

Environmental Degradation: What is the Role of the Church in Environmental Conservation in Kenya from 1963–2019?

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Abstract

The 21st century is characterised by the massive destruction of Mother Earth, particularly the clearing of indigenous forests that are major water catchment areas and the sources of most Kenyan rivers. As a result, many Kenyan rivers are drying up. The ripple effect of this is an acute water shortage in most Kenyan cities, leading to water rationing in some parts and in other parts the appearance of dry taps. Also, due to the high rate of deforestation and the resultant destruction of wild animal habitat, some species are now on the verge of extinction. Furthermore, careless and irresponsible disposal of industrial waste has culminated in environmental pollution, which has in turn lead to the death of aquatic life. The church is an integral part of society and has played a significant role in the life of human beings on earth. In Kenya, the church has been a force to reckon with since independence in 1963 and, in the 1990s, the creation of our multiparty system. Her outstanding contributions in social, economic and political spheres of life are undisputed. However, her marginal role and voice in environmental conservation, which is also a divine mandate and core mission, have been conspicuously absent. It is this low profile, and this church aloofness in matters of environmental degradation, that have prompted the present article seeking to examine the role of the church in mitigating the worsening environmental degradation trend in Kenya and in Africa at large.

Keywords: church; environmental degradation; environmental sustainability; religion; Kenya; habitats; earth



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Introduction

Mother Earth was created by God replete with flourishing flora and fauna. The fauna and flora ensured human sustenance in God's newly-created planet and "God saw that it was good" (Genesis 1:31). They (the fauna and flora) are the pride of all Kenyans and their beauty is appreciated throughout the world. They attract domestic and international tourists because of their beauty. In return, Kenya earns significant foreign exchange and tourist dollars, and tourism, specifically, has become one of Kenya's major sources of hard currency. In 2018, Kenya's National Bureau of Statistics' economic survey recorded the highest number of international tourists ever. The figures show that international tourism to Kenya rose by "8.1% from 1,339.7 thousand in 2016 to 1,448.8 thousand in 2017."¹ This substantial growth in tourism took place despite a prolonged electioneering period in the country and enormous negative travel advisories issued by Euro-American countries, from where the majority of international tourists originate.

Foreign-exchange, earned through tourism, is one of the key benefits of Kenya's flora and wildlife. It has enabled Kenya to manage its natural resources as a treasure to the world at large. Unfortunately, in many cases our cherished flora and fauna are being threatened with extinction. This is in spite of the fact that God created everything good and, furthermore, charged humanity with the responsibility of "ruling over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature" (Genesis 1:28). This obliges us to pose critical questions such as: What does this dominion mean theologically, from creation to this day? Is humanity exploiting this dominion for good or for destruction? Such questions are pertinent because our threatened globe can no longer afford to do business as usual. We are part of a global environmental crisis. Rogers S. Gottlieb highlights some of these threats as follows:

Global climate change, a plague of environmentally caused diseases (such as cancer and birth defects), desertification everywhere due to loss of top soil, crisis of biodiversity (that leads to natural beauty lost forever), loss of wildness, devastation of indigenous people, unsustainable patterns and quantities of consumption and finally genetic engineering menaces.²

In Kenya, the threats are no different because the consequences of environmental degradation are dire. This has destroyed narratives of thick forests, huge rivers and lakes with bountiful fish and other aquatic life; plains teeming with wild animals and mountains, and other beautiful features captivating to the eye. These narratives are disappearing, becoming myths to the present generation—if not hallucinations. The reality on the ground is dry rivers such as the Chania, Ndarugu, and Mathioya, which,

1 Kenya National Bureau of Statistics. *Economic Survey 2018* (Nairobi: Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2018), 184.

2 Roger S. Gottlieb "Religion and Ecology: What is the Connection and Why Does it Matter?" 3–24. In *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology*, edited by Roger S Gottlieb (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 4–6.

during the dry spell in Central Kenya of 2018, saw a drastic drop of water level at Ndaka-ini dam, built in 1988. The dam therefore failed to meet the initial goal of an estimated 70 000 000 cubic meters of water, despite being the main source of water in Nairobi County. Forest cover is far below the internationally-recommended percentage of more than 10%. Moreover, industrial waste dumped into rivers, lakes and the ocean is causing massive death of marine life. We are obliged to research and get to the bottom of this environmental degradation.

