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EXAMINING THE ANTHROPOCENTRIC APPROACH OF CHRISTIANITY TO HUMAN–ENVIRONMENT RELATIONS

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Abstract
Religious worldviews shape traditional attitudes towards nature and the environment. The devastating changes occurring in the environment have become a global concern. However, the effects of these environmental changes on human beings, as well as the proliferation of waste and its environmental repercussions, have become even more pressing in contemporary discourse. The Christian religion adopts an anthropocentric position in the human–earth relationship, and this determines the role it plays within the changing human environment. This study examines the anthropocentric approach of Christianity to the human–earth relationship using the comparative analysis method to determine how this approach has either helped to sustain the environment or contributed to its deteriorating condition. It argues that Christianity's anthropocentric approach emphasises a stewardship role for humanity in relation to the environment, with a responsibility to tend and preserve it for sustainability. It recommends Robin Attfield's ethical considerations regarding the environmental role of religion, as these considerations may help to shape a constructive and responsible form of environmental stewardship.

Keywords: Religion, anthropocentric approach, Christianity, human–earth relationship, environmental sustainability.

Introduction

The degrading nature of man's physical and cultural environment has become a matter of global concern. The *State of the World 2000* report cites climate change, alongside population growth, as one of the critical challenges of the new century. It notes that in solving this problem, "all of society's institutions – from organized religion to corporations – have a role to play."[1] The problems within the human environment include pollution, overpopulation, waste disposal, climate change, global warming, and the greenhouse effect, among others. Within the ecosystem, climate change has become a ravaging force against ecological balance. It is "a change in global or regional climate patterns, in particular a change apparent from the mid to late twentieth century onwards attributed largely to increased levels of atmospheric carbon dioxide produced by the use of fossil fuels."[2] Olaniyi, Ojekunle, and Amujo succinctly captured this reality when they wrote, "climate change in Nigeria is evident from temperature increase, rainfall variability, drought, desertification, rising sea levels, erosion, floods, thunderstorms, bush fires, landslides, land degradation, more frequent, extreme weather conditions

[1] Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim, "Introduction: The Emerging Alliance of World Religions and Ecology," *Daedalus* 130, no. 4 (2001): 1.
[2] W. Ye, *Climate Change and Its Effect on the Global Food System* (Place of publication: ADEC ESG, 2016), 1.

and loss of biodiversity."[3] Year after year, farmers, for example, plant their crops according to the usual agricultural seasons, yet the expected climatic patterns have changed significantly. The timing of seasonal rainfall has become increasingly erratic, causing crops to become scorched on their farms due to irregular rainfall patterns. In Nigeria's climatic calendar, August was traditionally known as a period during which rainfall reduced considerably; however, today, the "August break" appears to have become almost a thing of the past. Similarly, the harmattan season, once synonymous with the December and Christmas period in most parts of Nigeria, is gradually fading away.

The problems associated with climate change are enormous. Although these changes are occurring globally, their effects often differ from one locality to another. Deena Robinson notes that "the extreme weather events are causing thousands of deaths, and the greenhouse gases are creating environments inhospitable to leading enjoyable lives. Poor air quality has been linked to higher rates of cancer, heart disease, stroke and asthma."[4] Another major problem is the rapid rate of species extinction, that is, the disappearance of wildlife on earth. This has largely been blamed on the ever-increasing human population and the rate of natural resource consumption. At the local level, food insecurity has also become a serious concern. In Nigeria, for example, Joshua Odeyemi reports that,

> The food insecurity and malnutrition analysis, Cadre Harmonise, led by the government of Nigeria and supported by partners, alerts on the deterioration of food insecurity in Nigeria with 33.1 million people expected to face high levels of acute food insecurity during the coming lean season (June–August). This represents an alarming rise of 7 million people from the same period last year, driven by economic hardship, coupled with record high inflation, the effects of climate change and persistent violence in the northeastern states of the country.[5]

The climate crisis therefore poses a significant threat to agriculture, as changes in temperature and precipitation patterns affect crop yields and alter agricultural zones.

All the challenges discussed so far point to the fact that climate change, the proliferation of waste across land, air, and water ecosystems, as well as other environmental problems, are realities confronting countries across the world. The United Nations Millennium Campaign, which began in 2002 and was geared towards eradicating extreme poverty, set time-bound targets for 2015 relating to gender equality, health, education, and environmental sustainability.[6] Following renewed commitments to meet the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) after 2015, member states, at a high-level summit held in September 2015, adopted a new set of goals tagged the "2030 Agenda for

[3] O. A. Olaniyi, Z. O. Ojekunle, and B. T. Amujo, "Review of Climate Change and Its Effects on Nigeria Ecosystem," *International Journal of Rural Development, Environment and Health Research* (2019), accessed 25 February 2024, www.opendocs.ids.ac.uk.
[4] R. Deena, "Problems Brought on by Climate Change and the Solutions," *Earth.Org*, 2021, accessed 25 February 2024, https://earth.org/climate.
[5] Joshua Odeyemi, "Over 33m Nigerians Face Food Insecurity in 2025 – Report," *Daily Trust*, 8 November 2024.
[6] United Nations, "Secretary General Launches New Campaign to Implement Millennium Development Goals," 2002, accessed 21 September 2025, www.media.un.org.

