has now become known as The Assisi Declarations, an event, which was engineered by the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) during its 25th anniversary in Assisi, Italy (The Assisi Declaration, 1986).

The (WWF) recognised that there is a relationship between religion and the environment and thus, invited the leadership of the five leading religions of the world—Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and Judaism—to grace their 25th Anniversary event and also to tell the world their various contributions towards the world's quest to resolve the environmental problems of the day. These religions were represented by their leading members at the event.

Fortunately, in Ghana now, many institutions and the policy-decision makers have come to realize the need to include environmental education in the curriculum. For instance, in an address read on her behalf, the Former Minister of Education in Ghana, Prof. Naana Jane Opoku Agyemang at a day's workshop organised by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) said it was necessary 'to start with children since children were more receptive to change and likely to acquire the skills for environmental management' [ISD (Frank Asante)]. Again, the minister argues that 'majority of the environmental issues are behaviour issues and thus assisting individuals to develop responsible environmental behaviour will be critical in environmental conservation.' [ISD (Frank Asante).

This means that there is the need to imbibe in the youth environmental consciousness. It is here that RE becomes imperative because it can be used to instill the sense of ecological orientation in people and again, religion as has been noted earlier, is a key agent in changing people's attitude and behaviour in general.

Tucker and Grim (2000) have argued that religions are full of stories that enable us to interpret the nature and destinies of humans. Clarifying it further, they observed 'that people view environmental crisis as a complex issue, and that it is not only the result of certain economic, political, and social factors, but must also be seen as a moral and spiritual crisis that requires us to develop broader philosophical and religious understandings of ourselves as creatures of nature, embedded in life cycles and dependent on ecosystems' (Tucker and Grim, 2000). This is where the inclusion of RE in this quest for environmental sanity in the country, is likely to be beneficial.

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION

The following paragraphs present some concrete ecological values inherent in religions and the approaches that can be used to disseminate these ecological values in religion to RE instructors, pupils/students, religious leaders, eco-biased organisations as well as policy decision makers in Ghana. In pursuing this objective, the paper uses African Traditional Religion, Christianity and Islam, the three dominant religious traditions in Ghana to direct the discussions.

African Traditional Religion (ATR)

Indigenous religions have all along been viewed as environmentally-friendly but some scholars such as Tuan (1970), Thomas (1984), Tomalin (1995), Taringa (2006) have questioned this popular view. Tuan (1970), for instance, points out that if that is the case—being environmentally friendly--how come there exists environmental degradation in the eastern countries where the eastern religions are supposedly environmentally-friendly? In the same vein, Thomas (1984) wants to find out why 'Japanese worship of nature did not prevent widespread pollution of that country'. This brings the well touted view that indigenous religions are nature-friendly into question. In the view of Tomalin (2002), while many religio-cultural traditions do have a strong connection with the natural world, elements of the natural world may be considered as sacred without any explicit consciousness about the relevance of this to an environmental crisis' (Tomalin, 2002,15). Taringa (2006) for instance, points out 'the influence of indigenous people's worldviews on human-nature relationships are primarily relationships with spirits and not necessarily ecological relationships with nature' (Taringa, 2006:196). However, in spite of this concerns, it can still be argued that several empirical studies (Ntiamao-Baidu, 1991, 1995, 2008; Byers, 2001) have proven that where traditional or indigenous religion is strong, the environmental degradation there is relatively minimal than where its influence is waned.

Again, the age long view that the African is 'incurably' (Parrinder, 1969, 9) and 'notoriously' (Mbiti, 1969,1) religious, has also been challenged by Plaveot and Rinsum (2003). Plaveot and Rinsum's view has, however, been vehemently countered (Olabintam, 2003).

Although Indigenous religions were not represented in Assisi, yet a careful study of these religions shows that they have a lot to offer when it comes to nature

conservation, followers of African Traditional Religion see entities such as land, forest, rivers, mountains and some animals as sacred because their indigenous belief tells them such entities are the abodes of the gods and other spirit beings, therefore, their attitude towards such entities is that of awe and respect (Opanyin Kofi Fofie, personal communication, 3 December 2017 and in fact, all my informants held this view). In ensuring that such attitude abides, taboos were devised to regulate the people's attitude towards these natural bodies (Opanyin Kofi Fofie, personal communication, 3 December 2017). They also know that their very survival and that of the subsequent generations depend on such natural objects and as such they take serious exception to breach of any of these taboos that are meant to conserve these natural objects (Opanyin Kofi Fofie, personal communication, 3 December 2017).

