THE ENVIRONMENT, POPULATION, AND THEOLOGY: A PERSPECTIVE FROM CAMEROON

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Abstract

Focusing on deforestation and desertification as among some of the significant environmental problems facing Cameroon, this article argues that, among the many things that need to be done to address these problems, population growth needs to be privileged. Drawing from a Trinitarian theology that sees creation and salvation as the means by which the triune God cares for the world, the essay argues that churches in Cameroon should see themselves as communities called and sent by God to continue this care for creation, which especially includes the care for people as a means to care for the environment. Some of the theological moves that need to be taken for this care for the environment to be properly carried out include the development of a prophetic voice that speaks for destitute indigenous peoples, as representatives of the poor, and a rethinking of the common view that children are a blessing from God.

Introduction

The initial draft of this essay was begun on April 22, 2016, which, quite appropriately, was Earth Day. Scrolling through twitter on this day one could see various messages about how to take care of the earth. Some warned of water shortages, others of the

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destruction of various species, and others yet of the anthropogenesis of global warming and climate change. The Internet has become one of the most prominent sites where people are being sensitized about the importance of taking good care of the environment. Looking at some news sites, I found a two-part article (a third part was later added) written by a columnist of *The New York Times* who was part of a filming project that deals with the hazardous migration of young Africans in search of a better life in Europe. Thomas L. Friedman, *The New York Times* columnist, known for his proclamation a decade ago that *The World Is Flat*, wrote the first part of the articles from Niger and the second part from Senegal. Even though the articles were written from two African countries, they dealt with the same issue—seeking reasons why many young Africans are fleeing their countries under treacherous circumstances in search of greener pastures in Europe.

Friedman found that, among other things, these young people come from countries such as “Senegal, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Ivory Coast, Liberia, Chad, Guinea, Cameroon, Mali,” and Niger. Their flight, he wrote, is due to “devastated agriculture, overpopulation and unemployment.”

While there are other historical reasons, such as the decadent neo-colonial governance of these countries, that might account for why many young people feel that they do not have a chance at the good life in their own countries at the current time, Friedman put his finger on three important but interrelated issues that need to be addressed in order to forestall their continuous flight to foreign climes, sometimes under treacherous circumstances. In other words, even though these three issues—

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devastated agriculture, overpopulation, and unemployment—have deeper tentacles, one may get to these deeper tentacles by beginning to address them as they appear, beginning with devastated agriculture. In this case we see that devastated agriculture is connected to overpopulation which is connected to unemployment. In other words, there is a connection among the environment, population growth, and the process of creating a good life.

While every African country may have some unique circumstances as far as these issues are concerned, these three issues, which are all tied to the environment, have affected them in a similar way—diminishing prospects for flourishing human and other life forms. Concern with the environment, in both the scientific and theological perspectives, is motivated by the quest for creating a balance that will lead to the flourishing of human and other forms of life on earth. The environmental crisis in Africa in general and Cameroon in particular has many incarnations including “deforestation, desertification, declining biodiversity, loss of fertile soils, water pollution, urban air pollution, solid waste management,” and others.³ Some of these contribute to the devastation of agriculture and the unemployment that leads to rural-urban migration, and, subsequently, to intercontinental migration.

The fact that the current environmental crisis has many incarnations notwithstanding, this essay will focus on deforestation and desertification in Cameroon, arguing that these, and others, could be addressed from an interdisciplinary perspective that takes seriously what the scientific disciplines and Christian theology have to say about the environment as part of God’s creation which

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God seeks to redeem. Even though the current environmental crisis in Cameroon and around the world has many causes, focus will be placed on its connection to population growth. Given that the population of Cameroon is currently just under 24 million (2016) and that Cameroon’s contribution to environmental destruction may be very minute when seen from a global perspective, one may wonder why population growth has to be seen as central to dealing with the environmental situation in the country. However, it is important to focus on population because it is now accepted that our environmental crisis is anthropogenetic. This is even more so given that increase in human population leads to increase in the resources needed to sustain them. These resources often come from the environment in the form of food, energy, and others. This increase in demand for the resources to take care of the population often weighs negatively on the environment. More specifically, population growth is one of the most significant causes of deforestation. As William Sunderlin and Jacques Pokam have noted “population growth and shifting cultivation are generally viewed, respectively, as the main cause and agent of deforestation in Central Africa in general and in Cameroon in particular.”

