

Challenges of Climate Change: The Role of Christian Religious Leaders

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Abstract

The Global Climate has substantially changed largely as a result of human activity. The sun that shone mildly to give the day-light, has suddenly become hostile, harsh and unfavorable to man. The rain that dropped to give water to the earth, has also become hostile and extreme, destroying houses and lives. The ocean and seas that were initially calm and reserved have suddenly risen and encroaching into dry lands, flooding several places. The land that sustained and produced food for man, has turned against man. And the air that was clean and unpolluted has become contaminated and harmful to man. Indeed, the world is currently faced with a seemingly intractable problem. However, this global Climate change is currently fought by world leaders. Hence, there have been several global Climate change Conferences. Precisely, the first World Climate Conference was held in 1979. And ever since, there have been similar conferences till date. Although, the fight against Climate change is quite old, the problem is still rearing its ugly head. Therefore, having critically studied the issue, the researcher outlined roles for Christian religious leaders in this War against Climate change.

Keywords: Anthropogenic, Eco-sustainability, Carbon dioxide, Climate Change, Christian Religious Leaders

Introduction

Fears loom in the air as the atmosphere spells doom. Calamity lurks in the corner as everybody seems to be devastated. People gather in groups grubbing in search of goal related solutions. What can be done to salvage the situation? Is the big question, whose answer seems unfathomable. The earth has become intractably sick and seems to be defiling medications.

The Earth's Climate has significantly changed with adverse effects on its inhabitants. According to scientists, there have been a dramatic change in global temperatures resulting mostly from anthropogenic (human) activities. These human activities are traceable from the industrial revolution, to the subsequent increase in the use of fossil fuels, such as coal and oil, which have led to the heavy emission of Carbon dioxide (CO₂) into the air. Also, activities like increased deforestation and land use contribute to affecting the climate "microclimate, and measures of climate variables"(www.en.wikipedia.org).

Unfortunately, the consequences of this, affect all and sundry. Hence, there have been series of global Conferences and Summits on "Climate change", aimed at mapping out modalities for a workable solution. And in one of these climate summits, the U.S President Barack Obama is reported to have said thus:

The world must come together to confront climate change. There is little scientific dispute that if we do nothing, we will face more drought, famine and mass displacement that will fuel more conflict for decades (www.visibleearth.nasa.gov).

With every passing week, the scientific data get more precise, and more frightening. Yet this has regrettably proven insufficient to move people to action. Instead, what dominates each Climate Summit, is politics and interest.

Therefore, this Paper attempts a critical evaluation of the situation in order to create a niche for Christian Religious leaders in the fight against Climate change and its adverse effects.

Christian religious leaders and climate change: definition

Christian Leaders

Christian leaders in this context, simply refer to those at the helm of affairs in Churches, Christian groups and organizations, all over the world. These may include Popes, General Overseers, Archbishops, Bishops, Priests, Pastors, Deacons, Evangelists, Apostles, Knights, Presidents of Church administrative groups (men, women and youth groups) choir masters/mistresses e.t.c.

Climate Change

Climate change refers to the significant increase in the earth's temperature over a long period of time. It involves the increase in the average temperature of near surface air and oceans of the earth in recent decades and its projected continuation. Nevertheless, for the purpose of this Paper, Climate change can be referred to as, those changes in the earth's climate variables caused by human or anthropogenic factors.

The causes and effects of climate change

The Causes of Climate change can be divided into two categories; the Human (anthropogenic) and the Natural causes. Among the Natural causes are:(i)Volcanic eruptions which release large volumes of sulphur dioxide (SO₂), water vapour, dust and ash into the atmosphere(ii)Ocean current which produces a phenomena such as "El Nino" that affects the climate through the movement of CO₂ into or out of the atmosphere(iii)Earth orbital changes which affect the climate substantially through the variations in orbital speed and coverage and(iv)Solar variations which also affects the climate through variations in the amount of energy output. (www.climatechangechallenge.org) All this, notwithstanding, their effects on the climate are understandably negligible, when compared to the effects of human activities.

There is "strong evidence that the warming of the earth over the last half-century has been caused largely by human activity" wrote the Met Office, Hadley Centre U.K. (www.climatechangechallenge.org). These activities include the burning of fossil fuels and coals for industrial purposes, deforestation, agriculture, transportation, energy generation (electricity) individual energy use in the home (i.e heating), driving cars, air travel and so on. All these, and others, have led to the rise in carbon dioxide (which is the most important greenhouse gas in the atmosphere) emission. Also, methane and nitrous oxide are another important greenhouse gases emitted from agricultural components like livestock and chemical fertilizers.

