

ASSESSING THE RELEVANCE OF RELIGION ON ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION LAW IN GOMBE STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

Gombe State is situated in the Savannah region of Nigeria, facing a myriad of environmental problems that are impacting the livelihood of residents through deforestation, climate change, and degradation in terms of waste management, pollution and loss of natural habitat. The environment is a sacred trust, and its protection is a collective responsibility shared by both governmental law and religious doctrine. In Gombe State, there are over 30 forest reserve areas, mostly gazetted as a legal instrument in environmental conservation. This study highlights the importance of engaging religious institutions in environmental conservation efforts in Gombe State. By leveraging religious values and teachings, policymakers can develop more effective environmental conservation laws and programmes. Religious perspectives on environmental conservation highlight lessons from both Muslim and Christian traditions. In Islam, the Qur'an and the Hadith emphasise human responsibility as stewards and an obligation through Hifz al-bi'a (environmental conservation), implying protection of the natural world. The Christian perspective emphasises humanity's responsibility to care for God's creation: 'The Earth is the Lord's and everything in it'.¹ The methodology is qualitative, incorporating interviews with religious leaders, state officials, analysis of religious texts, and observation of environmental conservation practice within the geographic scope of the study. The findings underscore the potential for interfaith collaboration in addressing environmental challenges, with Islamic and Christian leaders alike

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¹Psalm 24:1.

emphasising humanity's stewardship role in protecting the environment. The research questions are: what is the relationship between religious values and environmental conservation practices in Gombe State? How can religious organisations contribute to environmental conservation efforts in Gombe State?

Keywords: Muslims–Christians, Environmental Conservation, Law, Religious Perspectives.

1. BACKGROUND

The relationship between religion and environmental conservation has become increasingly important globally, as the world grapples with the challenges of climate change, biodiversity loss and environmental degradation.^{2 3} The role of religion in promoting environmental conservation has been recognised by international organisations such as the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), which has partnered with faith-based organisations to promote sustainable development.⁴ In Africa, where over 80% of the population identifies as either Christian or Muslim,⁵ religion plays a significant role in shaping human behavior and attitudes towards many social interactions, and the environment is no exception. African countries, including Nigeria, have a high degree of religious consciousness and have recognised the importance of incorporating traditional and religious values into environmental conservation efforts.^{6 7}

²United Nations, Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UN 2015) <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda> accessed 27 June 2025.

³Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5°C (IPCC 2018).

⁴United Nations Environment Programme, 'Faith for Earth Initiative' (UNEP, 2018) <https://www.unep.org/faith-for-earth-initiative> accessed 7 September 2026.

⁵Pew Research Center, 'Sub-Saharan Africa Will Be Home to Growing Shares of the World's Christians and Muslims' (Pew Research Center, 2019) <https://www.pewresearch.org> accessed 16 November, 2025

⁶African Union, Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want (adopted 31 January 2015, 24th Ordinary Session of the Assembly of the African Union, Addis Ababa)

In Nigeria, environmental degradation poses a significant threat to sustainable development, with challenges such as deforestation, soil erosion and pollution affecting the livelihoods of millions of people. The Nigerian government has recognised the importance of environmental conservation and has made laws and policies to protect the environment.⁸ However, the effectiveness of these laws and policies is limited by a range of factors, which among others may include lack of awareness, limited capacity, and conflicting or vested interests. In Gombe State, located in the north-eastern part of Nigeria, environmental degradation is a significant challenge, with deforestation, pollution and soil erosion among other environmental problems. This study seeks to assess the relevance of religion to environmental conservation law in Gombe State, by examining the perspectives of religious leaders, environmental policymakers, and local communities. The research aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the role of religion in shaping environmental conservation law and practice in Gombe State, raising some fundamental questions on the relationship between religious values and environmental conservation practices, and on how religious organisations can contribute to environmental conservation law efforts in the state.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This section is structured across four levels — global, Africa, Nigeria and Gombe State — integrating theoretical perspectives, empirical evidence and practical insights to analyse the role of religion in helping environmental governance law achieve its objectives.