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4 For the use of an interdisciplinary approach in addressing environmental issues in Cameroon, but which does not dwell on Christian theology, see Markham and Fonjong, *Saving the Environment in Sub-Saharan Africa*.

5 Nancy Morvillo, *Science and Religion: Understanding the Issues* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 317. It is however important to note that the region of the world with the lowest population growth, the West, has placed the greatest pressure on the world’s resources through industrialization and rapacious consumption. Given that developing countries often aim to become like the West, the pressure on the world’s resources is getting even worse. See Nathan Keyfitz, “Consumption and Population,” in *Ethics of Consumption: The Good Life, Justice and Global Stewardship*, David A. Krocker and Toby Linden, eds. (Lanham, Maryland: Rowan and Littlefield Publisher, 1998), 476-500.

6 William D. Sunderlin and Jacque Pokam, “Economic Crisis and Forest Cover Change in Cameroon: The Roles of Migration, Crop Diversification, and Gender Division of Labor,” *Economic Development and Cultural Change* 50 no. 3 (April 2002): 582. Other factors that lead to deforestation, they note, are
that world population has recently been growing exponentially, it is important for Christians and people everywhere, including places with low population (growth), to begin considering its effects on the environment. Given that we are living in an interconnected world that has especially been flattened by the effects of climate change, the environmental crisis has to be approached both locally and globally. The Cameroonian philosopher, Godfrey Tangwa, has noted that in our global and globalizing world “the dangers facing the world as a whole, even if emanating largely from only a small part of it, can best be tackled only from a global perspective.”

Perhaps one may hasten to add that such dangers may also be addressed from a local perspective. Focusing on population growth and the current environmental crisis in Cameroon is a local move that may have a global impact.

The rest of this article will proceed thus: first, the current environmental situation in Cameroon, with respect to deforestation and desertification, will be given, showing some of the historical changes that have occurred as the population has increased. Second, some suggestions as to what needs to be done to address the declining environmental situation will be given. Finally, it will be argued that the church in Cameroon has a significant role to play in bringing about this change and doing this needs to be undergirded by a robust Trinitarian theology that is missiological in nature, connecting care of nature and care of people.


Environmental Issues in Cameroon: Deforestation and Desertification

Current environmental concerns in Cameroon are similar to those in most places around the world. Among the most pressing, however, are deforestation and desertification and their attendant loss of biodiversity, diminished agricultural production and reduced water supply. Cameroon’s contribution to global warming, like that of most Third World countries, is however minimal.

Cameroon, a small central African country of about 24 million people, has a total area of about 475,000 square kilometres, with over 41% of this taken up by the forest region, which is in the southern part of the country. Cameroon’s rainforests are among the richest, in terms of biodiversity, in Africa and the world. As Samuel Ndobe and Klaus Mantzel put it, “Cameroon’s forests probably support the richest flora and fauna in continental tropical Africa, with high levels of endemism, making it one of the world’s biodiversity hotspots; it ranks fifth in Africa for biodiversity and the country is home to nearly 8,000 species of plants, 250 mammals, 542 fish, 848 birds, 330 reptiles, and 200 amphibians.”

Deforestation in Cameroon therefore does not only carry the threat of soil erosion and depletion of water resources but also of the loss of much of the diverse flora and fauna of the region. It is the recognition that protecting this diverse flora and fauna is important not only to Cameroon but the rest of the world that some environmental organizations have teamed up with the government of Cameroon to designate parts of the forest in the country as national parks and forest reserves. These protected forest zones are

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8 For more on this, see the section on Cameroon in the CIA’s The World Factbook available at https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/cm.html.
however feeling the pressure not only of the local populations, whose livelihoods are being threatened, but also of major international corporations that look to cultivate cash crops such as palm oil and rubber. In order to prevent indigenous peoples from carving out spaces in the forest to cultivate food crops or hunt animals that are sometimes listed as endangered species, these people are often relocated to places where they are forced to seek alternative forms of livelihood. While some of those thus relocated sometimes manage to find alternative ways to make a decent living, others do not.