For the Effects of Climate change, they are glaring. There have been significant rise in sea level, due to the indiscriminate melting of the Arctic ice cap. There have been evidence of extreme weather condition around the world and several species of animals and plants have gone into extinction. These and many more, have caused the rise in poverty level, drought, and famine; with developing countries bearing the brunt of these consequences. As a matter of fact, Ethiopian

population has reportedly been suffering increased poverty; water scarcity and food insecurity as a result of Climate change. Also, precisely in 2011, flood wrecked Pakistan like never before, and claimed over 1000 lives and rendered millions homeless. Also, in the same year, there were more cases in Philippines, Thailand, China and Bangkok. Over here in Africa, Tanzania lost 23 lives(December 23), Nigeria 102 and 31(August 28 and 31 respectively), Johannesburg 40 (6000 displaced;January 18) and South Africa 50 (January 7) in the year 2011. (www.mapreport.com/worlddisaster). On the other hand, there have been cases of drought in the Horn of Africa, which is currently affecting around 10 million people in Kenya, Ethiopia, Djibouti and Somalia. (www.guardian.co.uk). Obviously, these are just a few out of the numerous effects of Climate change.

International conferences on climate change

The incidence of Climate change has aroused concern among countries of the world; hence, there have been series of Climate Summits which are spearheaded by the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). These Conferences or Summits are organized to create platforms for World key leaders, among other reasons, to reach a mutually accepted legal agreement on the carbon dioxide emission reduction. However, reaching that mutually accepted agreement has regrettably been the greatest challenge.

For instance, in 1997, world leaders convened to set new goals for carbon dioxide emission by signing a legal document which is popularly known as the Kyoto Protocol. By signing the Protocol, "the countries of the European Union and 37 other industrialized Countries committed themselves to reducing their emissions respectively by an average of 5 percent against 1990 levels, and over the five-year period from 2008 to 2012". (Awake.2011:12) However, this agreement (protocol) was never mutual as some developed and larger developing countries who are major carbon dioxide emitters were left out of the legal agreement. These countries include the United State of America, China and India. And the United States and China alone contribute about 40 percent of the global carbon dioxide emissions.

Also, in 2009, another Climate change Conference was convened in Bella Center, Copenhagen, Denmark which lasted from 7th to 18th December 2009. This is popularly known as Copenhagen Summit (Cop 15-Conference of Parties) and meant to strengthen the commitment to the Kyoto Protocol and to set new legally binding agreement for 2012 and beyond. However, instead of the expected legally binding mutual agreement to reduced Carbon dioxide (CO₂) emission, this Conference produced the non-mutual and "ineffective" Copenhagen Accord. This was drafted by the US, China, India, Brazil and South Africa on December 18, 2009. This agreement was described by the Bolivian delegation as "anti-democratic, anti-transparent and unacceptable" (www.en.wikipedia.org) Hence, the Copenhagen summit was described as a failure.

The Sixteenth Session of the Conference of Parties (COP 16) to the Kyoto Protocol took place in Cancun Mexico. This Climate change Conference drew almost 12,000 participants and said to had produced "the basis for the most comprehensive and far-reaching international response to Climate change. However, the conference left the future of the Kyoto Protocol unresolved"(www.unfccc.int/meetings/COP_16) And as such not actually a successful one, in the absence of a legally binding carbon dioxide emission reduction agreement.

The most recent, is the Durban Climate change Conference held in South Africa. This is designated as the Cop 17 (Conference of Parties) and took place within the months of November and December 2011. This conference has been particularly described a successful one. The out comes included a decision by parties to adopt a universal legal agreement on climate change as

soon as possible, and no later than 2015. Infact, the President of Cop 17, Maite Nkoana- Mashabane reportedly said "what we have achieved in Durban will play a central role in saving tomorrow, today" (www.unfccc.int/meetings/COP_17)

However, the questions still remain, "will the United States, China, and other developed countries keep to this agreement? And, are the world leaders ready to overcome barriers (like political patterns of interest and power) to collective action?"

Christian religious leaders and climate change

There have existed diverse views and opinions on the relationship between Religion and Climate Change. Some believe in the ideal of creation care, and others see concern with nature as Paganism. Whereas some Secularists share the view that Environmentalism is religion, with its own creed and its own versions of paradise and hell. Yet, there are other group of religious extremists who would naively see the current state of the earth's climate as a sign of the End-time. Be that as it may, it will be pertinent to unequivocally assert at this stage, that Christians, especially Christian leaders owe the earth some duties.

An aesthetic look at the waters and its inhabitants, the flowers, the plants and the trees; as well as a topographic analysis of the lands, well structured hills, mountains and fearful valleys; and a critical study of the processes that bring rain; as well as the various climatic seasons would show how beautiful, the earth is. The earth was made for the inhabitation and sustenance of man and which in turn, should be sustained and preserved by man. But the reverse has been the case as man is gradually destroying his inhabitation and abode.