In Ghana, the land is viewed as a goddess and as such, certain things should not be done to it (All my interviewers pointed this out and in fact, this is a commonplace knowledge among the practitioners of African Traditional Religion). For instance, every community in Ghana has a special day dedicated to the earth goddess and no work is to be done on that day. The *Twi* speaking Akan for instance, have dedicated Thursday to the earth goddess and because they believe that the natal day of the earth goddess is Thursday hence it is called *Asaase Yaa*. *Asaase* means earth or land and *Yaa* is a name given to an Akan female born on a Thursday. The Fante speaking Akan also believe that her natal day is Friday and hence, *Assase Efua* (Opoku, 1978), *Efua* is a name given to a Fante girl born on a Friday. Among other things that are hateful to the earth goddess include having sexual intercourse in the bush, not offering a libation prayer before tilling the land (Parrinder, 1961) or digging a grave to bury a corpse and burying a dead pregnant woman without removing the unborn baby from her womb (Opoku, 1978; Nkansa-Kyeremanteng, 2004).

Generally, indigenous Africans believe that their very existence depends on the environment and thus have a responsibility to make sustainable use of their natural resources. It is against this backdrop that Mbiti (1991) observes that: 'the African sees the universe in terms of himself, and endeavours to live in harmony with it... African religion sees nature as a friend of man and vice versa... therefore man has to preserve nature and use it wisely...' (Mbiti, 1991, 44). In the words of Anane (2003):

Environmental conservation is not a recent phenomenon in indigenous African communities. Past generations knew about environmental degradation and the need for preservation. This knowledge found expression in traditional religious practices, because the African believes that everything belonging to the ecosystem and the environment has a strong spiritual meaning for humans. Indeed the African's attitude to nature is deeply rooted in the belief that all things were created by the Supreme Being for a harmonious continuity and there must be a relationship of mutual obligations between all created things. (Anane, 2003, 103)

Nana Akumfi Ameyaw's (Per comm. 20 May, 2018) explanation on indigenous Ghanaian attitude towards nature reinforces Anane's view above:

In God's creation, there are things that can be used (destroyed) and others that cannot be used, so the destruction of such things constitutes a sin. Even those that can be used have the right time for their use. Anything short of this is considered as a sin in our tradition. This is to ensure that we make sustainable use of natural resources. (Personal comm., 7 November 2011)

One can infer from the above that in traditional societies, religion functions as an important enforcement agency as its followers are ready to comply with conservation rules and regulations even when no one is around to watch them. In the words of Adjei, ‘This explains why in spite of the absence of modern institutions such as forest guards, the police and military, in the past, the traditionalists were ready to abide by conservational rules’ (Personal communication, 23 January 2018). This view is in consonance with the observation that certain cultural beliefs and practices of indigenous people ensure continuous existence and sustainability of local natural environments (IIED, 1992; USAID, 2005).

Christianity

Although scholars such as Lynn White (1967) and McHarg (1977) blamed Christianity for being the cause of our current environmental woes, McHarg (1977) for instance, took it further when he ‘refers to the Old Testament as a disturbing text, which has cultivated and legitimised a utilitarian and inevitably destructive attitude towards the nature’, (McHarg, 1977 as quoted in Kula, 2014, 37).

Other scholars such as; Johnson and Butigan (1984); Harrison (1999); Atfield 1983, 2010; and Calvin DeWitt (2000) have rejected this claim and generally, viewing it as overly simplistic and argue that Christianity is an environmentally friendly religion.