Even though the government attempts to conserve the forests in this way, this has not slowed down deforestation in the country because subsistence farmers continue to slash and burn the forest for the cultivation of crops. A recent study has shown that there was an increase in deforestation in some regions in Cameroon from 1986 when Cameroon entered a period of economic depression that saw many people migrating from towns and cities back to rural areas. The concentration of people in the rural areas led to

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deforestation because many more people were in need of land for cultivation.\textsuperscript{12}

The clearing of the forest for cultivation of crops has not spared even some of the sacred groves of many traditional societies in the grassland region of Cameroon. These sacred groves are often located at the fon’s (chief’s) palace and it is sometimes used for various forms of sacrifices and as burial places for the children of the palace. With the increasing population of the palaces, however, these sacred groves are being chopped down to build homes and plant crops.\textsuperscript{13} For example, the sacred grove of the Vengo people of Cameroon, called \textit{fotcha}, has increasingly diminished due to such activities. There used to be running water in this grove but over time the water has dried up and the area is now little more than a marsh. It has been determined that deforestation occurred in Cameroon at a rate of between 0.8 to 1\% between 1990 and 2005, although some think that this rate might be decreasing.\textsuperscript{14}

Apart from the devastation wrought on forests by small farmers, the government has also leased land to multinational companies for logging and cultivation of palm oil and rubber. Sometimes conservationists attempt to buy the land the government is selling in order to forestall its destruction but they are not able to do so.\textsuperscript{15} Forest areas have recently been chopped down by transnational corporations to plant cash crops such as palm trees (for palm oil) and rubber for the export market. Areas around the Korup National Park in southwestern Cameroon, which is a 1200 square kilometre government protected forest zone, and the Campo

\textsuperscript{12} Sunderlin and Pokam, “Economic Crisis and Forest Cover Change in Cameroon.”
\textsuperscript{14} AfricaEIN, “Cameroon: Deforestation.”
Ma’an rainforest in the southeast of the country, are constantly under threat from these corporations. Recently, the American investor Heracles Farms has been given a 99-year lease of (forest) land close to the Korup National Park, raising the ire of environmentalists around the world.\textsuperscript{16} The cultivation of palm trees and rubber has been going on not only around the Korup National Park but also around the Campo Ma’an National Park where satellite images show how the forest has been depleted from 1973 to 2001. While in 1973 one could see that the area was still dark green, by 2001 the dark green had become light green through the cultivation of palm trees and rubber.\textsuperscript{17} The cutting down of forests to plant palm trees and rubber is deforestation because it destroys the pristine flora and fauna of forests that have been around for thousands of years. The natural habitats of some animals are lost, exposing them to extinction, and some of the plants disappear, never to be recovered. Even though palm trees and rubber may serve to reduce carbon emission, they are not forests. They are regularly cleared to keep them clean and so are not replacements for the forests that have been destroyed. Even more, many of the people who suffer loss of livelihood when these new corporations come in hardly find gainful employment at the companies.

In addition to deforestation, there is the frightening advance of the Sahara Desert through desertification in northern Cameroon. The aridity of the northern region of Cameroon is made worse by the gradual disappearance of Lake Chad, a lake that has been the source of livelihood for many in the Lake Chad Basin region, including Cameroon. It is now common to hear of food shortages in


the northern region of Cameroon where this desertification is occurring. Satellite photos show how the lake reduced from 1963 when it covered an area stretching from Niger and Nigeria into Chad, Cameroon, and Central African Republic, to 2013 when it is only a shadow of its former self, confined to a small area in Cameroon and Chad. It is reported that this drastic diminishment of the lake is due to anthropogenetic activities around the area and effects of global warming.

Deforestation and desertification have diminished the agricultural potential of many rural areas thus forcing many, especially young people, to flee to cities where they hope to find means of livelihood. This has increased the population density of many cities in Cameroon, leading many to live in unsanitary and even geographically dangerous zones in the cities. In the city of Bamenda, capital of the North West Region of Cameroon, for example, many, especially the poor, live on hillsides, which could easily suffer from landslides, and areas that are easily flooded. The inadequate method of waste disposal sometimes leads to accumulation of waste in street corners, creating unsanitary living conditions. Living conditions of this nature, coupled with the fact that many young people are unable to find jobs in the urban centre due to the fact that Cameroon is still to emerge from an economic crisis that began in the middle of the 1980s, has led many young people to flee the country, some in the situations we find at the beginning of this essay. How is such a situation to be addressed?

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Some Responses and Suggestions

Addressing the current environmental situation is urgent not only for the people of Cameroon but for people all over the world. Studies have shown that the halting of deforestation and desertification in Cameroon especially benefits developed and some developing countries that play significant roles in atmospheric pollution.21 The continued existence of these forests sanitizes the air people breathe around the world. That is one of the reasons Western environmental organizations have taken significant interest in protecting these forests.