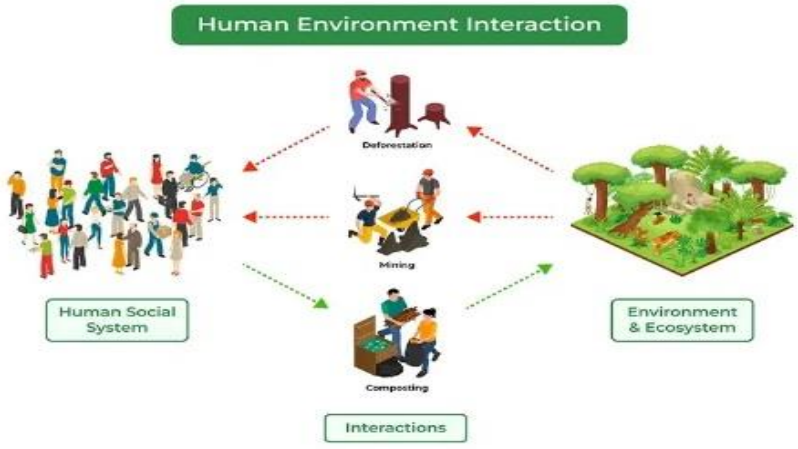
Sustainable Development." It is evident that at least eight of the seventeen goals relate directly to environmental issues, with Goal Thirteen specifically addressing "climate action." However, research shows that Nigeria, alongside many other developing countries, is behind in its efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).[7] There is therefore serious need to re-strategise. Individuals, organisations, and institutions whose actions are grounded in Christian beliefs, traditions, and principles, despite facing scepticism and resistance, possess the capacity to mobilise communities, inspire moral conduct, and offer distinct perspectives that can contribute significantly to environmental stewardship.

This study employs the comparative analysis method which examines phenomena alongside one another to identify points of similarity and difference.[8] The method allows for a clarification of the assumptions and implications of the anthropomorphic approach of the Christian religion to the human–earth relationship. The anthropomorphic approach in Christianity is often assumed to emphasise human-centred stewardship or dominion, an assumption that has implications for environmental sustainability. A comparative approach makes it possible to examine how this differs from eco-centric or bio-centric frameworks, thereby revealing the implications for environmental ethics and practice. Philosophical analysis, on the other hand, is a method of inquiry through which complex systems of thought are assessed by analysing them into simpler elements whose relationships are thereby brought into clearer focus. This work therefore examines the Christian anthropocentric approach to the human–earth relationship against the perception that Christianity has contributed more to the deteriorating state of the environment than to its preservation. The study begins with a general overview of the different approaches to the human–earth relationship and then discusses the objections and criticisms levelled against the Christian anthropocentric view as one that encourages human domination and the abuse of other creatures and the environment.

Approaches to the Human–Earth Relationship

The relationship between humans and the earth is complex and multifaceted, encompassing environmental, social, economic, and cultural dimensions. Human beings depend on the earth for resources and ecosystem services; however, human activities also affect the planet's health and stability through pollution, deforestation, climate change, and other forms of environmental degradation. The figure below illustrates the organised ways in which people live together, their interactions within culture, economy, politics, technology, and related spheres, as well as how these interactions shape the ways humans use, value, and manage the environment.

[7] B. Mandyoli, S. N. Asoba, N. P. Mefi, and T. Musikavanhu, "Nongovernmental Organizations and Sustainable Development Goals," *International Journal of Sciences and Research* (Florence, Italy, 2022), 25.
[8] M. Mokhtarianpour, "Islamic Model of Iranian Pattern Development Process Model," in S. M. Miri and Z. D. Shahrokh, *A Short Introduction to Comparative Research* (Tehran: Allameh Tabataba'i University, 2019), 1.



Source: www.geeksforgeeks.org/human-environment (accessed 29 May 2024)

The perception that different societies have had of this human–earth relationship has, however, changed over time. Richardson *et al.* opine that "in the first instance, it was addressed entirely through religion – the belief that superpowers control the destiny of the universe. Thus, it was accepted that it was the god(s) that controlled the seasons, rainfall, availability of food, and so on."[9] Approaches to the human–earth relationship are traditionally concerned with environmental ethics, that is, the view that the protection of the natural environment is of major practical and moral concern for humankind.

As scientific understanding has advanced and the human population, alongside human activities, has increased, both our perception and the nature of the human–earth relationship have changed. B. Moore *et al.* wrote, "a milestone in the evolution of this relationship was reached recently with the recognition that the earth functions as a self-regulating system – where not only physical, chemical and biological, but also human processes interact to create the environmental conditions experienced."[10] This new understanding of the human role in the functioning of the earth system implies an obligation for organised and active management of the human–earth relationship. Governments, individuals, religions, religious practices, religious epistemologies, and religious ideologies have all played significant roles in the changing human–environment relationship, particularly in addressing the global crisis of climate change, the exploration of human–animal relationships, and issues relating to human health and wellbeing. On the question of the human–earth relationship, a range of positions are evident: from the biocentric position of Native Americans, to the anthropocentric position of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Bahá'í, to the more ecocentric positions of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, as well as the anthropocosmic position of Taoism and

[9] K. Richardson, W. Steffen, and D. Liverman, eds., *Climate Change: Global Risks, Challenges and Decisions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 472.
[10] B. Moore III, A. Underdal, P. Lemke, and M. Loreau, "The Amsterdam Declaration on Global Change," in *Challenges of a Changing Earth: Proceedings of the Global Change Open Science Conference* (Amsterdam, 2001), 207.

