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NEW SCHOLARS

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**ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION IN
THE NIGER DELTA
AN ETHICAL APPRAISAL**

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From the beginning, humans have consistently interacted with the environment. Available evidence suggests that from the earliest times, humans' relationship with the environment was perceived as that of a superior and a subordinate, with man regarding nature as the super-ordinate reality and themselves as the subordinate. However, rapid advancements in science and technology have brought about radical changes in human's attitude towards nature.

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Equipped with sophisticated and more efficient tools, and propelled by a radically different intellectual orientation and religious outlook, humankind's attitude and relationship with nature began to change. Nature became depersonalized, and the earth no longer considered as something organic, but as dead matter that could be taken apart, studied and ultimately understood and synthesized. This radical change of attitude, which some environmentalists choose to refer to as the "arrogance of humanism" has culminated in the ruthless exploitation, depletion and degradation of the environment. Capitalist economics now assert that the earth is a mere resource that can be tapped, managed, developed and distributed. This nonchalant attitude has led humans to exploiting the resources of the earth without caution, neither are they perturbed about the damage being inflicted on the earth.

But to humans' rude shock, the real danger and enormity of their action are already manifest as their consistent exploitation of the environment has resulted in the exhaustion and degradation of the environment. Several challenges arising from this recklessness stare humans in the face. The most catastrophic environmental challenges facing humankind are the greenhouse effect and oil spillage. Global warming is a reality proved by the hole in the ozone layer currently estimated to be as large as North America [Cable News Network (CNN)] June 19, 2008). Experts warn "It's time to stop waffling so much and say that this evidence is pretty strong that the greenhouse effect is here". Oil spillage has ruined the environment. Most of the known ecosystems playing host to oil exploration and mining activities have been devastated.

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria is one area that has witnessed such devastation arising from mindless exploitation and absence of care. The exploitation of the rich oil and gas deposits in the vast swamps and the triangular-shaped coastal region, through which the River Niger and its tributaries discharge their waters into the Atlantic, has fast become a tragic experience for the vast majority of the population inhabiting the area. Oil and gas drilling by Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC) started at Oloibiri in 1958. This seeming blessing has since turned the entire Niger Delta region into a major ecological disaster area. Much of the air, water, land, and rivers of the region have all been largely polluted by decades of gas flaring and the emission of all forms of dangerous pollutants, and

intermittent oil spillage. The habitats for all forms of biotic life (the flora and fauna) have seriously been damaged. The people's traditional means of livelihood, particularly fishing and farming have been devastated while the people themselves are terribly exposed to various forms of diseases and life-threatening hazards. There is a disturbing increase among the population of a wide range of cancer cases, serious respiratory problems and extremely high acidity of soil and rainfall, as a direct consequence of excessive pollution of the environment (www.climatelaw.org).

Environmentalists like Albert Arnold (Al) Gore (former Vice President of the United States of America and Nobel Peace Prize Winner 2007), Nnimmo Basey (Director, Environmental Rights Action/Friends of the Earth) and Wangari Maathai (Nobel Peace Prize Winner 2004 and Kenyan former Environment Minister) have continued relentlessly to confront governments and to seek for effective solutions to the urgent problems confronting the earth and humankind. It was not until recently that philosophers and religious experts turned their attention to the problem of the environment. Their preoccupation with issues of transcendence, salvation, heaven and the hereafter appears to have shifted their focus away from matters relating to the environment. Regrettably, these initiatives have not succeeded in pulling the earth and its inhabitants, including humans, back from the brink of the threatening environmental catastrophe. The recent pronouncement by the Secretary General of the United Nations Organization, Ban Ki Moon that, "the world is still waiting for a solution that is long-term and economically viable" (www.reuters.org), clearly indicates that the search for a permanent solution remains on-going. The problem cannot simply be played down so long as the possibility of a catastrophic environmental disaster looms.

Scholars like Lynn White in trying to trace the root cause of environmental degradation have roundly blamed western Judeo-Christian traditions, while Lewis Moncrief and Patrick Dobel, among others, after a closer look at Biblical texts, suggest that science and technology are solely responsible for the present environmental woes being experienced globally. This view may not be totally correct since with science and technology humans can still be environment-friendly. Respect for life, and above all, for the dignity of the human person, ought to be the ultimate guiding norm for any sound

economic, industrial or scientific undertaking. However, the fact remains that, be it science and technology or traditional Judeo-Christian orientation, or still any other factor, against the background of the prevailing circumstances, nothing short of a radical change of attitude, is needed to pull the environment successfully back from the brink of a looming catastrophe. There is unarguably, the crucial need for a total change of attitude and re-direction from that of over-consumption and mindless exploitation of the earth's resources to ethics of responsibility and care.

As noted above, a handful of investigations have been carried out on the problem of the reckless exploitation of the earth's resources and reports produced on how to redress the harm being inflicted on the eco-system and life of the people in the area, however, very little, if any, serious effort has been made to highlight the religio-ethical dimension of the existential problem in the Niger Delta. Indeed as it was already pointed out regarding the traditional cultural background of the indigenous people of the region and the faith-traditions of most of the contemporary actors, there is a clear evidence of some close connection between the people's beliefs about the sacredness of the earth and their attitude while conducting some activities involving their environment. Basically, for the indigenous people of the Niger Delta, the earth is seen as a sacred entity, and human's basic attitude towards her is expected to be one of respect and reverence.

On the contrary, the mindless users of the earth whose faith-background is rooted in the Biblical tradition, often times quote the text of Genesis 1:26–28 to justify human's plundering of the riches of the earth. The text reads:

Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.' So God created man in his image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.'

The above text requires a re-interpretation to situate its ethical values in the context of the apparent environmental degradation in the Niger Delta. The thrust of this work, therefore, is not to discourage the tapping of the resources available in the Niger Delta environment, but to try to examine the ethically acceptable boundary within which these resources can be extracted. Also, it is not just to describe what man's relationship with the environment is, but to show what his relationship with the environment ought to be. Working within the broad-field of religious phenomenology, the research exposes in considerable detail the widespread pollution of land, water and air in the Niger Delta. It advocates a more acceptable understanding of biblical texts that underpin such contemporary themes as man's co-responsibility, stewardship and solidarity with the rest of God's creation. The research also highlights the Common Good theory of Christian ethics as one that promises viable ideas, values and attitudes which, if well promoted, would go a long way to reduce the problem of environmental degradation in the region to the minimum. Environmental degradation in the Niger Delta is an urgent moral issue, a direct consequence of actions and/or omissions of intelligent and willing human agents. Against the backdrop of the enormity and far-reaching tragic consequences of the widespread pollution, it is absolutely necessary that the exploitation of the rich mineral resources of the region be carried out in accordance with the highest international standards and that proper value-system and attitudes be promoted to ensure the best health of humans, other forms of biotic and a-biotic lives and the entire environment.