⁷Federal Republic of Nigeria, National Policy on the Environment (Revised 2016) (Federal Ministry of Environment 2016).

⁸ibid.

2.1 Religion and Environmental Stewardship

At the global level, the framework draws on the concept of eco-theology, extending to legal pluralism, to explore the role of religion in environmental stewardship and conservation law. Eco-theology emphasises the moral responsibility of humans to protect the environment as a divine creation. Religious traditions such as Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and indigenous spiritualities have long advocated for environmental stewardship. For example, the encyclical *Laudato Si'* by Pope Francis highlights the Christian duty to care for the earth as a common home, emphasising the interconnectedness of ecological, social and spiritual wellbeing.⁹ Similarly, Islamic teachings on *Khalifa* (stewardship, or vicegerent of the earth) and the *Mizan* (balance) underscore the ethical obligation to preserve natural resources, humans being considered trustees of Allah's creation.^{10 11}

Global environmental challenges such as climate change, deforestation and biodiversity loss have prompted religious institutions to take an active role in advocating for sustainable practices. For example, the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative brought together religious leaders from various traditions to address deforestation through faith-based action.¹² This global movement demonstrates the potential of religion to complement legal and policy frameworks in addressing environmental issues.

In Africa, the framework incorporates the role of indigenous knowledge systems and traditional religious practices in environmental conservation. Many African communities have viewed the environment through sacred groves, totemism and taboos serving as

⁹Pope Francis, *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home* (Vatican Press 2015).

¹⁰RC Foltz, *Islam and Ecology: A Bestowed Trust* (Harvard University Press 2003).

¹¹*Qur'an* 3:30.

¹²Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, 'Faith-Based Action to Protect Tropical Forests' (Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, 2020) <https://www.interfaithrainforest.org>.

informal conservation mechanisms.¹³ These practices are often rooted in spiritual beliefs and have historically contributed to biodiversity preservation. For example, sacred groves in Ghana and Nigeria have been preserved for centuries owing to their spiritual significance, serving as reservoirs of biodiversity and ecological balance.¹⁴

However, the erosion of traditional values due to modernization and globalization has weakened these systems, leading to environmental degradation in many parts of Africa.¹⁵ The framework explores how African religious traditions, including Christianity and Islam, can revitalize these practices and integrate them into formal environmental law. For instance, the concept of *Ubuntu* (human interconnectedness) in African philosophy emphasises the need for collective responsibility in environmental conservation, aligning with religious teachings on stewardship.¹⁶

2.2 Religion and Environmental Governance

In Nigeria, the framework examines the intersection of religion and environmental governance. Nigeria's religious diversity, with significant Christian and Muslim populations, provides a unique opportunity to leverage religious teachings for environmental conservation. For example, Islamic environmental ethics emphasise the prohibition of *Israf* (wastefulness) and the promotion of *Adl* (justice) in the use of resources, aimed at sustainable resource management.¹⁷ Similarly, Christian teachings on creation care

¹³MF Murove, *African Ethics: An Anthology of Comparative and Applied Ethics* (University of KwaZulu-Natal Press 2009).

¹⁴A Ormsby and S Bhagwat, 'Sacred Forests of India: A Strong Tradition of Community-Based Natural Resource Management' (2010) *Environmental Conservation* (Cambridge University Press).

¹⁵Murove (n 13).

¹⁶*ibid.*

¹⁷Foltz (n 10).

advocate for sustainable practices, as seen in the activities of faith-based organisations promoting tree planting and environmental education.¹⁸

Despite the potential to utilize religious teachings, Nigerian environmental laws often lack explicit integration of religious principles, leading to gaps in implementation and enforcement.¹⁹ For instance, the National Environmental Standards and Regulations Enforcement Agency (NESREA) focus primarily on regulatory measures, with limited engagement of religious institutions in environmental advocacy. The question this raises is how religious ethics might complement legal frameworks in addressing environmental challenges such as deforestation, desertification and pollution — a gap this study seeks to address.