Confucianism.[11] These positions are often classified into two broad categories: those that are "biocentric" or "life-centred" and those considered "anthropocentric" or "human-centred". This study therefore examines the primary focus of each approach, although the anthropocentric approach of Christianity remains the principal concern of this paper, particularly because it is often interpreted as emphasising human-centred stewardship and humanity's dominion over every other aspect of the environment, thereby leading to neglect, disregard, misuse, and, in some cases, the outright annihilation of other elements within the environment.

The desire to avoid the ill-treatment of other living things, as well as to uphold the purity of nature, gave rise to biocentrism. The biocentric perspective maintains that all living things are equal and deserve equal moral consideration. This position is important for promoting the preservation of biodiversity, animal rights, and environmental protection. However, biocentrism rejects the notion of humanity's superiority over other living things and challenges the belief that nature exists merely for human consumption. Rather, it argues that humans are simply one species among many, all of which are interdependent and rely on one another for survival and growth. Many Native American traditions emphasise the sacred value of nature, and biocentric ethics can also be found within religion. For example, the very first of the five Buddhist ethical principles states that humans should avoid killing or harming any living thing.[12] The difference between ecocentrism and biocentrism is that ecocentrism recognises the earth's interactive living and non-living systems, rather than only the earth's organisms as found in biocentrism, as central in importance.

Anthropocentrism, on the other hand, regards humans as separate from and superior to nature and maintains that human life possesses intrinsic value, while other entities such as animals, plants, and mineral resources are viewed as resources that may justifiably be exploited for the benefit of humankind. Anthropocosmism, however, argues that humans are deeply intertwined with the environment. Rather than placing value on a particular centre, as is the case with anthropocentric, biocentric, and ecocentric approaches, thereby excluding or marginalising what is considered peripheral, the anthropocosmic approach seeks to facilitate the mutual implication of humanity and the natural world, affirming the interconnectedness and mutual constitution of both central and peripheral values.[13] It is a truism that no comprehensive vision of humanity existing in harmonious balance with the environment has gained universal acceptance, at least within contemporary industrial societies. Consequently, the development of an integrated humanistic–ecological worldview has rapidly become an overriding intellectual and practical challenge for modern societies. George Sessions writes,

> For as the search for causes of the environmental crisis has tended to move to the deeper level of examining Western society's most basic assumptions and attitudes towards non-human nature, an increasing

[11] J. Grim and M. E. Tucker, eds., *Worldviews and Ecology: Religion, Philosophy and the Environment* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1993), 1.
[12] M. Schouten, "Biocentrism: Definition, Ethics and Examples," 2023, accessed 11 March 2024, https://study.com/academy/lesson/biocentrism.
[13] S. Mickey, "Contribution to Anthropocosmic Environmental Ethics," *Worldviews* 11, no. 2 (2007): 226, accessed 11 March 2024, http://www.jstor.org/stable/43809353.

> number of scholars have concluded that the anthropocentric orientation of our Western religious and philosophical traditions have played a major role in the formation of ideologies which have resulted in the crisis.[14]

In examining the anthropocentric approach of the Christian religion to the human–earth relationship in order to determine how it either helps to sustain the environment or contributes to its deteriorating condition, it is important to bear in mind that "anthropocentrism has been claimed to be the root of the global environmental crisis."[15] The variety of usages associated with the concept of "anthropocentrism" reveals several underlying disagreements beneath the apparent consensus surrounding calls for its rejection. Ben Mylius developed a language for distinguishing between various senses of the term "anthropocentrism" as follows:

1. Perceptual anthropocentrism, which characterises paradigms informed by sense-data derived from human sensory organs.
2. Descriptive anthropocentrism, which characterises paradigms that begin from, centre upon, or are organised around *Homo sapiens* or "the human."
3. Normative anthropocentrism, which characterises paradigms that constrain inquiry in ways that privilege *Homo sapiens* or "the human" (passive normative anthropocentrism); and paradigms that make assumptions or assertions concerning the superiority of *Homo sapiens*, its capacities, the primacy of its values, and its position in the universe, and/or make prescriptions based on these assumptions and assertions (active normative anthropocentrism).

These various senses of the term "anthropocentrism" frequently assert either that humanity is exceptional or that humanity constitutes the norm. Within these conceptions, however, it is possible to distinguish six separate dimensions of anthropocentric thought: humans have been understood as a high point within a spatial hierarchy; as the culmination of a temporal sequence; as fundamentally different in kind; as a bodily standard of measurement; as a mental constraint on apprehension; and as a self-evident identity.[16] The Christian religion is therefore often considered to possess a strong anthropocentric orientation based on its creation account of the universe and humanity's place within it.