It has been suggested that the current environmental crisis calls for the prophetic voices of all religious people to be raised. Speaking about the urgency of addressing the issue, the past president of the American Academy of Religion, Laurie Zoloth, in her strongly worded 2014 Presidential Address, urged that the current environmental crisis ought to interrupt our current way of life.

We must be interrupted; we must stop. To make the future possible, we need to stop what we are doing, what we are making, what we are consuming, what we think we need, what makes us comfortable. We need to interrupt our work—even our good work—to attend to the urgency of this question.22

Writing from the American context, Zoloth places the onus of what should be done on the pattern of making and consuming, a pattern that has been held responsible for significantly contributing to climate change. This is another way of saying that the root of the environmental crisis can be located in the capitalist economy. The

21 Schmidt-Soltau, “The Costs of Rainforest Conservation.”
plundering of the environment orchestrated by the capitalist economy has been described as a crime against humanity.\textsuperscript{23} This crime is especially committed by the rich against the poor and the present against the future. This is because the rich nations of the world are contributing more to climate change but the effect of this is being felt all over the world. The environmental crime is being committed against future generations because not to address the issue now is to put at risk the lives of those who come after us—they would inherit an increasingly unsafe planet. Stopping and taking stock and acting to reverse the present situation will be not only taking care of the needs of all in the world, especially the need of the world’s poor, but also about taking care of the present and future generations. Not to do anything is to demonstrate our profound lack of concern. We cannot afford to show lack of concern on this issue; rather we need to treat the environmental crisis with the urgency and immediacy it requires, understanding what we are, as Edward Antonio puts it, living in a “kairotic moment marked by an extreme crisis.”\textsuperscript{24}

It is perhaps for this reason that the government of Cameroon has created many forest national parks and forest reserves, as we saw above, and has been part of various conventions whose goal is to curb climate change. As a member of these conventions, the government of Cameroon is said to have been putting some measures in place that are aimed at ameliorating environmental degradation and its effects. One of this is the designation of rainforests as protected areas. Others include using efficient means of agriculture, focusing on renewable energy, and lowering emission through efficient means of transportation. Whether or not these are properly carried out and whether or not they would have the desired effect of what the government of Cameroon has dubbed

\textsuperscript{23} Lennard and Parr, “Our Crime Against the Planet.”
its “Green Revolution” is still to be seen. Given that the government has been colluding with foreign companies in the deforestation of the country, one would be wise to take what the government says it is doing with a pinch of salt. It is however important to note that whatever is to be done needs to be done in a context of what has been described as “a fine balancing act,” balancing the fact that the country is still far underdeveloped with the fact that any development needs to be carried out in an environmentally sustainable way. While there is considerable debate about what constitutes development and how it should be carried out, it is important to note that those young people who are fleeing from a less flourishing life to places where they believe they may experience a better life, are already indicating what they believe development is. Their situation must constantly be before us as we debate the question of development and whether or not it should be African or Western. It is however important for us to note that even though Cameroon places a globally insignificant strain on the degradation of the environment, the immediate impact of environmental degradation on the lives of Cameroonians is quite significant and much needs to be done to address the issue urgently.

Some studies have suggested that indigenous people who live in some of the forests that have been designated as national parks manage the forest better than the environmental organizations that engineer their removal from these forests. Because they see their well-being as intimately tied to the well-being of the forests, they tend to take better care of it than when the government and environmental organizations swoop in, remove them, and place the area under surveillance. More studies need to be done to see if this finding may be confirmed. If it is confirmed, it may lead to cheaper means of managing these forests that would not entail

sending in forest rangers and removing people from their ancestral lands. This method recognizes the rights of indigenous peoples and takes care of the forests at the same time.