2.3 Religion and Environmental Laws

Drawing on the context of Gombe State, environmental issues such as water pollution, waste disposal and management, deforestation and erosion, among others, call for urgent action. Gombe's religious communities, predominantly Muslim and Christian, have the potential to influence environmental attitudes and behaviors through teachings and community-based initiatives. For instance, mosques and churches can serve as platforms for environmental education and advocacy, promoting practices such as tree-planting campaigns and waste management.²⁰

¹⁸A Ogunfolakan, 'The Contribution of Religion to Environmental Conservation in Some Selected Towns in Kogi State, Nigeria' (2014).

¹⁹F Nkomazana and L Maseno and others, *Law, Religion and the Environment in Africa* (Emory University School of Law, Center for the Study of Law and Religion 2020).

²⁰Ogunfolakan (n 18).

Given that religious institutions may be well aligned with traditional leadership structures, it will be of utmost importance for traditional leaders and religious institutions to bridge the gap between formal environmental law and community practice. For example, the Gombe Emirate and other chiefdoms, using their governance structures, could play a pivotal role in mobilizing communities for environmental conservation across the state. By examining case studies from Gombe, the framework highlights the practical relevance of religion in shaping environmental conservation law. For instance, the success of faith-based tree-planting initiatives in Kogi State, north-central Nigeria, demonstrates the potential for similar programmes in Gombe State,²¹ and could also be replicated in other states, bearing in mind the varying degrees of environmental challenge peculiar to each.

3. METHODOLOGY

Methodology is an integral phase of research, without which one cannot establish the what, when, how and why of an inquiry. An appropriate methodology adds value to what others have done in terms of procedure and technique, drawing on available secondary data and the methods adopted to generate new data using instruments in both quantitative and qualitative form. This study adopted qualitative methods, using interviews to validate existing secondary data and to generate new data to guide the analysis and discussion of findings. Religious leaders across the divide, together with government officials, were purposively selected on the basis of their knowledge of the subject matter.

In qualitative research, the concept of population differs from that in quantitative inquiry. Rather than seeking statistically representative samples from which findings can be generalised to a larger population, qualitative researchers seek information-rich cases from which they

²¹ibid.

can learn deeply about the phenomenon of interest.²² The population of this study comprises Islamic and Christian clerics and government officials dealing with environmental matters. Although there are traditional religious worshippers in the state — in particular, adherents of the Lunguda forest-conservation taboo — they were not easily accessible, mostly living in remote villages, which forms part of the study's limitations. There is a need for further study to integrate the traditional religious conservation view with that of the state's extant environmental laws and religious doctrines.

Merriam²³ and Creswell²⁴ offer conservative guidance, suggesting that for in-depth qualitative interview studies a minimum of six informants is acceptable, depending on the nature of the research and the saturation level achieved. Saturation — the point at which additional data collection yields no new insights — is the key criterion for determining sample-size adequacy. Morse²⁵ posits that where the quality of qualitatively collected data is rich and useful, fewer informants will suffice, with emphasis placed on depth of information rather than number of participants. Baker and Edwards,²⁶ in their comprehensive review of qualitative sampling, conclude that appropriate sample size depends on the scope of the study, the quality of data, and the saturation point reached.

²²JW Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (4th edn, SAGE 2014).

²³SB Merriam (ed), *Qualitative Research in Practice: Examples for Discussion and Analysis* (Jossey-Bass 2002).

²⁴Creswell (n 22).

²⁵JM Morse, 'Determining Sample Size' (2000) 10(1) *Qualitative Health Research* 3.

²⁶SE Baker and R Edwards, *How Many Qualitative Interviews Is Enough? Expert Voices and Early Career Reflections on Sampling and Cases in Qualitative Research* (National Centre for Research Methods 2012).