Christians used the Assisi meeting to clearly point out that their faith is not an anti-environment one. This is attested to by the declarations they made during the meeting. The delegation to Assisi was led by Father Lanfranco Serrini, Minister General, OFM Conv and made the following declarations on behalf of Christians on nature conservation:

Therefore, in the name of Christ, who will come to judge the living and the dead, Christians repudiate:

- i. All forms of human activity—wars, discrimination, and destruction of cultures—which do not respect the authentic interest of human race, in accordance with God’s will and design, do not enable men as individuals and as members of society to pursue and fulfill their total vocation within the harmony of the universe;
- ii. All ill considered exploitation of nature which threatens to destroy it and, in turn, to make man the victim of degradation

They further resolved and recommended that:

In the name of Christ, who will repay everyone for good works, Christians call upon all men and women to pursue:

- i. A synthesis between culture and faiths
- ii. Ecumenical dialogue on the goals of scientific research and on the environmental consequences of the use of its findings;
- iii. The priority of moral values over technological advances;
- iv. Truth, justice and peaceful coexistence of all people

Pursuant to these declarations, Calvin DeWitt (2000) for instance, contends, the Bible contains divinely inspired wisdom about creation, and if we pay attention to this text, we can learn to relate to other creatures as God intends’ (DeWitt (2000, as quoted in Baumann et al., 2011, 59). He argues that:

Authority over things belongs to the Author of those things: we have no

authority to destroy what we ourselves did not create; destruction of a grand master's work by its onlooker, beholder, or curator may be a disgrace to their creator. (DeWitt, 2000, 297)

He uses the biblical passage on behemoth, which Dewitt (2000, 292) refers to as hippopotamus in Job 40:15-24 to illustrate his point. For instance, in Job 40:19 (NRSV), we find these words 'it is the first of the great acts of God—only its Maker can approach it with the sword' (Job, 40:19 NRSV). By these words, it is clear that humans are not supposed to kill the hippopotamus.

In God's speech to Job on the behemoth, which DeWitt (2000, 292) refers to as hippopotamus, we find these words 'it is the first of the great acts of God—only its Maker can approach it with the sword' (Job, 40:19 NRSV). By these words, it is clear that humans are not supposed to kill the hippopotamus. Explaining further, DeWitt says:

In biblical Christianity, the value of creatures derives ultimately not from their utility, market price, cuteness or charm. Instead, their value derives from their creator. All things owe their life and breath to their creator who not only has created them and declared them good but also sustains them through divine love and power.' (DeWitt 2000, 298)

The Bible, which is the authoritative book of the Christians, indeed contains a lot of injunctions such as the one found in Deuteronomy 23:12-14 'you shall designate an area outside the camp to which you shall go with your utensils you shall have a trowel; when you relieve yourself outside, you shall dig a hole with it and cover your excrement... therefore your camp must be holy, so that he may not see anything indecent among you and turn away from you' (NRSV). This is a clear indication that God detests filth. In Genesis 2:15, God placed man in the Garden of Eden, and gave him the mandate to work on the land and to take care of it. With this biblical mandate, it is believed that man should be blamed for any mismanagement of the environment that is likely to cause air pollution, water pollution, land pollution, erosion, population explosion, overcrowding in the cities, and problem of waste disposal, among others (Asante, 1999:84).

Moo (2009) in his paper titled: 'Creation and new creation: transforming Christian perspective, argues that 'the message of ecological responsibility has a clear basis in the theology of the Apostle Paul' (p. 241). In the view of Andor (nd), a lot of passages exist in the Bible which have great significance for the modern reader in the area of ecology, one of such passages is Deuteronomy 23:10-15. This passage was used as a guide for ecological sanitation in the days of the Israelites' wanderings. For him, strategies outlined in this passage can assist modern generation to achieve ecological sanitation. All these are values in the Bible which pupils can be exposed to with the view to conscientising them on how the Bible can be used as a source on how to treat other beings in our environment.

Islam

Islam is a religion that enjoins its faithfuls to respect creation and protect it and avoid any activity that will be injurious to other beings (Kula, 2001). This belief is informed by the two main sources of Islamic instructions on environmental conservation—The Quran and Hadiths. That is, the Quran and Hadiths instruct Muslims on how they must relate to nature. However, serious environmental

problems have been recorded in many places where Islam dominates or has made inroads. One can talk of the '[d]estruction of the Aral Sea in Central Asia, desertification in Sub-Saharan Africa, hasty depletion of oil deposits in the Middle East, deforestation and consequently destruction of biodiversity in Indonesia and Malaysia' (Kula, 2001).

Just as with Christians, Islamic clerics and academics are now more serious with environmental issues and thus combing their scripture to identify the relevant portions that deal with environmental issues and hammering them with the view to bringing practitioners attention to them and act accordingly to salvage nature and humanity.