The Christian Anthropocentric Approach to the Human–Earth Relationship

Many environmental ethicists trace the roots of anthropocentrism to the creation narrative in Genesis (1:26–28) in the Judeo-Christian Bible, in which humans are created in the image of God through the doctrine of *imago Dei*. Christian anthropocentrism, like many Western religious and philosophical traditions, therefore, argues that human beings are the central or most significant entities in the world and possess intrinsic value. This perspective tends to regard humans as separate from and superior to

[14] G. S. Sessions, "Anthropocentrism and the Environmental Crisis," *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations* 2, no. 1 (1974): 71.
[15] L. Droz, "Anthropocentrism as the Scapegoat of the Environmental Crisis: A Review," *Ethics, Science, and Environmental Politics* 22 (2022): 25.
[16] T. Tyler, "The Exception and the Norm: Dimensions of Anthropocentrism," in S. McHugh, R. McKay, and J. Miller, eds., *The Palgrave Handbook of Animals and Literature* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 15.

nature. The instruction given to humanity in Genesis to "subdue" the earth and to "have dominion" over all other living creatures has consequently been interpreted as an indication of humanity's superiority over nature. Nature therefore assumes an instrumental value in relation to humanity in the sense that the natural world is often perceived to possess value primarily insofar as it benefits humankind.[17] Andy McIntosh notes that "major doctrines find their roots in the early chapters of Genesis and are developed further in the rest of Scripture, particularly in the New Testament. They include the following: 'man is made in the image of God and is different from animals (Genesis 1:27, 1 Corinthians 11:7).'"[18] McIntosh further notes that from Genesis 1:28, "be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it," the dominion mandate given to humanity is clear. Humanity is portrayed as distinct from animals, made in God's image, and entrusted with delegated authority over the world and other living creatures. Furthermore, verse 29, "I have given you every herb that yields seed … to you it shall be for food," corresponds with Genesis 9:3, where it is written that every moving thing that lives shall be food for humanity.[19]

Unfortunately, these Christian texts and their various interpretations are frequently criticised for elevating humans above other parts of nature and for paving the way for domination and abuse. Such views, like secular conceptions of life, have always been, and continue to be, significant factors in shaping human moral attitudes and actions towards the environment. Michael Gilmour argues that the anthropocentric view clouds human understanding in the following manner: "we are biased toward our own species, tending to think we alone matter among all other living things. We find it difficult even to imagine other species possessing forms of intimacy with their Creator, but we find imagery to that effect in biblical poetry."[20] These are some of the ways in which the Christian anthropocentric view influences humanity's attitude towards the environment and raises questions such as the one Gilmour further asks: "is it merely a poetic fancy for the Psalmist (in the Bible) to call on sea monster, wild animals, cattle, creeping things, and flying birds to praise God (Psalm 148:7, 10) or is it possible that in their own way, they actually do just that?" He concludes that "within the theological poetic language of the Bible, it is certainly possible for non-humans to engage in forms of communion with their Maker."[21] This interpretation suggests that other creatures of the earth possess a form of intrinsic value and should therefore be respected rather than abused. This critique of anthropocentric thought forms part of a broader argument that links human-centred interpretations of religion to contemporary ecological crises.

In extreme cases, the Christian anthropocentric view is blamed for most ecological crisis in the world today. Tonnesen, Oma, and Rattasepp argue that, "unlike the previous five extinction events in earth's history which, for example were caused by asteroids, this sixth one is largely caused by human beings. Some of the contributing factors include greenhouse gas emissions, pollution, overfishing, agricultural activities, overhunting, excessive meat and dairy consumption and land use

[17] S. E. Boslaugh, "Anthropocentrism," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 2016, accessed 19 April 2024, https://www.britannica.com/topic/anthropocentrism.
[18] A. McIntosh, *Genesis 1–11: A Verse-by-Verse Commentary* (UK: Day One Publications, 2016), 11–12.
[19] Ibid., 24.
[20] M. J. Gilmour, *Eden's Other Residents: The Bible and Animals* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014), 87.
[21] Ibid., 88.

change (like deforestation)."[22] Elizabeth Kolbert conceives the sixth extinction of species as "one-third of all reef-building corals, a third of all freshwater mollusks, a third of sharks and rays, a quarter of all mammals, a fifth of all reptiles, and a sixth of all birds are headed toward oblivion."[23] Hence, most environmental humanities scholars agree that, if we are to address the problem of mass extinction, our attitudes should become less anthropocentric and more inclusive towards non-human life. Stephen Grosse paints an even more worrisome picture of the effects of anthropocentric on the environment as follows:

> Despite the predictions of a grim future for the earth, human society continues to live in relative ignorance of the devastating effects that an anthropocentric lifestyle has on the natural world. Humans harm the environment in ways that are too numerous to count and if we continue to use natural resources at our current accelerated rate, within the next several centuries a vast majority of the creatures on the planet will be destroyed. It is foreseeable that human life itself will cease to exist if humans do not realize the devastating effects their ecological disregard has on the sustainability of the earth.[24]

For instance, a study by Ogunbode and Oyekan in the neighbouring cities of Iwo (Osun State) and Ibadan (Oyo State) in South-West Nigeria revealed the adverse effects of religious activities on the quality of the human environment. In this study, 52.2 percent of the respondents were Christians, 43.5 percent were Muslims, while 4.3 percent identified as traditional religionists.[25] Ogunbode and Oyekan observe in this study that "the indiscriminate location of worship centres, the release of effluents through the use of water, surface water contamination, noise pollution, and diversion of various public places for religious purposes could jeopardize sustainable human living in these cities if not checked through the introduction of relevant policies by stakeholders."[26] Although religiosity may obscure practitioners' awareness of these consequences, the long-term effects on health, socio-economic wellbeing, and the environment may be far-reaching and difficult to quantify. Odunola *et al.* observed a growing trend in Ibadan characterised by indiscriminate and poorly regulated siting of worship centres within residential neighbourhoods across the city.[27] They further noted "the removal of vegetation for new worship centres, especially at the outskirts of the town, for potential and existing members who might have moved to their new houses located at that location." According to the