The sample size for this study consisted of six participants (N = 6). As Morse²⁷ argues, qualitative research emphasises the depth and richness of information rather than statistical representativeness. A sample of six was deemed methodologically sufficient because participants were highly knowledgeable on the subject, drawn from both state officials and religious leaders, sharing tightly defined experiential criteria directly aligned with the study's scope, as suggested by Baker and Edwards.²⁸ Data saturation was achieved during the final interviews, as no significant new themes or conceptual insights emerged from the narratives, allowing for a rigorous, deep and nuanced analysis without sacrificing data quality.

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section examines the intersection of religion, tradition and law in environmental conservation. The relationship between religious doctrine, traditional belief systems and environmental law in Gombe State presents a complex tapestry of convergence and divergence. While existing scholarship acknowledges the influence of Islam, Christianity and indigenous traditions on conservation ethics, critical gaps remain in understanding how these sometimes-competing worldviews interact with formal legal structures. This review synthesises the current literature to reveal both the synergistic potential and the inherent tensions in this multidimensional relationship.

4.1 Religious Doctrines: Converging Ethics, Divergent Applications

The literature on Islamic environmental jurisprudence demonstrates strong convergence around Islamic environmental principles. Bello²⁹

²⁷Morse (n 25).

²⁸Baker and Edwards (n 26).

²⁹MA Bello, 'Islamic Ethical Perspective of Environmental Abuse in Lagos State' (2022) 22(1) Al-Tahrir 213.

discusses how Qur'anic concepts of *khalifa* (stewardship) and *mizan* (balance) are drawn upon by Islamic scholars in Nigeria, including through the *minbar* (pulpit) and *khutbah* (Friday sermon), to support conservation and reference prophetic teaching against pollution and waste.³⁰ The literature also suggests a divergence in implementation across enforcement contexts, with some environmental concerns receiving more consistent attention than others depending on local socio-economic priorities.

On Christian stewardship 'The Earth is the Lord's and everything in it'³¹ the wider literature on African Christianity³² presents a more fragmented picture of Christian engagement. While mainline denominations have institutionalised 'creation care' programmes, scholarship on African Pentecostalism finds it has, historically, engaged markedly less with ecological practice, prioritizing evangelistic and eschatological concerns over environmental stewardship. This doctrinal divergence plausibly produces uneven conservation outcomes across denominations, though comparable figures specific to Gombe State have not been established in the available literature. The broader literature suggests the difference stems from differing hermeneutical approaches to Genesis, with mainline churches emphasising stewardship and some charismatic groups favoring a more anthropocentric reading of scripture.

4.2 Traditional Belief Systems: The Erosion of Effective Informal Institutions

³⁰Ibn Mājah, Sunan Ibn Mājah, Hadith 2479.

³¹Psalms 24:1 (n 1).

³²E Awudi, 'Beyond Eco-Pneumatology: An Examination of Scripture with "Green Eyes" Towards the Development of an African Pentecostal Ecotheology' (2025) 5(2) *Pentecost Journal of Theology and Mission* 1.

Comparable studies of sacred groves elsewhere in Nigeria³³ provide evidence that sacred groves can sustain markedly higher tree diversity, biomass and carbon storage than surrounding land uses; local accounts in Gombe similarly describe how *dodo* spirit taboos historically discouraged overexploitation through fear-based compliance, although a Gombe-specific quantitative comparison of this kind has not yet been established in the literature. Dunnamah and others³⁴ identifies three critical erosive factors: generational knowledge gaps, with far fewer young people than elders able to identify sacred species; Islamic reformist movements rejecting 'animist' practices; and economic pressures converting sacred spaces into farmland.

This creates a paradox: while the scientific literature validates traditional methods,³⁵ their social legitimacy is declining as religious change proceeds.³⁶ This dynamic — religious change undermining conservation mechanisms rooted in traditional belief — is consistent with the wider literature on sacred groves in Nigeria.