Muslims gave credence to this resolve, when they honoured the invitation extended to them by WWF in 1986 to come to Assisi to tell the world the Islamic views on environmental conservation. Led by His Excellency Dr Abdullah Omar Nasseef, Secretary General; Muslim World League, among others, presented the following Islamic views on the environment:

- i) For the Muslim, mankind's role on earth is that of a khalifa, vice--regent or trustee of God. We are God's stewards and agents on Earth. We are not masters of this Earth; it does not belong to us to do what we wish. It belongs to God and He has entrusted us with its safekeeping. Our function as vice--regents, Khalifa of God, is only to oversee the trust.
- ii) We have created over you seven heavens and we are not careless of the creation. And we sent down water from the Heaven in due degree, and we cause it to settle on earth; and we have the power for its wit. (Holy Koran 1909, The Believers, verses 10-16)

The following themes--cruelty, wastefulness and tree planting--are used to illustrate the responsibilities that Muslims have in respect of how they must relate to humans and other beings and nature in general.

Cruelty

Cruelty is abhorred in Islam. In Islam, even the created things that humans use for their survival must be used with sensitivity. This explains the import of the following Hadiths:

- i) God has prescribed the doing of good toward everything: so, when you kill, kill with goodness and when you slaughter, slaughter with goodness. Let each one of you sharpen his blade and let him give ease to the animal he is slaughtering (Saheeh Muslim, Abu-Dawud).
- ii) Hunting and fishing for food is permitted in Islam; however, the Prophet cursed anyone who uses a living creature as a target, taking a life for mere sport (Saheeh Al-Bukhari, Saheeh Muslim).
- iii) He also proscribed inciting animals to fight one another just as he frowned upon tiring of animals and shooting them with arrows.

Wastefulness

Islam detests wasting of natural resources and several Quranic texts and Hadiths are clear on this. For instance, It is in the Qur'an that the righteous are 'those who when they spend, do so not excessiveness or sparingly but are ever, between that, (justly) moderate' (Qur'an 25:67). '... do not spend wastefully' Qur'an 17:26. The

17:27 condemns wastefulness in strong words—‘Indeed, the wasteful are brothers of the devils, and ever has Satan been to his Lord ungrateful’.

It was reported that a Bedouin called Sa’ad was over using water for ablution and the Prophet had to tell him not to do so but Sa’ad replied the Prophet that there was enough water at the place and that his action would not affect the supply of water in the area in any way. The Prophet had to point it out clearly to him that even when a Muslim has a running river to wash himself four times instead of three, which are sufficient, that Muslim would be committing an error (Ibn’i-Mace 1952). This simply means that Islam does not approve of waste of natural resources.

Tree planting

Qur’an 6:165 recognises man as Allah’s vice-regent on earth and expects him to lead a responsible life. This principle of responsible stewardship extends to how one treats nature in general—whether trees, rivers, forest, soil or anything else in the earth.

It is on record that the Holy Prophet advised his companions on the need to protect the environment in which they lived, and even encouraged them to plant trees. It said that he instructed his companions to desist from the old practice in which a victor had to destroy everything in the land of the vanquished, including cutting down all the trees in the area. The under listed hadiths also confirm Islam’s interest in tree planting.

- i) Anas bin Malik reports the prophet as having said ‘It is charitable donation when a Muslim plants a tree or grows crops and the birds, humans or cattle eat from it’ (Sahil Bukari 28:817 Hadith No.2195. see also Sahil Muslim 3:1189 Hadith No. 1553)
- ii) If the day of resurrection comes upon anyone of you while he has a seedling in hand, let him plant it.” 2 [Sound report reported by Imam Ahmad in Musnad, by Bukhari in al-Adab al-Mufrad, (Hadith No. 479) and by Abu Dawud at-Tayalisi in his Musnad]. (see Nazma, 1928 for more details on Islamic views on trees).
- iii) The first Caliph of Islam, Abu Bakr is reported by Bayhaqi as warning the Muslim army against cutting trees in the following words: ‘Do not drown or burn date-palm trees. Do not cut down fruit bearing tree. Do not demolish a church. And do not kill any children or old people or women... (Snan al-Kubra 9:85 Hadith No. 17904)

The illustrations from the three religious traditions demonstrate clearly that religion has something positive to contribute to environmental conservation. This is in line with what Grimmit’s (1987) refers to as ‘learning religion’, ‘learning about religion’, and ‘learning from religion’.