[22] M. Tønnessen, K. A. Oma, and S. Rattasepp, eds., *Thinking about Animals in the Age of the Anthropocene* (London: Lexington Books, 2016), vii.
[23] E. Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2014), 17–18.
[24] S. Grosse, "Building a Relationship with the Earth: Humans and Ecology in Genesis 1–3," *Denison Journal of Religion* 5 (2005), accessed 3 May 2024, http://digitalcommons.denison.edu/religion/vol5/iss1/4.
[25] T. O. Ogunbode and F. E. Oyekan, "Religious Practices and Its Impact on a Sustainable Urban Environment in Nigeria: The Way Forward," *The Scientific World Journal* (2023), accessed 9 December 2025, https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov.
[26] Ibid., 23.
[27] O. O. Odunola et al., "Evaluation of Locational and Environmental Effects of Religious Centres on Adjoining Development in Ibadan, Nigeria," *Lautech Journal of Civil and Environmental Studies* 7, no. 1 (2021): 76–87, accessed 9 December 2025, www.googlescholar.com.

authors, "the pattern of expansion has the tendency to aggravate the rate of degradation of the human environment."[28]

Other religious activities identified in Iwo and Ibadan as negatively affecting the quality of the built environment include noise pollution and the religious use of water. Common among many worship centres is the use of public address systems (PAS), which significantly amplify noise levels. According to Oloruntoba et al., "cases of headache, stroke, and a rise in blood pressure are all attributed to the degraded quality of life caused by noise pollution."[29] Adesoji similarly reports that such health conditions are increasingly prevalent in Nigeria.[30]

Within the Christian faith, some denominations practise the use of water for spiritual cleansing, ritual baths, and other forms of healing or 'miracles.' In many cases, the disposal and misuse of water during these activities contribute to unpleasant odours and environmental degradation through the release of effluents from worship centres. Sewapo observes that "Christian denominations such as Baptists, Celestials, Cherubim, and Seraphim use water as objects for miracles and for baptismal services." He further argues that "the quality of the environment may be at the receiving end of using this resource for various purposes which may have to be checked."[31] Unfortunately, this situation is not limited to these locations alone but reflects a broader reality in many parts of the country.

This lack of ecological awareness further complicates efforts to address environmental problems. In Habel's explanation, "the verb used for 'subdue' (as in Genesis 1:26) is kabash, a word associated with forceful subjugating, enslavement (Jeremiah 34:11; Nehemiah 5:5), crushing hostile nations (2 Samuel 8:11), and the rape of a woman (Esther 7:8)."[32] For Habel, it is difficult to derive an ecological interpretation from such a highly anthropocentric and abrasive term.

There are, of course, several challenges and criticisms associated with the Christian anthropocentric understanding of the human–earth relationship. Nevertheless, especially considering the current environmental crises confronting contemporary society, it is important to consider how anthropocentric thought may have narrowed or, in some cases, misdirected Christian ecological theology. In a study by Onnoghen *et al*., the authors rejected the hypothesis that there is no significant relationship between Christianity and the conservation of natural resources. Their analysis revealed that "the calculated r-value of 0.194 was greater than the critical r-value of 0.138 at the 0.05 level of significance with 198 degrees of freedom. This finding indicates a significant relationship between

[28] Ibid, 78.
[29] E. O. Oloruntoba , R. A. Ademola, M. K. C. Scridhar, et al., "Urban Environmental Noise Pollution and Perceived Health Effects in Ibadan, Nigeria," *African Journal of Biomedical Research* 15, no. 2 (2012): 77–84, accessed 9 December 2025, www.googlescholar.com.
[30] A. Adesoji, "The New Pentecostal Movement in Nigeria and the Politics of Belonging," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 52, no. 8 (2016): 1159–1173, accessed 9 December 2025, www.googlescholar.com.
[31] H. Sewapo, "An African Christian Cultural Perspective of the Symbolic Value of Water in the Fourth Gospel," *Iqra Journal: Theological and Religious Studies* 2, no. 4 (2022): 5–15, accessed 9 December 2025, www.googlescholar.com.
[32] N. C. Habel, *Readings from the Perspective of Earth* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2000), 46.

Christianity and the conservation of natural resources in Akamkpa Local Government Area of Cross River State."[33]

Drawing on Deuteronomy 20:19 — "When thou shalt besiege a city a long time, in making war against it to take it, thou shalt not destroy the trees thereof by forcing an axe against them: for thou mayest eat of them, and thou shalt not cut them down (for the tree of the field is man's life) to employ them in the siege" (KJV) — Onnoghen *et al.* conclude that "the above view is strongly against claims that Christian religion promotes indiscriminate utilization of natural resources, through assertions that God created every living creature as food for man; man must take absolute care to conserve and protect them."[34]

Anthropocentrism emphasises human priority over the earth and has often been used to justify the use, exploitation, neglect, or stewardship of nature. Rooted in Genesis 1:26–28, this perspective has significantly influenced Christian attitudes towards the environment. However, anthropocentrism is not necessarily a wholly negative force, nor does it inevitably elevate human interests above God's purposes for creation as a whole. For this reason, a critical examination of the Christian anthropocentric approach to the human–earth relationship remains necessary in the pursuit of a more sustainable environment.