4.3 Legal Frameworks: Selective Incorporation and Institutional Tensions

The wider literature on law and religion in Africa reveals a pattern of selective legal incorporation of religious and customary principles into formal environmental law generally,³⁷ drawing on concepts such as the Islamic *hima* (protected zones) and comparable traditional zoning

³³JC Onyekwelu, AD Agbelade, B Stimm and R Mosandl, 'Role of Sacred Groves in Southwestern Nigeria in Biodiversity Conservation, Biomass and Carbon Storage' (2024) Environmental Monitoring and Assessment.

³⁴AY Dunnamah and others, 'The Role of Traditional Religion in Natural Resources Conservation' (2016) 4(5) International Journal of Education and Research 37.

³⁵Onyekwelu and others (n 33).

³⁶F Nkomazana and L Maseno and others, Law, Religion and the Environment in Africa (Emory University School of Law, Center for the Study of Law and Religion 2020).

³⁷*ibid.*

concepts across the continent. This literature suggests such provisions are frequently weakly enforced in practice, suggesting symbolic rather than substantive adoption. A critical tension can also emerge between statutory and religious authorities more broadly: secular environmental laws may contradict Islamic inheritance practices affecting land use, and economic interests within religious communities can override conservation ethics where the two conflict.³⁸³⁹

4.4 Faith-Based Advocacy: Bridging or Widening Gaps?

Contemporary faith-adjacent and government initiatives demonstrate both promise and limitation. Gombe State's own Gombe Goes Green (3G) programme,⁴⁰ launched by the state government in 2019, has shown notable success in tree planting, reporting several million trees planted across the state's local government areas by the mid-2020s. This is a state-led initiative rather than the interfaith religious coalition. More broadly, the literature on faith-based environmental advocacy in Nigeria identifies persistent challenges, including sectarian competition, whereby Muslim and Christian groups may duplicate efforts in rival territories rather than collaborate.⁴¹ Second is short-termism, with faith-based environmental projects across the region widely reported to be vulnerable to donor dependency and correspondingly short lifespans.⁴² Third is a knowledge gap: religious leaders in Nigeria frequently receive little or no formal environmental training,⁴³ particularly regarding the integration of state law with religious teaching on the environment.

³⁸Gombe State Government, 'Gombe Goes Green' (Gombe State Government) <https://gombestate.gov.ng/gombe-goes-green/> accessed 18 September 2026.

³⁹Awudi (n 32).

⁴⁰Gombe State Government, 'Gombe Goes Green' (n 38).

⁴¹*ibid.*

⁴²Awudi (n 32).

⁴³Bello (n 29).

4.5 Empirical Review

Omoyajowo and others⁴⁴ cross-sectional study examines the relationship between spirituality and environmental responsibility, emphasising the role of spiritual leadership in promoting pro-environmental behavior. The study, involving 1,438 respondents from Nigeria and the United States, found that spirituality significantly influences environmental stewardship,⁴⁵ with 70% of respondents believing in a duty of care toward nature and over 60% indicating they would adopt conservation measures if spiritual leaders emphasized environmental teaching.

Predictors of spiritual engagement with the environment include prayer frequency, meditation and altruistic values. The study aligns with Kollmuss and Agyeman's⁴⁶ pro-environmental behavior models, particularly the altruism model linking spirituality to ecological action. While the study highlights spirituality's role, it lacks granularity in differentiating between religious traditions, and its reliance on self-reported data may introduce bias. Bsoul and others⁴⁷ work on Islam's perspective on environmental sustainability explores Islamic teachings linking Qur'anic principles and prophetic tradition to modern sustainability goals such as the UN SDGs. Its key argument is that the Qur'an promotes moderation⁴⁸ and condemns waste,⁴⁹ framing environmental care as a religious duty.

⁴⁴K Omoyajowo and others, 'Exploring the Interplay of Environmental Conservation Within Spirituality and Multi-Cultural Perspectives: Insights from a Cross-Sectional Study' (2024) 26 *Environment, Development and Sustainability* 16957.