Major Causes of Environmental Degradation in Kenya from 1963–2019

The genesis of environmental degradation in Kenya came after 1895, when Kenya became a British Protectorate. The colonialists came to Kenya, greedy for its abundant raw materials for their European factories, and also for cheap African labour. They cut down numerous Kenyan forests. The extent and magnitude of their rape of Kenya's natural resources are well captured by Mugo Muhia and Julius Gathogo, who maintain:

Colonialist conquest introduced newer ways of farming, mining and even hunting (not for food but for game trophies). The result was decimation of the population of wild animals and clearing of vast areas of virgin forests to pave the way for large-scale commercial farming; trees were felled in their million both for domestic use and for export.³

The young nation of Kenya suffered alarming environmental degradation and, with it, the emergence of a “white highland” in 1895. This occurred in Central Kenya and some parts of the Rift Valley, as thousands upon thousands of hectares indigenous forests and bush lands were cleared. History tells us that by 1901, the Kenya-Uganda railway had penetrated the hinterland, fomenting a series of industries strategically located in up-and-coming towns like Nairobi, Mombasa, Nakuru and Kisumu. Although these industries came with the hazards of industrial waste and environmental damage, the colonialists were far more interested in the enormous profits emerging from these industries. Mining of precious stones in various parts of Kenya also went into high gear. Forced population relocation ensued so that rapacious mining practices, including the frequent use of explosives, often mishandled and the cause of the loss of human life, became commonplace. People drowned in open water-filled trenches that, in addition, provided breeding sites for mosquitoes. Industry goons terrorised the population.

Regrettably, even after Kenya gained independence and self-rule in 1963, colonialism turned into neo-colonialism—and that has continued to this day. A factor in this was the Kenyan and British military training agreement (the British Army Training Unit Kenya-BATUK that was opened at Dol Dol in 1945) in the northern frontier of Kenya,

3 Mugo Muhia, and Julius Gathogo. “The use of Indigenous Resources in Environmental Conservation in Ngugi wa Thiongo’s *Murogi wa Kagogo: A Religio-cultural Perspective*.” *Jumuga Journal of Education, Oral Studies and Human Science* (2018): 1, 3.

Laikipia County. Whatever the benefit to communities adjacent to the battalions, the resultant environmental degradation outweighs it. Some of the challenges that Laikipia County faces are greenhouse gases emitted by the 10 000 troops rotating through for training with their 1 000 or more vehicles, helicopters and jets—causing untold damage to wildlife and human beings from unexploded ammunition left on the ground after training exercises. The damage to the landscape and wildlife from ear-shattering bombs going off during training exercises is impossible to measure.⁴ It is more than unfortunate that the British government shirks its environmental responsibilities. The county is left unable to fulfil its 2016 Paris Accord commitment on climate change and the people suffer the consequences.

On the same doleful note, 2019 saw numerous cases of Chinese nationals caught with ivory, rhino horns, leopard skins, game meat and other treasures stolen from our environment.⁵ This means that the Kenyan wildlife that attracts tourists is threatened with extinction. Our ecology is off kilter and the truth is that neo-colonialism perpetuates environmental degradation under the guise of international development partnerships. This means that the very Kenyan wildlife that attracts tourists is being threatened with extinction. Our ecology is out of balance. As such, it is true to say that neo-colonialism is perpetuating environmental degradation under the guise of international partnership in the so-called development of the country.