Examining the Christian Anthropocentric Approach to the Human–Earth Relationship

The scriptural passage Genesis 1:28 states: "And God blessed them, and God said unto them, be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moves upon the earth" (KJV). This passage has generated considerable debate because of the different meanings and applications scholars have attached to it. The key expressions in the passage are "be fruitful," "multiply," "replenish" (fill), "subdue," and "have dominion over." This study focuses primarily on the term "replenish" in relation to sustainability. According to Daniel T. Mollenkamp, sustainability refers to "the ability to maintain or support a process over time."[35] The word "replenish," meaning "fill," conveys the idea of restoring, adding to, or occupying an empty space or vacuum. In this sense, it may imply filling a vacancy or restoring what is lacking. Replenish appears six times in the book of Genesis and seventy-six times in the Bible as a whole.[36]

Some scholars have taken Genesis 1:28 to mean legitimisation unlimited human exploitation of other creatures, the earth's resources, and non-human life. Others interpret "replenish" as a command to marry and numerically populate the earth. However, these interpretations have been criticised as misconstrued. Responding to the question of whether the verse commands all people to

[33] U. N. Onnoghen et al., "Influence of Religious Beliefs on the Conservation of Natural Resources in Akamkpa Local Government Area of Cross River State, Nigeria," *Prestige Journal of Education* 2, no. 2 (2019): 222.
[34] Ibid, 222.
[35] D. T. Mollenkamp, *What Is Sustainability? How Sustainabilities Work, Benefits, and Example* (New York: Dotdash Meredith Publishing, 2023).
[36] S. N. Ani and V. Ogbozor, "The Hermeneutics of Genesis 1:28 and Environmental Ethics: A Socio-Ethical Evaluation," *Sapientio Global Journal of Arts, Humanities and Development Studies* 3, no. 2 (2020): 107.

marry and procreate, Matthew Poole argues that: "it does not oblige every particular person to marry, as appears both from the example of the Lord Jesus who lived and died in an unmarried state, and from his commendation of those who made themselves eunuchs for the Kingdom of God, Matthew 19:12, and from St. Paul's approbation of virginity, 1 Corinthians 7:1, 1 Corinthians 7:8, 1 Corinthians 7:26–27, 1 Corinthians 7:32."[37] Poole further explains that the command to "fill" the earth should rather be understood as "a command obliging all men so far as not to suffer the extinction of mankind." According to him, this command applied particularly to Adam and Eve and later to Noah and his family after the flood.[38]

Similarly, Manus and Obioma, commenting on Genesis 1:28, assert that "humanity is blessed and empowered to transmit the life it has received from God. By this, it is made co-creator with God. Apart from this singular power, humankind is enjoined to subdue the earth."[39] Theologians such as Norbert Lohfink further argue that the verb "subdue" should be understood not as a licence for exploitation but rather as a divine injunction to handle nature responsibly so that it remains productive and supportive of life on earth.[40] It is in this light that the words of John McConnell in his *Earth Magna Carta* become particularly relevant: "let every individual and institution now think and act as a responsible trustee of Earth, seeking choices in ecology, economies and ethics that will provide a sustainable future, eliminate pollution, poverty and violence, awaken the wonder of life and foster peaceful progress in the human adventure."[41]

Within the Christian anthropocentric framework, humanity occupies the role of steward of the earth. A steward may be understood as a person entrusted with the management of another's property or affairs; one who administers responsibilities on behalf of another.[42] Stewardship, therefore, is the theological belief that human beings are responsible for the care and management of the world. This understanding may also have social and political implications, particularly within traditions such as Christian democracy. The concept of stewardship begins with the recognition that God is the owner of all creation, as reflected in passages such as Exodus 19:5, Psalm 24:1, Psalm 50:10–12, Deuteronomy 10:14, Leviticus 25:23, Job 41:11, and Revelation 22:13. Stewardship also implies accountability, since stewards are expected to report back to the owner concerning how entrusted resources have been managed.

In the context of Genesis 1:26–28, the concept of "dominion" represents a delegated right to rule. Human beings, created in the image of God, are expected to exercise authority on God's behalf. Consequently, humanity does not rule creation autonomously but is expected to reflect God's attitude towards creation. This understanding is reinforced in Genesis 2:15, where humanity is placed in the garden "to dress it and to keep it," thereby emphasising the stewardship role. Dominion, therefore,

[37] M. Poole, *Matthew Poole's Commentary on the Holy Bible*, 3 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1990).
[38] Ibid.
[39] C. U. Manus and D. Obioma, "Preaching the 'Green Gospel' in Our Environment: A Re-reading of Genesis 1:27–28 in the Nigerian Context," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 72, no. 4 (2016).
[40] N. Lohfink, *Theology of the Pentateuch* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 7–8.
[41] J. McConnell, "Earth Charter: History of the Original Earth Charter," 1979, accessed 28 February 2024.
[42] "Dictionary.com," accessed 27 February 2024, https://www.dictionary.com.

should not be interpreted as domination; rather, it implies servanthood, which was exemplified in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ.

This understanding of stewardship extends beyond human relationships to include the non-human world. Human beings are called to care for creation rather than abuse it, as reflected in Proverbs 12:10. Such responsibility implies the principle of sustainability, which seeks to conserve and renew the earth rather than deplete or destroy it. The wellbeing of the environment, including animal life, is also reflected in passages such as Matthew 10:29, Psalm 104:14, Psalm 104:21, Matthew 6:26, and Deuteronomy 22:6–7.