The environmental situation and the promotion of human flourishing in Cameroon, however, need to be engaged not only by the government but also by the church. The church in Cameroon continues to play significant roles in environment protection through education, tree planting, and organic farming, among others. Some churches in Cameroon have included environmental education not only in the academic programs of church-related schools but also in individual congregations. In 2009, for example, the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon initiated a program to plant 100,000 trees by 2012. Organic farming for sustainable food production is being encouraged in some segment of the Baptist Church in Cameroon, while small Christian communities related to the Roman Catholic Church in Cameroon have supported environmental education and the need to plant trees.28

Despite the commendable work the churches are currently doing, much is still left to be done. For example, slashing and burning of forests as farming and hunting techniques continue unabated and the felling of trees for use as fuel continue to wreak havoc on the environment.29 Even more, the churches in Cameroon have hardly been seen as advocates for indigenous peoples who are often being uprooted from their ancestral lands and hardly given


enough resources to make ends meet in their new settlements. The churches in Cameroon have therefore often been silent when it comes to environmental justice as the poor continue to be the ones who experience much immediate suffering in many of the attempts at slowing down deforestation and desertification. In order to address this situation, environmental protection needs to be central to the theology of the church. As has been suggested by Ernst Conradie, for this to happen, environmental education has to be central to theological education, especially in theological and Bible schools where ministers of churches are often trained. More especially, however, the issue of population growth should be central to this form of environmental education. Environmental theology that sees population growth as critical to environmental protection should be Trinitarian theology that sees care for the environment as intimately linked to care for people. In this context, to care for the environment is to care for human beings and non-human things. Stressing care of human beings should not simply be seen as an anthropocentric way of dealing with the environmental crisis but rather as a prophetic call for human beings to be treated well in a region in the world where they have often not been given fair treatment. This falls within the framework of what the Cameroonian philosopher, Godfrey Tangwa, has called “eco-bio-communitarianism,” where everything in the environment, including human beings, is seen as interdependent.

Towards a Trinitarian Theology of Care for Creation

A Trinitarian theology that emphasizes care for creation is missiological in character because it is rooted in the Trinity’s self-manifestation in the sending of the Son to redeem the world from decay through the power of the Holy Spirit. It sees Christian salvific discourse as a discourse of care for the creation initiated by a God who does not intend creation to be annihilated but rather to find peace and renewal in divine life.\textsuperscript{32} Christian theology sees creation as good, purposed to finding and sustaining its being only through constant communion with its triune creator. However, Christian theology also acknowledges that human action is responsible for placing a chasm between God and creation, subjecting creation to decay. That is the meaning of the story of the disobedience of Adam and Eve and its consequences, captured in Genesis 2 and 3. This disobedience, which is the beginning of human sinful actions that harm creation, continues today in various human actions that continue to place human life in the world in danger, especially as seen in our current environmental crisis.

The Christian idea of salvation, which includes the sending of the Son or \textit{Logos} through whom all things were made, connects the idea of creation and salvation, demonstrating the triune God’s continuous care for a creation that seems intent on going its own way. The \textit{Logos} undertakes a rescue mission of sorts, to make sure that that which was freely created does not annul its own existence through its own transgressions. The life, death, and resurrection of the Son were the means of proclaiming and manifesting the continuous care which God has for creation, which continues to groan, anticipating its fuller healing in divine life.\textsuperscript{33} The action of


the Father in sending the Son through which the world may be reconciled back to God and the continued sustenance of the world through the power of the Holy Spirit, demonstrate that God does not want God’s creation to go to waste. This is perhaps what Pope Francis means when he says in *Laudato Si’* that “The creator does not abandon us; he [*sic*] never forsakes his loving plan or repents of having created us.”\(^{34}\) The Pontiff does not only credit us with the ability to do what it takes to avert tipping over the edge of the environmental precipice on which we now stand, but sees our ability to do so as grounded in a God who constantly invites us to fruitful and sustainable relationships. It is in this light that Pope Francis connects care of the environment to issues of poverty and justice, calling for sustainable development that does not damage our “common home” which God has given us. Caring for our common home is therefore a missiological endeavour that derives from the activity of the pursuing God whom we worship. From this perspective, the church is made up of communities called out to participate in divine life through their continuous care of God’s creation.

There are of course many ways to care for God’s creation but one of the ways to do so in the context of Cameroon is for the church to be advocates of the poor, especially the indigenous peoples who live in forests from which they are constantly being evicted by the government and often abandoned to life of uncertainty and penury in towns about which they know very little. The environmental education of the church should therefore not only be limited to how to plant trees or perform organic farming but should also include how to care for those people whose lives and livelihood are being radically affected through their removal from their ancestral lands.