⁴⁵*ibid.*

⁴⁶A Kollmuss and J Agyeman, 'Mind the Gap: Why Do People Act Environmentally and What Are the Barriers to Pro-Environmental Behaviour?' (2002) 8(3) *Environmental Education Research* 239.

⁴⁷L Bsoul and others, 'Islam's Perspective on Environmental Sustainability: A Conceptual Analysis' (2022) 11 *Social Sciences* 228.

⁴⁸Qur'an 7:31.

⁴⁹Qur'an 6:141.

This is corroborated by the Prophet Muhammad's practices, such as water conservation during ablution,⁵⁰ exemplifying sustainable resource use, and by the concept of *Ummah* (community), which fosters collective environmental responsibility. The paper further integrates Al-Jayyousi's⁵¹ 'green life model', combining environmental activism, innovation and eco-friendly lifestyles.⁵² However, the study is theoretical and lacks empirical validation, and it overlooks contradictions, such as instances where Islamic practices (for example, animal sacrifice) may conflict with conservation.

Irawan's⁵³ qualitative study of Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*), Sufism and environmental conservation in Indonesia examines how Sufi doctrines *zuhud* (asceticism) and *tafakkur* (contemplation) drive environmental practice at the Ath-Thaariq *pesantren* in West Java. Its key findings show ecology integrated into education, teaching organic farming and waste recycling, with students viewing nature as sacred, aligning with Sufi values of gratitude and kinship.⁵⁴ Challenges include limited government support and curriculum gaps. The study draws on Vaughan-Lee's⁵⁵ 'spiritual ecology', emphasising harmony between humans and nature, and critiques Van Bruinessen's⁵⁶ characterization of Sufism as conservative by showcasing its adaptive, eco-centric practices. Its single-case design, however, limits

⁵⁰Ibn Mājah, Sunan Ibn Mājah, Hadith 2008 (on water conservation during ablution).

⁵¹OR Al-Jayyousi, *Islam and Sustainable Development: New Worldviews* (Routledge 2012).

⁵²Bsoul and others (n 47).

⁵³B Irawan, 'Islamic Boarding Schools (Pesantren), Sufism and Environmental Conservation Practices in Indonesia' (2022) 78(4) HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies a7073.

⁵⁴*ibid.*

⁵⁵L Vaughan-Lee, *Working with Oneness* (Golden Sufi Center 2002).

⁵⁶M van Bruinessen, 'Introduction: Contemporary Developments in Indonesian Islam and the "Conservative Turn" of the Early Twenty-First Century' in M van Bruinessen (ed), *Contemporary Developments in Indonesian Islam: Explaining the "Conservative Turn"* (ISEAS 2013).

generalizability, and it could further explore tensions between Sufi asceticism and modern agricultural demands.

All three studies underscore spirituality's role in environmentalism. Omoyajowo and others⁵⁷ and Bsoul and others⁵⁸ highlight doctrinal imperatives, while Irawan⁵⁹ focuses on Sufi praxis. Omoyajowo and others' broad 'spirituality' metric, however, risks homogenizing diverse traditions. Empirically, Omoyajowo and others⁶⁰ and Irawan⁶¹ provide survey and case-study data respectively, whereas Bsoul and others⁶² offer a normative framework whose lack of fieldwork weakens its applicability.

Islam and Christianity play pivotal roles in shaping environmental stewardship in Gombe State. Begum and others⁶³ demonstrate that Islamic religiosity significantly moderates pro-environmental behavior among university students, with Qur'anic principles such as *khalifa* (stewardship) fostering conservation attitudes. Similarly, Dunnamah and others⁶⁴ note that traditional Islamic and Christian teaching in Gombe historically discouraged exploitative practice, though modernization has eroded some norms. Begum and others,⁶⁵ however, reveal a critical gap: while Islamic teaching promotes pro-environmental behavior, its integration into formal environmental policy remains inconsistent. This aligns with Abdulsalam and

⁵⁷Omoyajowo and others (n 44).

⁵⁸Bsoul and others (n 47).

⁵⁹Irawan (n 53).