However, an important question that one needs to pose at this point, is that if indeed Christianity and Islamic are environmentally-friendly faiths, how come the environment is seriously degraded in the areas these faiths dominate? Is it the case that God’s providence has been taken for granted? Or the clerics were more interested in preaching salvation to the neglect of the environment? It appears that the taking of God’s providence for granted and the clerics’ emphasis on salvation more than anything else is associated with all the Abrahamic faiths. This is because Islam is not the only religion that did/do this but Christianity is as well. This is

because Christian pastors and preachers place much emphasis on salvation than any other consideration. This view is supported by the former US Vice President, Al Gore, a leading promoter of the stewardship doctrine when he observed that:

In the past, the Church has probably failed to take with sufficient seriousness a concern for the environment and thus we should not shy away from self criticism. Equally, we should not see environmental catastrophe as the fulfilment of Biblical prophecy. (Al Gore, 1992, as quoted in Kula, 2014: 38)

I would want to add that the above view can also apply to Muslims too as they have also for a long time been pre-occupied with salvation.

But I have earlier on pointed out, 'in contemporary Christian [and Islamic] literature the idea that claims everything has been created for humanity is no longer the dominant view point' (Thomas, 1984 as quoted in Kula, 2014, 38). This is a pointer that religion is a tool that can be used to salvage nature through many avenues, one of which is RE. However, the use of RE in this direction, is also fraught with challenges some of which are discussed in the ensuing paragraphs.

THE CHALLENGES FACING THE USE OF RE TO COMBAT ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION

Although the values in RE in environmental conservation in Ghana have become increasingly a prominent issue in Ghana of late, there is however the lack of appropriate approach to the tapping into these values in religions to address some of the environmental challenges. Such impediments include: the lack of required textbooks, lack of skilled instructors in RE, demonisation of indigenous religion and its practices and the inadequate knowledge of indigenous religious beliefs and practices.

One important resource for the teacher to deliver effectively is the availability of the required teaching materials, most especially textbooks. There is no doubt that there have been some textbooks for RE since its inception in Ghana. They have been available but none of them lay emphasis on ecological orientation. As I have pointed out, the emphasis of these book has been on how to become good believers and how to achieve the ultimate goal of their religions—salvation. If anything at all, ecological orientation is tangentially addressed in these textbooks.

Another problem has been how to get the skilled instructors to handle RE as a subject. It has always been taken for granted that because it is about religion, any believer will be able to teach the subject. This has resulted in the traces of confessional teaching that is usually found in the handling of the subject particularly in the first and second cycles schools in Ghana. The confessional teaching becomes predominant in the schools that are mission founded.

Again, the demonisation of indigenous religion and its practices by other religions especially Christianity has been an impediment to the use of indigenous knowledge to combat environmental degradation in Ghana. It has been pointed out that the indigenous Africans have been noted to live in harmony with their environment due to their indigenous religious beliefs but these beliefs and practices have been tagged as idol worship particularly, by some Christians. The cumulative effect of this demonisation is that it has set us apart from nature and thus reduced nature to a mere object of exploitation. This is because indigenous African religion just as western paganism, sees human beings as part of nature and not to take dominion

over it. And more importantly, there still exists an inadequate knowledge of some aspects of indigenous religious beliefs and practices. For instance, the issue of the idea/concept of God, the relationship between God and the lesser gods and the ancestors still remain problematic. These are areas have yet to be studied⁴ extensively. This explains why the demonization of the religion has not been helpful in using it to combat environmental problems today.

These among others, are some of the hurdles that have to be crossed in order to make the harnessing of RE to compliment the conventional methods of tackling environmental problems a reality.

REMEDYING THE SITUATION

One primary objective of RE is to find out how a people's understanding of God is impacting on their lives, particularly personal life, inter-personal relationship and human-nature relationship. Here lies in the relevance of RE in ecological or environmental conservation. What this implies is that the instructor needs to be well versed in the religions on which the instructions are based. For instance, since African Traditional Religion is a non-scriptural faith, it is imperative that the instructor becomes well versed in the people's idioms, proverbs, context and diction of the people for him/her to be able to draw out the conservational values in the beliefs and practices of the people. In other words, for effective hermeneutical analysis of the conversational values in the people's beliefs, one has to understand the worldview and the language of the people. This deep insight is what is necessary for the instructors of RE in order for them to become functional or effective in carrying out their pedagogical obligations in the resolve to involve the youth in the quest for environmental sanity in Ghana today.