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It has been noted that current attempts to protect the environment are often antithetical to a Christian vision of creation, thus exacerbating the penury of those who are already poor.\footnote{Northcott, “Ecology and Christian Ethics,” 222.} The church needs to interrogate current secular visions of environmental protection, be aware of how current attempts to protect the environment often lead to further impoverishment of the poor, and develop prophetic theologies that provide concrete solutions to this issue. The British theologian Michael Northcott has noted how the vision of secular environmental protection is agonistic or conflictual in nature, pitting the saving of flora and fauna at the expense of human beings. “To ‘save’ the values moderns wish to find in nature,” he writes “requires the exclusion of humans from nature.”\footnote{Northcott, 219.} The church should not simply buy into this vision of environmental protection but should rather interrogate it on behalf of the powerless. It is a shame that it is often secular groups that are speaking out on behalf of these people in Cameroon.\footnote{For an example of this, see http://www.forestpeoples.org/location/africa/cameroon.}

Also, it is important for the church to note that the denuding of the forest and the diminishment of agricultural prospects have in part been brought about by the need for the poor to scratch a living from the earth. The other part, often precipitated by logging and industrial agriculture, is often due to human greed. While the greed of corporations denudes the forests for profit, caring less about the well-being of the people who inhabit such regions, the focus in this essay is rather on the environmental degradation occasioned by the quest for human survival. Most people who live in the rural areas of Cameroon and who contribute in the deforestation and even the desertification process do so not out of the quest for profit but mainly to survive. These are people like my parents who owned few acres of arable land and who slashed and burned down the forest on this land in order to plant food for our nourishment and
some cash crops to raise money for our education and upkeep. As our family got larger, my parents expanded the area of land they cultivated for food and even cash crops. From this anecdote, one can see that population increase diminished our ability to properly care for the environment because increase in population leads to increase in consumption and increase in consumption leads to environmental degradation.\textsuperscript{38} While inordinate consumption, especially in the Western world and some Asian countries, has significantly contributed to climate change, the activities of small farmers in Cameroon and elsewhere in Africa also play a part, even though this part is minute.\textsuperscript{39} When I was growing up in the 1970s the population of the country was about 7 million but today (2016) it has tripled that number. In fact, at the beginning of this millennium, Cameroon was estimated to be “fewer than 13 million inhabitants” but that number has almost doubled in the last fifteen years or so.\textsuperscript{40} This increase in population is putting more pressure on natural resources, resulting in the increasing infertility of the soil, water pollution, deforestation and desertification.

Given the importance of population growth to the well-being of families, it was with much anticipation that I read the apostolic exhortation on the family from pope Francis, hoping that the care of family would be connected to the care of creation, with particular reference to population growth. I was however surprised to see that population is not portrayed in the document as a problem. Rather, focus is placed on places in the world where the population is falling rather than on those where the population is rising. The exhortation instead identified, among the challenges facing the family “the decline in population, due to a mentality against having children . . . promoted by the world politics of

\textsuperscript{38} See Nathan Keyfitz, “Consumption and Population.”
\textsuperscript{40} Tangwa, “Some African Reflections on Biomedical and Environmental Ethics,” 389.
reproductive health,” which may lead to “a situation in which the relationship between generations is no longer ensured” and even to possible economic decline and loss of hope.41

This sentiment correctly identifies the complexity of addressing the question of population growth given that lower population may in fact jeopardize the future of any community. However, it has been noted that population growth is highest in the developing world where there are higher levels of mortality. Higher levels of mortality often lead to higher birth rates spurred by the hope that some of the children will survive. In this context, we are faced with a situation where higher death rates do not lead to a decline in population but rather to its continued replenishment, even though the population growth rate is often small. As the people begin to be more affluent, however, the death rate begins to fall and the population begins to rise.42 Many African countries are now at the point where they are beginning to experience affluence and the population is rising, significantly adding to the overall population of the world, placing more strain on available resources. It may well be that a fairer distribution of resources may take care of this rising population. That is however not what is currently happening in the world. The current global trajectory, including the case of Cameroon, is one where the rich are getting richer and the poor are being squeezed. The prospects for the equitable distribution of wealth do not look good, which is why the church has to continuously raise its prophetic voice. Theologically, God is a God of abundance whose economy of grace provides abundantly for everyone.43 In the current political economy, however, that is not what is happening. Even if this were happening, it is not clear

42 For more on this see, Morvillo, Science and Religion, 316-319.
43 For more on this, see D. Stephen Long, Divine Economy: Theology and the Market (London and New York: Routledge, 2000). Long Contrasts God’s economy of plenitude and gift, akin to socialism to the “heresy” that is the “market” economy. Also see Kathryn Tanner, Economy of Grace (Minneapolis, MN: Ausburg Fortress, 2005).
that the resources available would continue to effectively sustain a continuously rising population. What happens when population rises without a corresponding increase in, and equitable distribution of, resources is that some people begin to die and this would lead the population to decline.\textsuperscript{44} This would be an awful way to address the population and environmental crisis we are faced with today. That is why the prophetic voice of the church should not only focus on calling for equitable distribution of resources but also on raising the alarm about the adverse effects of a rising population to our environment.