Human activity is another factor causing environmental degradation in Kenya and the globe at large. Norman Geisler (1989) demonstrates the role and extent of human activities in the destruction of our natural resources, observing that each year a tropical forest the size of Scotland is destroyed on planet earth.⁶ While this is the global trend, Kenya is not without blame, since it is implicated in activities dangerous to our environment, including encroaching on natural forests for occupation, farming and logging purposes. The ripple effect of these activities is the destruction of water catchment areas in major forests such as Aberdare Forest, Mt Kenya Forest and Mau Forest. These are major sources of Kenya's most important waterways. Because of poor farming practices, top soil loosens and soil erosion becomes inevitable. Wild animals living in these forests are also threatened; since their natural habitat is destroyed through logging as well as their being killed for bush meat, for their skin or other body parts. The implication of all these human activities, according to a 2018 Economic Survey, is a substantial decline of wildlife species, including Burchell's zebra, the Grant gazelle, giraffes, impalas, Homson's gazelle, the Topi elands, elephants, gerenuk and the Grevyo zebra.⁷ With such a drastic drop in population, this

4 Lou del Bello, "British Army Accused of Thwarting Kenya's Climate Plans." *Daily Nation*, December 29, 2016. Accessed May 30, 2019. <https://www.climatechangenews.com>.

5 Hilary Kimuyu, "Court Detains for Five Days Chinese Nationals Caught with Ivory, Dog Meat." *Daily Nation*, January 9, 2019. Accessed May 30, 2019. <https://www.nation.co.ke/news/live>.

6 Norman L. Geisler, *Christian Ethics: Options and Issues* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academics, 1989), 293.

7 Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 144.

trend not only causes ecological imbalances, but also constitutes an economic threat to our country, which depends on tourism to a great extent. Furthermore, these activities have prompted many cases of human-wildlife conflict, as has been reported in many parts of Kenya. A tragic example is that of 68-year-old Sarah Mwaoka, who was attacked by buffalo on 9 April 2019, in Taita Taveta County. There was a hyena attack in Narok on 30 April 2019, and elephants killed a 69-year-old man who was trampled to death at Marmanet area on 14 December 2018 in Laikipia County. Bush babies and monkeys in Muranga County destroyed farm harvests in February 2018. These and other incidents are numerous.

Rainer Bussmann,⁸ writing in 1996 on the management and destruction of Mount Kenya Forest, cites corruption as another vice adversely affecting the state of our environment. Though it is a global phenomenon, the state of corruption in Kenya today is alarming, despite stepped-up measures in 2019 by the office of the Director of Public Prosecution (DPP). Prominent figures implicated in corruption were arrested. Corrupt government officials deployed to safeguard and protect our flora and fauna happen to be the same people conspiring with perpetrators to destroy our environment. This is evident in cases where forest wardens are complicit in Kenyan logging businesses and with game wardens implicated in poaching. National Environmental Management Association (NEMA) officials are also asleep on the job, so poisonous industrial waste is dumped into water bodies unchecked. They bury their heads in the sand when crooks encroach upon public places supposedly reserved for recreational activities. They openly favour private development and their behaviour is negligent in the extreme. All these effects of corruption cited by Geisler prompt him to conclude that human greed has led to the literal rape of many Kenyan natural resources—in Kenya as well as the world at large. Geisler’s article on environmental degradation is a most eloquent denunciation of global environmental degradation.

The most important question is: Who is morally responsible for mitigating this global threat? In response to this question, Clemence Makamure⁹ attempts to address this crisis by establishing, first, that the global environmental crisis is fundamentally a moral and religious one. If the problem involves religion, according to Makamure, then it goes without saying that it requires religious solutions. Therefore, the next section of this article will explore the role of the church in rescuing Mother Earth in order to guarantee a bright future for generations to come.

8 Rainer W. Bussmann, “Destruction and Management of Mount Kenya Forest,” *Ambio* 25 (5) (1996): 314–317.

9 Clemence Makamure, “Environmental Issues in Africa Theological Education.” In *Handbook of Theological Education in Africa*, 714–721, edited by Isapel Apawo Phiri and Dietrich Werner. (Dorpspruit: Cluster Publications, 2013).

The Role of the Church in Environmental Conservation in Kenya

Religion is a fundamental phenomenon in human life, particularly in Africa. John Mbiti observes that religion permeates all departments of life. Africans are very religious.¹⁰ As such, one is left wondering why rampant environmental degradation occurs in a country where the majority professes Christianity. Does this trend in Kenya affirm the words of Lyn White (1967) that Christianity is responsible for the world's environmental woes?¹¹ Whatever the answer, the most urgent question is: What is the role of the church in environmental conservation?