With regard to the case of indigenous ecological lessons, an invitation can be extended to indigenous ecological experts to the schools as resource persons to help RE instructors to talk to the students about the indigenous ecological conservation models such as sacred groves, their attitude towards totemic plants and animals, river bodies which have been tried and tested. In this way, students' minds can be disabused about the bastardisation of indigenous religious practices as being fetish, idol worship etc. by impinging religious traditions such as Christianity and Islam.

As regards textbooks, an effective way to tackle it is to encourage experts— theologians and those in the area of religious environmentalism--to produce the relevant books for the instructors in RE. Closely related to this, is the problem of using RE instructors with the requisite knowledge in the subject. The issue has to do with being able to do the appropriate exegetical analysis of the appropriate texts and drawing out the conservational values inherent in these texts for the benefit of the pupils. This has been the bane of most of the instructors in RE in Ghana. This lack of qualified instructors is a serious challenge to the use of RE in ecological conservation in Ghana.

With regard to Christianity and Islam, there will be the need to train the instructors in the original texts of the scripture—Hebrew(OT) and Greek (NT) for Christianity and Arabic for Islam—this will make them capable of doing the appropriate exegesis to draw out the ecological values inherent in the chosen texts for pedagogy. What this implies is that the teachers must be prepared in such a way that they become equipped for them to be able to introduce to learners the origins,

doctrines and belief systems of each religious tradition. This calls for what has become known today as phenomenological approach to the teaching of RE. In the view of Grimmitt (1987), this approach involves taking religion as a field of study and trying to point out the distinctiveness and uniqueness of religion as a mode of thought and awareness. He further explains that:

if religious education teachers could adopt the attitude of a shopkeeper with wares in his window which he is anxious for customers to examine, appreciate and even try on but not feel under any obligation to buy, then many of the problems connected with religious education would disappear. (p. 26)

One of the merits of the phenomenological approach to the teaching of RE, for Grimmitt, is that it makes the teaching of RE undogmatic and again, it satisfies the first three of his criteria he outlined for teaching RE--“the subject should incorporate a unique mode of thought and awareness which is worthwhile to man’s understanding of himself and his situation”, “the subject should serve to widen and deepen the child’s cognitive perspective in a unique and valuable way and so contribute to his total development as a person” and “the subject should be taught in ways which ensure understanding and actively foster the child’s capacity to think for himself” (1987: 16).

CONCLUSION

The focus of this study was to examine how and the extent to which RE can be used as a conduit to address some of the environmental problems of sub-Saharan African using Ghana as a case study. The three dominant religious traditions in Ghana—African Traditional Religion, Christianity and Islam--were used to guide the discussion and the discussion has shown that religions have something to offer in nature conservation, and one avenue to realize this is through the teaching of RE.

One key thing that was clear from the discussion was that RE has the potential to nurture students to become ecologically oriented since ecological values are embedded in religious beliefs or doctrines. This will obviously impact positively on the current quest to finding solutions to many of the current environmental problems, although this is not without some challenges. But as has been pointed out in the discussion, with commitment, adequate provision of the required teaching materials, most especially textbooks and appropriate methodologies for training instructors of RE, the challenges can be addressed or minimised for RE to complement the efforts to deal with the mounting environmental problems of today.

It has also been noted that some literature caution against romanticising what religion particularly indigenous religions can do in terms of assisting in environmental conservation. Taringa (2006) for instance, argues that the ecological attitude of traditional African religion is more based on fear or respect of ancestral spirits than on respect for nature itself. An analysis of this view of shows that Taringa is not denying that African traditional religion assists or has something to offer in terms of environmental conservation, rather, he is admitting that in practice the religion can help in conserving nature. Again, in this paper, empirical evidence has been adduced to show that religion has the potential to help fight environmental degradation and therefore if it is appropriately handled through RE in schools, Ghana in particular and other societies in general, stand to benefit from using RE to combat environmental problems.

It is against this backdrop that this paper's argument has been that RE should be one of the areas that must not be ignored when policies relating to conservation of the environment are being discussed and formulated in Ghana.

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