⁶⁰Omoyajowo and others (n 44).

⁶¹Irawan (n 53).

⁶²Bsoul and others (n 47).

⁶³A Begum and others, 'Impact of Environmental Moral Education on Pro-Environmental Behaviour' (2021) 18(4) International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health 1604.

⁶⁴AY Dunnamah and others, 'The Role of Traditional Religion in Natural Resources Conservation' (2016) 4(5) International Journal of Education and Research 37.

⁶⁵Begum and others (n 63).

Magaji's⁶⁶ observation that Gombe State University Leverages Islamic environmental ethics in its afforestation initiatives but lacks systemic policy frameworks to scale these efforts.

Dunnamah and others⁶⁷ provide ethnographic evidence of how Lunguda traditional religion conserved biodiversity through taboos on hunting sacred species and seasonal restrictions such as regulated fishing periods, practices rooted in animist belief that created de facto protected areas. The study critiques modernization for dismantling these systems, leading to ecological degradation, a view supported by Abdulsalam and Magaji,⁶⁸ who note that Gombe State University's green initiatives aim to revive such indigenous practice.

Neither study, however, fully explores how to integrate traditional ecological knowledge with contemporary conservation law a missed opportunity given Nigeria's National Policy on Climate Change,⁶⁹ which advocates community-based resource management. On legal frameworks and religious integration, Abdulsalam and Magaji⁷⁰ document Gombe State University's adherence to SDG 13 (Climate Action) through green infrastructure such as tree planting and zoological parks, reflecting Nigeria's commitment to the Paris Agreement.⁷¹ The study critiques the lack of enforceable law to sustain these initiatives, a gap mirrored in Dunnamah and others' finding⁷² that

⁶⁶RS Abdulsalam and A Magaji, 'Green Features: A Pathway to Climate Change Mitigation in Gombe State University' (2024) 18(2) *International Journal of Real Estate Studies* 39.

⁶⁷Dunnamah and others (n 64).

⁶⁸Abdulsalam and Magaji (n 66).

⁶⁹Federal Ministry of Environment, Third National Communication on Climate (TNC) (Federal Republic of Nigeria 2020).

⁷⁰Abdulsalam and Magaji (n 66).

⁷¹Federal Ministry of Environment (n 69).

⁷²Dunnamah and others (n 64).

post-colonial legal systems failed to codify traditional conservation norms.

Virtually all the studies reviewed acknowledge the role of faith-based organisations in environmental advocacy. The literature converges on religion's influence on environmental ethics but diverges on implementation, including on the need to codify traditional and religious conservation norms into law, and on interfaith collaboration to address sectarian divides in faith-based organisations through platforms such as Gombe State University's 'Green Gombe' initiative.⁷³ Critical gaps remain in understanding how intra-religious debate shapes environmental positions, the economic factors limiting legal enforcement, and optimal models for religious–secular collaboration. Future research should employ political-ecology frameworks to analyse the power dynamics between these intersecting systems.

5. FINDINGS

The evidence gathered in the course of data collection indicates that both Islam and Christianity make certain provision in respect of the environment. This section synthesises a missing nexus between Nigerian environmental law and religious doctrine. The secular statutory structure of the Climate Change Act 2021⁷⁴ possesses legal force but lacks local legitimacy and grassroots penetration.^{75 76} Conversely, religious institutions in Gombe State possess considerable moral authority and societal trust but lack formal regulatory backing, structural funding and enforcement instruments. The data strongly

⁷³Abdulsalam and Magaji (n 66).

⁷⁴Climate Change Act 2021 (Nigeria).

⁷⁵EO Ekhaton, A Review of Nigeria's 2021 Climate Change Act: Potential for Increased Climate Litigation (IUCN Academy of Environmental Law 2022).