Writing in 1974, Henry Okullu in his book *Church and State* argues that the church is of paramount importance because it is society's conscience.¹² Okullu, however, was focusing on the political stance of Kenya during dictatorial single-party rule. His thoughts are still valid and most relevant in a world in which the destruction of natural resources and the contamination of the environment threaten the existence of humanity itself. Therefore, one of the major roles of the church in environmental conservation is by being conscious of what is happening at the moment. However, if the church remains aloof while Mau Forest, Aberdare or Mt Kenya Forests are destroyed in order to pave the way for farming, illegal logging, and charcoal-burning, or when industries are set up practically everywhere without environmental assessment as to their impacts on the local community, then the church leaves a lot to be desired.

It is imperative that the church, as the conscience of society, fulfils its divine mandate to save the world. According to Gottlieb, the first step to consciousness of this is to condemn the environmental destruction of Mother Earth. He is right to urge church leaders to preach a green gospel, condemning the abuse of nature for its effect on the non-human as well as human populations.¹³ While the church in Kenya may have been vocal in condemning the state for fomenting massive destruction of the environment, her voice has been far too selective and low key and of little impact on Kenya; even though with regard to political issues touching Wanjiku¹⁴ her voice has been loud enough to diminish the level of political corruption. Sadly, in general about the environment, her voice has been minimal if heard at all. As a religious institution with a public platform that can sensitise society with regard to environmental conservation, the church must do its duty. It has the moral authority to speak to issues of climate change, the emission of ozone-depleting gases, and to advocate for environmental conservation measures at workshops, retreats, seminars and conferences. The most effective of all platforms is the Sunday sermon. However, most ministers seem to

10 John S. Mbiti. *African Religion and Philosophy* (Nairobi: Heinemann Educational Publishers, 1969), 1.

11 See White, Lyn. 1967. "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis." *Science* 155 (3767) (March): 1203–1207.

12 See Henry Okullu. *Church and Politics in East Africa* (Nairobi: Uzima Press, 1974).

13 Gottlieb, "Religion and Ecology," 13.

14 A familiar phrase used in Kenya to refer to common public.

abrogate their responsibility to preach the gospel of Christ on environmental degradation and conservation, even though this is central to its calling.

The second way the church is to be the conscience of society is by monitoring how humanity treats Mother Earth, about which God is described in Genesis as declaring that "... everything was very good" (Genesis 1:31). To this end, the role of the church is to ensure that humanity acts in a more responsible manner because she is the earth's steward. Geisler, in support of this role of the church, asserts that:

God has entrusted the earth and its resources to our care, and we must act responsibly with them [because] it is not good stewardship to squander our valuable resources. The earth is God's garden and we are its keeper ... [therefore] we must not turn God's garden into a desert, nor his seas into cesspools.¹⁵

In light of Geisler's ideas, this article contends that the role of the church in environmental conservation is to ensure that humanity perpetuates the work of God. In a world with plentiful flora and fauna, humanity has to perpetuate the propagation of species, co-creating with God by ensuring multiplication of what exists in the world now. However, when we study different species of animals and plants at the brink of extinction, this phenomenon is worrisome because instead of humanity co-creating with God, humanity is actually the main cause of environmental degradation. People erect buildings in every available open space without regard for the environmental consequences. They build on riparian land, discarding plastic bottles everywhere that eventually block our drainage systems, which becomes a principal environmental hazard. In all these events, it remains the role of the church, with other like-minded bodies, to sensitise society to moral responsibility in constructing buildings, to avoid littering, and to engage in responsible tree-cutting.