Furthermore, stewardship entails several obligations. First, Christians are called to worship the Creator rather than creation itself. Second, because clean air, pure water, and adequate natural resources are essential for public health and social stability, governments have an obligation to protect citizens from the effects of environmental degradation. This responsibility therefore calls for humility and caution in humanity's interaction with nature. Third, stewardship requires environmentally responsible practices such as recycling, conservation of resources, and meaningful engagement with nature. Neglect and destruction of the environment contradict the command of God and are displeasing to Him (Jeremiah 2:27). Some Christians may argue that human beings are more important than the rest of creation and that priority should therefore be given to human needs rather than environmental concerns. However, many environmental problems ultimately affect human wellbeing directly. When the environment is neglected, human communities inevitably suffer. Caring for non-human creation and preserving the delicate interactions within nature are therefore essential aspects of justice and responsible living.

According to the 2023 Sustainable Development Report published by the United Nations Sustainable Development Solutions Network, global progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) established in 2015 remains sluggish. While some progress was made between 2015 and 2019 towards sustainability and a circular economy, this progress declined significantly following the global pandemic in 2020. High-income economies adapted more effectively than low- and middle-income countries, many of which lacked the capacity to implement emergency measures. Even among wealthier nations, substantial progress has not been achieved in crucial areas such as climate change, biodiversity conservation, and responsible consumption. The outlook for low-income countries remains particularly bleak due to limited financial resources and increasing vulnerability to global crises.

At the global level, no single SDG is currently expected to be fully achieved, largely because of climate change and severe threats to biodiversity. The world continues to face challenges such as water scarcity, threats to marine ecosystems, food insecurity, hunger, and disruptions to educational systems. The G20 countries account for more than 80 percent of global GDP, nearly 70 percent of the world's forests, and over 50 percent of the world's landmass. They are also responsible for 90 percent of global lignite and coal extraction and more than 60 percent of global oil and gas production. Consequently, these nations bear enormous responsibility for advancing sustainable development and protecting planetary boundaries. Reuters reported on 16 November 2023 that developed countries finally delivered their annual $100 billion climate commitment to developing economies in 2022 after

repeatedly missing the target established in 2009. Many low-income countries depend heavily on such support to transition to green energy and strengthen climate resilience.[43]

From the foregoing, progress in addressing climate change appears far from satisfactory. In Nigeria, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) also appeared to have faced serious setbacks. Prior to 2015, challenges such as inadequate human capacity for implementation, poor access to primary healthcare systems, unreliable data systems, inadequate funding, indiscipline, and endemic corruption hindered progress in the country.[44] Many of these challenges remain unresolved. Religion, because of its enduring influence on human beliefs and behaviour, has a crucial role to play in addressing environmental problems. Environmental challenges cannot be addressed solely through scientific knowledge and technological advancement; they also require ethical responsibility grounded in religious beliefs and values. Nigeria remains one of the most religious countries in the world, and many religious adherents often place greater trust in the teachings of religious leaders than even in medical advice.[45] If this is the case, then messages concerning climate change and environmental sustainability can effectively be disseminated through religious institutions such as churches and mosques across the country.

Diara and Nche propose a theology of climate change mitigation and adaptation, arguing that "while most Christians appreciate the beauty of nature, many do not realize that there is a strong biblical basis for creation care, and that, in fact, many ethical values, fundamental to the development of a peaceful society, are particularly relevant to ecological question."[46] Yet such awareness cannot emerge without deliberate teaching and guidance. This responsibility rests significantly upon the clergy. Estimates suggest that Christians constitute approximately 45–54 percent of Nigeria's population, amounting to between 80 and 100 million people.[47]

In Nigeria, human survival and economic growth depend heavily on land, forests, rivers, and mineral resources. However, unsustainable practices such as oil extraction, deforestation, and over-farming continue to generate serious ecological challenges. Rapid urbanisation in cities such as Lagos, Abuja, and Port Harcourt has further increased pressure on land, drainage systems, and water resources. Oyefeso Folu observes that "Nigeria has one of the highest deforestation rates in the world."[48] The Church in Nigeria therefore has a significant role to play in encouraging its members to join broader global efforts aimed at combating and mitigating climate change. As this study has shown, many negative Christian attitudes towards the environment, which contribute to environmental degradation, may stem from the misinterpretation or misunderstanding of Genesis 1:26–28. Consequently, there is need for intentional denominational philosophies, principles, and policies that

[43] UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network, accessed 26 February 2024, https://www.un.org.
[44] S. Ajiye, "Achievements of Millennium Development Goals in Nigeria: A Critical Examination," *International Affairs and Global Strategy* (2014): 25.
[45] T. Fasua, "Who Said Churches, Mosques and Synagogues Are Not Essential Services?" *The Cable*, 2020, accessed 28 February 2024, https://www.thecable.ng.
[46] B. Diara and C. Nche, "Theology of Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation: The Place of the Church," *Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* 2, no. 13 (2013).
[47] "National Profiles: Nigeria," Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA), retrieved 15 May 2025.
[48] Folu Oyefeso, "Nigeria's Deforestation Crisis: Understanding the Urgent Need for Change," 3 April 2024, www.foluoyefeso.com.

can guide the systematic implementation of environmental programmes and projects rooted in a proper understanding of Genesis 1:28 — namely, the responsible care and sustainability of the environment.