According to Christian theology, the earth is God's property put under Man's Dominion from the creation period. Unfortunately, this "man's dominion over the earth" has regrettably been "a doom" for the earth. According to Ituma(2009)

One of the human positions; that have made the earth very hard for man to establish a harmonious and peaceful existence is the idea that the earth must be exploited and manipulated for the benefits of man. As a result of this position human idea about the earth is how to remove everything without some control or replenishment. (p.9)

Consequently, the earth's atmosphere has been dangerously depleted and pillaged by human activities. The ever-increasing use of fossil fuels and gas which increase the Carbon dioxide(CO₂) emissions, the increase in land use and deforestation for industrial and agricultural purposes and so on, account for this state of the earth's climate. Obviously, these have adverse effects on human livelihood and survival. For instance, there have been evidences of its effects on crops and extreme weather conditions around the world. "It is especially clear in the dramatic change of the polar caps, i.e. the Arctic ice cap is shrinking and the Antarctica ice shelf is melting". (www.climatechangechallenge.org)

As it has been noted, the knowledge of the imminent danger of continual destruction of the ecosystem has set world leaders on their toes, in the fight against Climate change. However, this paper avers that until Christian religious leaders all over the world, take active part in this fight for eco-sustainability, the politically cum economic driven international Climate Change Summits, would yield less desired result.

Nevertheless, just like, there have been series of Conferences and Summits on Climate Change, so have there been series of comments, responses, and resolutions from Christian religious leaders alongside other religious organizations, on the same issue. For instance, as far back as twenty years

ago, Pope John Paul II, had expressed the need to safeguard the earth's environment. Thus he wrote;

There is a growing awareness that world peace is threatened ...also by a lack of due respect for nature. Ecological awareness, rather than being down-played, needs to be helped to develop and mature, and find fitting expression in concrete programmes and initiatives. (www.vatican.va/holyfather).

Likewise, a message delivered on 1st January 2010, during the world peace day celebration, Pope Benedict XVI wrote:

We are all responsible for the protection and care of the environment. This responsibility knows no boundaries... respect for creation is of immense consequence...for the pacific coexistence of mankind: if you want to cultivate peace protect creation. (www.climatechangechallenge.org).

Also, there have been such environmentally friendly comments from Christian religious leaders like Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu, Archbishop Thabo and so on. There have also been Christian religious organizations, specifically set up for tackling the phenomenon of Climate change. These organizations include the Interfaith Power and Light (IPL) founded by Rev Sally Bingham (a priest in the Episcopal Diocese of California) (www.interfaithpowerandlight.org) Anglican Communion Environmental Network (ACEN) and so many others. More interestingly, at the just concluded United Nations Climate change Conference in Durban, South Africa, Christian religious leaders led by Bishop Geoff Davis who represented Archbishop Desmond Tutu and others, signed a historical Interfaith Pact on Climate Change, as a way of participating in the fight against Climate change.

All this notwithstanding, it will be pertinent to note that the issue of creation care" is fundamental to Christian belief. The injunction to care and uphold stewardship over the earth, runs through the pages of the Holy Bible. At the creation period, according to Christian theology, man was created and given dominion over all creatures (Gen 1:28) Then, in Leviticus 25:23-24, man is reminded thus; *the land is mine and you are but aliens and my tenants. Through out the country that you hold as a possession, you must provide for the redemption of the land".* Also in Psalm 24:2, it is unequivocally stated thus, *"the earth is the lords and the fullness thereof, the world, and they that dwell therein".*

From the foregoing, it is clear, that the earth is God's property and should be accorded due respect. The earth expresses God's power, majesty, glory and wisdom. Hence, the protection and preservation of the features and creatures of the earth should be prioritized by man. The earth was not beautifully made to be destroyed, but to be enjoyed and sustained by man, through a conscious stewardship over it. Song(1998:454) has remarked "The divine declaration that creation is "very good" (Gen. 1:31) establishes the natural world as the proper context for human fulfillment. Mankind's vocation is to be found in respect for nature and the stewardship of its order". However, instead of this deference, gross disrespect, disregard and utter disdain characterize man's attitude towards nature. Hence, the earth is currently in shambles and its beauty eroding away. No wonder, Pope Benedict XVI lamented, thus;

Can we remain indifferent before the problems associated with such realities as climate change, desertification, the deterioration and loss of productivity in vast agricultural areas,

the pollution of rivers and aquifers, the loss of biodiversity, the increase of natural catastrophes and the deforestation of equatorial and tropical regions? Can we disregard the growing phenomenon of environmental refugees, people who are forced by the degradation of their natural habitat to forsake it and often their possessions as well-in order to face the dangers and uncertainties of forced displacement? Can we remain impassive in the face of actual and potential conflicts involving access to natural resources? (www.vatican.va/holyfather).