Another way the church should alert society to environmental destruction is through the theological language of sin. While in Roman Catholicism different levels of sin exist, sin is still sin, whether against God, humanity or Mother Earth. Gottlieb cites an Orthodox global spiritual leader who maintains:

To commit crime against the natural world is a sin ... to cause species to become extinct and destroy the biological diversity of God's creation ... to degrade the integrity of the earth by causing changes in its climate, stripping the earth of its natural forests or destroying its wetlands ... to contaminate the earth's waters, its air or its life with poisonous substances, [all] these are sins.¹⁶

Such theological language can be a powerful tool in the mitigation of environmental degradation, especially in Kenya, with its stratification of sinful behaviour. Such behaviour allows game wardens conspiring with poachers to kill our rarest species in

15 Geisler, *Christian Ethics*, 306.

16 Gottlieb, "Religion and Ecology," 13.

pursuit of Mammon; forest wardens accepting tips from loggers; government officials turning a blind eye to industries dumping waste irresponsibly, and with disregard of human health. The church, for fear of losing potential financing for its projects, must not eschew its duty to call out sinfulness with regard to the environment in the same way that it denounces murder, rape, robbery, adultery, and so forth.

Providing instruction on environmental issues is another role of the church in the conservation effort. The church teaches that the entire universe belongs to God. The Psalmist asserts that “the earth is the Lord’s and everything in it, the world and all who live in it” (Psalms 24:1). God’s will must be done, mankind must protect the earth. Geisler explains further that the term “care” (*shamar* in Hebrew) means “to keep, to watch or to preserve ... [and] both words describe action taken on behalf of creation, not on behalf of humans as such [because] humans are duty-bound to serve and preserve the earth.”¹⁷ This means that humanity needs to be taught how to take care of the earth on behalf of God. Failure to act will worsen the dire consequences of human failures already so evident in nature.

To this end, it is the role of the church to emphatically teach the importance of conservation. This is because people misinterpret God’s mandate to humanity to exercise dominion, to “rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground” (Genesis 1:28). This must not be interpreted to mean that people can do whatever they like. It follows that it is the role of the church to teach the right interpretation of what God meant by “dominion.” It certainly does not mean polluting the waterways of Kenya, cutting forests protective of our water reservoirs, so important for human and wildlife consumption. Rather, according to Gottlieb, the church has a duty to teach that human dominion should be understood as a privilege among all other inhabitants of the earth. Limburg takes this meaning to another level by adding that having dominion over the earth does not imply permission to destroy the environment, but instead suggests that humans are to exercise responsible and caring stewardship of the earth and its resources.¹⁸ Therefore, it is correct to deduce that dominion, theologically speaking, is synonymous with the immense responsibility of ensuring that the world continues to function optimally.

Furthermore, due to the urgent need for environmental protection, ecclesiastical institutions around the world began promoting environmental studies beginning in the 1960s. These include classes on environmental theology, religion and environment, eco-theology and environmental ethics, among others. Environmental study programmes answer one of the criticisms of African theology, namely that it has not addressed postcolonial realities involving ethnicity, poverty, war, environmental degradation and many other urgent matters. In Kenya, this development has won much attention from church seminaries and universities, where such studies are now taught to theological students during their seminary studies. The goal of such teaching is to

17 Geisler, “Christian Ethics,” 305.

18 J. Limburg, “What does it Mean to have Dominion over the Earth?” *Dialogue* (1971): 221–222.

sensitise society with regard to the environment and its conservation. Churches are recognising that they have a central role to play in the environmental conservation of a planet on the verge of total destruction. Of course, when earth perishes, so will the church, despite its being in the world but not of it.

The church, as the body of Christ on earth, has to be yoked together with other environmentally like-minded world institutions that are campaigning for the conservation of Mother Earth. Though some may condemn it as having become worldly, its partnership and networking with other environmental bodies enhance its core mandate and mission of stewardship. It follows that networking with other local, national and international environmental bodies is essential for the church. As Oladeji observes, management of the environment requires an integrated decision-making framework and a multi-pronged approach because it entails involvement and collaboration on the part of all stakeholders.¹⁹ Kenyan churches at first were not conspicuous in this struggle, especially in the 1980s and 1990s when our Kenyan Nobel Peace Prize winner, the late Wangari Maathai, protested the erection of the Uhuru Park-Nairobi skyscraper. She had a passion for saving Karura Forest from land grabbers.