Robin Attfield's Ethical Consideration of the Environmental Role of Religion

In his discussion of environmental ethics and religion, Robin Attfield argues that the accusation that theistic religions promote human-centred and domineering attitudes towards nature is questionable. Rather, he maintains that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have encouraged many people to view human beings as stewards of nature. Although this understanding does not necessarily provide concrete policy directives, Attfield contends that it has been valuable in directing human attention towards environmental responsibility.[49] Attfield argues in favour of biocentrism, maintaining that all living beings possess a good of their own and therefore have moral standing, although the degree of their moral considerability may vary. He further argues that the flourishing of all living beings possesses intrinsic value. At the same time, he insists that human beings are morally responsible not only to present generations but also to future beings who may be affected by present actions. In particular, humanity has a duty to ensure that future beings are able to meet their basic needs.

On this basis, Attfield's biocentrism endorses a form of consequentialism in which the moral value of a practice or character is determined by its consequences for all affected living beings — human and non-human, present and future. These positions align, in many respects, with the ideal Christian anthropocentric understanding of the human–earth relationship examined in this study. Nevertheless, from the mid twentieth century, and more rapidly from around 1970 onwards, human beings became increasingly aware of the environmental crises caused by their activities. This growing awareness generated demands for a non-anthropocentric ethic, one that also considers the interests of non-human beings. Consequently, questions emerged concerning whether monotheistic religions such as Christianity contribute towards mitigating ecological problems or whether they instead contribute to, or even exacerbate, such problems.

In response to these concerns, Attfield explains that anthropocentrism may be understood in two different ways: either as the belief that everything was created solely for the sake of human life and wellbeing, or as the view that moral action should be judged according to the promotion of human wellbeing. According to Attfield, it was the misleading interpretation of anthropocentrism by thinkers such as Lynn White that contributed significantly to the condemnation of Christianity within environmental discourse. White famously argued that Christianity insisted "that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends."[50] Some scholars, however, have criticised this interpretation as unbiblical. Responding to White's position, Attfield writes: "if, however, Christianity and Judaism turn out to admit of interpretations other than those of White, there remains a need to consider whether their message is sufficient to generate and inspire environmental activism."[51]

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[49] T. Pölzler, review of *Environmental Ethics: A Very Short Introduction*, by Robin Attfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 2.

[50] E. Whitney, "Lynn White Jr.'s 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis' After 50 Years," *History Compass* (2015): 11.

[51] R. Attfield, "Climate Change and Religion," in *Handbook of Philosophy of Climate Change* (Springer Nature, 2023), 431.

Historically, Attfield acknowledges that while White may have misrepresented Christian theology and the assumptions underlying medieval technology within Latin Christianity, White's thesis appears less misguided when applied to the property-oriented individualism and capitalism that characterised certain expressions of Christianity from the seventeenth century onwards. Attfield does not suggest that Christianity entirely abandoned its earlier theological foundations during this period. Indeed, this era also witnessed a renewed emphasis on stewardship theology.[52] Similarly, Northcott argues that White wrongly indicted Christianity as a whole for promoting an anthropocentric domination of nature when he should instead have criticised Baconian Christianity as one of the historical roots of the ecological crisis.[53] The Christian understanding of humanity as stewards or trustees, accountable to God for the treatment and use of creation, became more explicit in Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536).[54] In the following century, stewardship was applied more directly to nature by Sir Matthew Hale, Chief Justice of England. In *The Primitive Origination of Mankind* (1677), Hale described humanity as the "viceroy" of God on earth and presented human beings as accountable stewards who would answer for any failure to fulfil their responsibilities towards creation.[55] More recently, the American Catholic Bishops have advocated stewardship and care for creation in *Seven Themes of Catholic Social Teaching* (2020).

Attfield therefore defends the Christian belief that human beings are stewards answerable to God for the care of nature.[56] In his view, the stewardship or trusteeship model is compatible with a range of ethical positions, including biocentric consequentialism. By providing a credible metaphysical framework for humanity's role within creation, stewardship also strengthens moral motivation for ethical action. It reinforces values such as concern for human wellbeing and care for fellow creatures. Attfield's ethical reflections on the environmental role of religion, particularly Christianity, contribute towards shaping a constructive understanding of responsible stewardship. The preservation of ecosystems upon which both humanity and other living creatures depend, including the protection of biological diversity and the survival of species, remains essential for sustainable development.

Conclusion

The various approaches to the human–earth relationship each present their own challenges and criticisms. Nevertheless, considering the environmental crises confronting contemporary society, it is important to reconsider how misinterpretations of Christian anthropocentric thought may have diverted Christian ecological theology from its intended role as a viable framework for effective environmental activism. Anthropocentrism is not necessarily a negative force; however, its interpretations and practical implications must be carefully examined and responsibly guided.

[52] J. Passmore, *Man's Responsibility for Nature*, 2nd ed. (London: Duckworth, 1980), 30.
[53] M. Northcott, *A Political Theology of Climate Change* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans; London: SPCK, 2013), 106.
[54] J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2001).
[55] Passmore, *Man's Responsibility for Nature*, 30.
[56] R. Attfield, *The Ethics of the Global Environment*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 3.

Within Christianity, human beings are understood as stewards of God's creation. As Genesis 2:15 states, "And the Lord God took the man and put him into the Garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it" (KJV). Christianity therefore teaches that humanity bears responsibility towards the environment, including the duty to preserve and care for the earth. Christians are consequently obliged to act in environmentally responsible ways. We therefore conclude that the Christian anthropocentric approach to the human–earth relationship, properly understood, emphasises humanity's stewardship role in caring for creation and ensuring its sustainability.