Therefore, Christian religious leaders all over the world should practically rise and actively join the global match to save the earth and mankind; not necessarily from eternal destruction; but from generational ecological disaster. This can be achieved through the following ways:

1. Intimate Awareness Creation (IAC)

This is simply an awareness created on the basis of friendship and familiarity. The reality of Climate Change should be made known. Christian leaders should take as a duty, the task of enlightening their members, on the dangers of climate change. This is where intimacy comes in, as the information shall be from the leader to the led. This should be done on regular basis during Church services, meetings, fellowship and so on. The emphasis of this Awareness should be on the practical ways and actions that can be taken to reduce carbon dioxide emission. These practical ways according to the Nature Conservancy include:

- i. Walking or using bicycle instead of driving cars, (cars and trucks run on fossil fuels, which release CO₂ into the atmosphere)
- ii. Telephone or videoconference for office meetings instead of traveling by Airplanes which produce 12 percent of transportation sector CO₂ emissions
- iii. Use of compact energy-efficient fluorescent light bulbs,
- iv. Recycling and use of recycled products (paper, glass, metal and plastic) at least to spare the trees in the forest which would have been cut down as raw materials for paper production,
- v. Planting of native trees to help absorb carbon dioxide from the air,
- vi. Turning down the heat or air conditioners when out of use (i.e when leaving the house or sleeping)
- vii. Buying of renewable energy sources with solar panels, windmills and other technologies,
- viii. Acting globally and eating locally in order to avoid unnecessary burning of fossil fuel just to get food from supermarkets, instead of shopping at a local farmers markets for healthy and fresh food and
- ix. Inflation of automobile tires always to burn less gas and emit less carbon to help save the climate.(www.nature.org).

With these individually-centered efforts, and if properly taught and adhered to, the earth's climate can be saved. The idea is that, if Christians all over the world who account for 2.1 billion(www.thegreatone22.wordpress.com) of the world population, would be enlightened by their leaders on the need to save the earth's climate by consciously taking environmentally friendly actions on daily basis, like the above listed ones, the earth must be healed.

Also, this method of Awareness has more prospects for the Eco-sustainability Campaign. This is seen in the fact that, any injunction given on the platform of religion, tends to attract more compliance and obedience from adherents. Therefore, it is assumed that if Christian leaders actively participate in the campaign against Climate change the desired success would be achieved.

This Intimate Awareness Creation on the need and how to save the earth's climate, can be facilitated through the following media.

- i. The use of electronic/non-electronic media like television, internet, radio, newspapers, etc. this would help in reaching both Christians and non-Christians all over the world.
- ii. Through special Seminars, Symposium and Workshops on the subject of Climate change and Way Out, and
- iii. The use of Church based Stickers, Tracts and Bills.

2. Charity for Climate Change Victims (CCCVs).

This is one of the important roles; Christian religious leaders can play in the global war against Climate changes.

It would be inappropriate to preach eco-sustainability without remembering the Climate change victims who suffer disproportionately from drought, flooding, famine and pollution.

These victims are mostly found in developing Countries in Sub-saharan Africa, Asia and even Pacific Countries and Territories (like Micronesia, Palau, Marshall Islands, Papua New Guinea, Tonga, Solomon Islands etc). Who suffer much natural disasters including flooding, drought, famine and attendant poverty and destitution?

Consequently, many have been displaced from their homes and possessions with children being the most vulnerable. David Bull (U.K Unicef Director) has reported that "those who have contributed least to Climate change; the world poorest children; are suffering the most". The report also added that "Climate Change could add 40,000-160,000 extra child deaths a year in Asia and Sub-saharan Africa through lower economic growth .(Jeremy 2008).

Therefore, Christian leaders should develop empathy for this group of people and extend their charitable work to them. In the midst of dejection, hopelessness and despair, Christians should be the source of hope. Christian religious leaders should head the course of rendering a helping hand, through a collective efforts of Christians, all over the world. Voluntary contributions can be encouraged during Church services crusades, meetings and fellowship for these victims. Beyond this, Christian leaders should advocate the welfare of these victims to the necessary quarters like the United Nations, Voluntary Non-government Organizations and Philanthropists for assistance. Also, they should set up either a body or an account that may be called "Charity for Climate Change Victims" (CCCVs) through which, these victims can be reached. It should be done in a way that, people can voluntarily contribute money or other materials, online. Without doubt, this will go a long way in putting relieved smiles on the faces of these people who are currently bearing the brunt of Climate change.

Conclusion

The War Against Climate change is a war for all, but fought by a few. It is regrettably lugubrious that despite the conspicuous signs of imminent danger of the Global Climate Change, many are yet to be moved to action. But it is strongly believed that if Christian leaders all over the world, would take to heart this solemn call, and actively join this war, victory will be assured and the earth's Climate would be saved.

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