As of now, environmental networking between churches and other bodies exists, with churches establishing environmental desks to address global problems. The World Council of Churches (WCC) in Geneva criticises developed countries and calls for ecological justice.²⁰ It denounces the phenomenon of the rich becoming ever richer and stronger while they destroy the earth and further impoverish the poor, who become even more vulnerable, resulting in worsening injustice. In Kenya, in the wake of the Green World Campaign, various churches are establishing partnerships and links with organisations dedicated to saving Mother Earth.

The Anglican Church of Kenya sets a good example. In 2018 it became the third province in the Anglican Communion to join the other two provinces in the Green Anglicans Movement. All these efforts by churches are most laudable. Barbour opines that theologians should support all those promoting and propagating nature conservation in various ways in their long-standing struggle against air and water pollution, and in their demands for forest protection and reforestation programmes.²¹ With these campaigns and movements, churches are active in tree planting, soil erosion prevention, stopping the release of toxic gases into the environment, and

19 S. O. Oladeji. "World Heritage and Sustainable Development: The Role of Local Communities." A Lead Paper Presented at International Day for Monuments and Sites at National Museum Ondo State. (Nigeria Department of Eco-tourism and Wildlife Management, Federal University of Technology, Akure, 2012), 9.

20 Rogate Mshana. "Poverty and Justice in African Theological Education" 722–730. In *Handbook of Theological Education in Africa*, edited by Isapel Apawo Phiri and Dietrich Werner (Dorpspruit: Cluster Publications, 2013), 725.

21 G. Barbour. *Religion in an Age of Science* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1990), 26–27.

promoting responsible farming to ensure replenishment of the soil, as well as other laudable endeavours.

Conclusion

To sum up, this article explores the role of the church in a world threatened by environmental degradation. Cited are three key fundamental roles for the church in environmental conservation. The first is the church as society's conscience, meaning that, whenever humanity uses their God-given dominion for predatory exploitation instead of acting as co-creator with the Ultimate, the church must blow the whistle. The second role is, simply, teaching. A divine mandate requires the education of all stakeholders in caring for the earth. The church is in a privileged position with regard to conserving our environment and denouncing environmental degradation. The third role is that of partnership or networking with other like-minded environmental bodies in the fight for sustainability. Although the church is in the world but not of this world, it must urgently reach out to environmental groups and activists. It must move forward in collaboration with others to reverse the current trend of environmental degradation in order to function as the light of the world.

This article, then, establishes that Mother Nature is vital to human survival. This means the future of humanity solely depends on how the two (nature and humanity) will treat each other. It is right, then, to conclude that a symbiotic relationship exists in which each needs the other; must protect the other in the interest of survival. These points were made clearly by Anselm Adodo, who argues that human beings and plants exchange oxygen and carbon dioxide in a balanced way such that life thrives. In this system, human beings, plants, animals, and spirits co-exist as harmonious vibrations of the music of life.²² The article also finds that environmental conservation is a corporate responsibility in a society in which all stakeholders are called upon to join hands and make Mother Earth a pleasant place to live, with everything humanity needs being available and sufficient. This article calls upon the church as a religious institution to collaborate with other environmental bodies at the local, national and global levels, with the ultimate goal of mitigating environmental degradation.

This article recommends that environmental stakeholders, and particularly the church, must don the mantle of regular education of the masses—lest God's people perish for lack of knowledge. The church is in a privileged position to teach good farming methods that pose no threat of soil erosion, to encourage the adoption of alternative fuel sources such as bio-digesters for the production of gas, and to promote solar and wind energy rather than solely depending on wood fuel. In conclusion, the article has given much attention to the role of the church in environmental conservation. However, there are further virgin areas in environmental conservation, such as the use

22 See Anselm Adodo. *Nature Power: A Christian Approach to Herbal Medicine Akure* (Don Bosco Training Centre, School of Printing and Finishing, 2002).

of indigenous methodologies, and also earth-friendly modern technology among others. These, too, are fields ripe for further studies.

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