The worthy concern for the future of the human race and economic stability contained in \textit{Amoris Laetitia}, therefore, does not take into account the situation in many African countries, including Cameroon, where the population has been rising significantly even as the resources to care for this rising population appears to be declining. Turning a blind eye to the issue of population growth fits very well within the African traditional model where having kids is often seen as a blessing and thought is hardly adequately given to how the kids are to be cared for. If care of creation is about caring for human beings also, as this essay suggests, and if it is Christian mission to care for creation just as the Triune God does in the process of creation and redemption, it follows that careful thought has to be given to how children are to be cared for rather than just on having them. From this perspective, having kids is not a good in itself, as it is often assumed, but is rather ambiguous—it may turn out well but it may also not turn out well. How the children are to be cared for needs to be ascertained because this is important to whether the act of having a child turns out well or not. Even though infant mortality has begun to decline in many African countries, including Cameroon, it is no secret that Africa continues to have one of the highest rates of infant mortality often due to very

\textsuperscript{44} For more on how population growth may fluctuate, see Morvillo, \textit{Science and Religion}, 317.
preventable diseases. What is the need of having children when their survival and flourishing cannot be ensured?

Speaking of ensuring the survival and flourishing of children may be theologically dicey given that our survival and flourishing is ultimately not attributable to human beings but rather to divine providence. Surely, it may be argued, as the German theologian Christoph Schwobel has done, that the sustaining, preserving, and restoration of creation is divine rather than human work, that we overreach when we imagine that these are in our hands. However, it is theologically problematic to take human beings out of the equation of caring for creation because humans have a mandate from God to care for creation (Gen. 1:28). While anthropocentrism has been decried in ecological theology, it can hardly be denied that humans have a significant role to play if we are to succeed in reversing some of the environmental destruction we have already wrought. Saying that humans have a vital role to play in this process does not mean that divine providence is not central; rather, it recognizes that God often works in the world through human beings. The Logos became human, St. Anselm of Canterbury taught, to do that which only humans had to do but which only God could do. The salvation of the world could not be wrought without the participation of a human being. This applies to how we deal with the environmental situation. While it ultimately depends on God, God has decided not to pursue the process without us, as the incarnation of the Logos demonstrates. The eventual renewal of the whole earth and the arrival of the new heaven and the new earth do not appear to need human participation but our current survival on this planet appears to need our participation and cooperation.

Even more, focusing only on divine providence without emphasizing the role of human beings in caring for creation would imply that humans should do nothing about the pressing issue of

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tackling the current environmental crisis. Because Christians are people called and sent by God to participate in the redemption of creation, all possible and legitimate means of doing this have to be explored and implemented. This involves addressing the issue of population growth and its adverse effects on the environment even though the Roman Catholic Church and many African Christians do not appear open to this possibility. The sensitization that needs to be going on (even through the Internet if possible) should address how to protect the environment by addressing our rapid population growth. In order to effectively do this, one significant issue that has to be addressed in both biblical and African traditional value systems is the view that to have as many children as possible is a blessing from God.

Cameroon’s traditional culture, like that of many African countries, is that which sees a successful person or couple as one whose compound is buzzing with people, preferably their children. It is said in Cameroon that wealth is people rather than things. This idea shows the importance that is placed on being in relationship with many people, especially one’s children, relatives, and community. Not to have children, as is now well known, is not only to suffer social death but is also to be poor. Thus, emphasis is placed on having children as a form of social and spiritual security. It is social security because it makes one’s compound formidable so that anyone thinking of attacking the compound would have to think twice about the matter, given that there will be many people to defend the compound. It is also social security because one who has many children would have many people to support them in times of need, especially when they become old. When they eventually die, the children they had would perform the necessary rites needed to smooth their transition into becoming an ancestor. Even in cases where one does not have children, one’s memory is dependent on those who knew them and who are willing to perform the necessary rites to make one an ancestor. Given that all of these are done by people rather than things, one can see why having people, especially children, is critical. To ensure that one would
have as many people around them as possible, one needed to have many children. This is especially so in case some of the children die. It was therefore imperative to have many children to ensure that if some of them die, one would still be left with enough of them who could serve as one’s social and spiritual security. These are good reasons for wanting to have many children and they need to be taken extremely seriously.

The African traditional valuation of children is captured succinctly in the biblical world. Psalm 127:3-5 notes that children are indeed a gift from God. “Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the sons of one’s youth. Happy is the man who has his quiver full of them. He shall not be put to shame when he speaks with his enemies in the gate” (4-5, New Revised Standard Version). As a gift of God, children should be seen as desirable; in fact, they should be seen as a blessing. Not to have children or not to want to have them is not to desire this gift and this may put one at odds with the ways of God. Amoris Laetitia places the begetting of children within the context of salvation history, thus raising the stakes of the significance of children.⁴⁶ How can salvation history continue if there are no children to link the process? This question is posed by major figures in the history of Israel from Abraham and Sarah to Zechariah and Elizabeth. In fact, the Christian salvation story begins with the birth of a child, Jesus Christ. The centrality of having children in the continuation of the history of salvation can be seen as an important perspective that informs Amoris Laetitia. Added to the African traditional view of the perception of people as wealth discussed above, it becomes very difficult to raise the issue of addressing climate change through slowing population growth.

It should however be pointed out that from a Christian theological perspective, our material and spiritual security are in the hands of the triune God who created us rather than in the hands of other creatures. This sentiment is also present in many African traditions where God, not people, is often seen as ultimate. This

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vision may need to be cultivated in order to engage our understanding of the importance of bearing more children and its effects on the environment. Further, the need to bear many children weighs heavily on women who are often seen as little more than their ability to bear children. In fact, making our women to bear more children may demonstrate our lack of care for their bodies.

Even more, what if it is also the case that having children may not be all that worthwhile if the means of sustaining them is not available? What is the use of having children without the resources to take good care of them? What is the use of having children who have a very high probability of dying at a very tender age? What is the use of having children only to see them later drown at sea as they make the desperate attempt to cross into Europe, as is the case with many Cameroonian and other Africans and people from the Middle East? Could it be that sometimes it may be better never to have been born, as Job lamented (Job 3), and a contemporary South African philosopher, David Benata, opined?47

These questions may appear nihilistic but in the context of the environmental crisis we face in Cameroon and around the world today they are questions that need to be given serious thought. The point here is not to claim that having children is in itself harmful, as Benata suggests, but rather that it is ambiguous and that we need to make sure that when we have children we should have the resources to take care of them. As we have already seen, having many children weighs on the available resources, making the lives of many miserable. This state of affairs is contrary to the mission of the Trinity who brought creation into being and is intent on redeeming it, in spite of its sometimes wayward ways. Our inability to care for our children is a demonstration of our inability to care for the rest of God’s creation just as God expects us to do.

Given that the desire to have many children is often sustained by a context of high mortality, the church should be advocating for

ways that may help improve people’s livelihood without having deleterious effects on the environment. This would include calling for the establishment of social safety nets that may help take care of people when they are old and the improvement in the technology of food production so that more food may be produced without denuding the already fragile forests. Doing these things would be our own way of fulfilling our calling as people called and sent to proclaim the good news of the redemption of a groaning creation, even as we wait in joyful hope for the establishment of the new heaven and the new earth (Rev. 21).

Conclusion

This essay has focused on deforestation and desertification as among some of the significant environmental problems facing Cameroon today, arguing that among the many things that need to be done to address these problems, population growth needs to be privileged. Drawing from a Trinitarian theology that sees creation and salvation as the means by which the triune God cares for the world, the essay argues that churches in Cameroon should see themselves as communities called and sent by God to continue this care for creation, which especially includes the care for people as a means to care for the environment. Some of the theological moves that need to be taken for this care for the environment to be properly carried out include the development of a prophetic voice that speaks for destitute indigenous peoples as representatives of the poor and a rethinking of the common view that children are a blessing from God. The church ought to be involved in thinking of ways to improve people’s lives so as to limit the need to rely on children as security for the future. In fact, relying on children for future security may lead us to forget that our ultimate security is in God who constantly preserves and sustains us.