⁷⁶GC Ogbodo, 'An Appraisal of the Climate Change Act 2021 as "Game Changer" in Environmental and Climate Public Interest Litigation in Nigeria' (2024) 15(1) Journal of Sustainable Development Law and Policy 45.

indicate that, for environmental conservation law to be genuinely relevant and enforceable in Gombe State, the statutory instruments of the 2021 Climate Change Act must be hybridized with the faith-based stewardship frameworks championed by local Christian and Muslim clerics. The study identified several themes and sub-themes highlighting the relevance of religion to environmental conservation in Gombe State, discussed below.

5.1 Religious Influence on Environmental Attitudes

On this theme, the findings reveal a spiritual connection between religion and nature, emphasising the moral obligation to protect the environment. According to one respondent,⁷⁷ 'as a Muslim, I believe that Allah created the universe and everything in it, and we have a responsibility to take care of it.' On this view, a believer's sense of responsibility towards the environment, grounded in religious teaching, will shape the environmental attitudes and practice of followers.

This finding is corroborated by the existing literature, wherein the encyclical *Laudato Si'* by Pope Francis highlights the Christian duty to care for the earth as a common home,⁷⁸ and Islamic teaching on *Khalifa* and *Mizan* underscores the ethical obligation to preserve natural resources.^{79 80}

A further respondent⁸¹ emphasized that both the Qur'an and the Hadith of the Prophet Muhammad admonish believers in clear terms to conserve the environment, quoting a Hadith to the effect that a person

⁷⁷Interview with Respondent 1 (Gombe State, Nigeria, 2025).

⁷⁸Pope Francis (n 9).

⁷⁹Foltz (n 10).

⁸⁰Qur'an 3:30 (n 11).

⁸¹Interview with Respondent 2 (Gombe State, Nigeria, 2025).

who plants a tree from which a bird or human eats is rewarded as if for an act of charity.

Additionally, Islamic etiquette forbids defecating beneath a tree, a tree being regarded as a subsisting charity carrying spiritual reward for the individual even after death.⁸² The findings indicate that, even where religious clerics actively promote environmental stewardship, a fundamental obstacle is pervasive poverty and resource scarcity, which drastically limit compliance with both state law and religious moral teaching. This finding directly validates respondents' unanimous submission that religious environmentalism is severely constrained by a lack of material resources and alternative livelihoods for the greater part of the population, whose survival depends on forest resources.

Where the 2021 Act mandates strict carbon budgets and targets deforestation, it clashes with the immediate survival needs of Gombe's agrarian population. Local scholars point out that, absent viable economic alternatives, statutory bans on tree-felling or bush-burning are unenforceable. The top-down statutory demands highlighted by Olujobi⁸³ therefore fail at the sub-national level because they lack the financial flexibility of faith-based economic models. To resolve this, the study echoes the framework proposed by Zulkifli and Rahman,⁸⁴ which advocates integrating green Islamic finance (*Sukuk* and *Waqf* endowments) and Christian cooperative funding to finance the green obligations imposed by the state.

⁸²Interview with Respondent 6 (Gombe State, Nigeria, 2025).

⁸³OJ Olujobi, 'Nigeria's Climate Change Act 2021: A Pathway to Net-Zero Carbon Emission, Energy Security and Sustainability' (2024) 31 Environmental Science and Pollution Research 36834.

⁸⁴Z Zulkifli and F Rahman, 'Islamic Finance and Environmental Sustainability in Nigeria: A Systematic Analytical Approach' (2026) 2(1) Journal of Islamic Environmentalism 15.

5.2 Role of Religious Leaders in Environmental Conservation

Religious leaders across the divide bear an obligation to preach environmental stewardship in pursuit of sustainable practice. As one respondent put it,⁸⁵ 'our church teaches us to be good stewards of God's creation, and we should take care of the earth for future generations.' Another respondent similarly noted that 'the imams on the pulpit of the mosque always emphasise the importance of protecting the environment and conserving natural resources.'⁸⁶

This finding aligns with the empirical study by Omoyajowo and others⁸⁷ discussed above, which examined the relationship between spirituality and environmental responsibility across 1,438 respondents in Nigeria and the United States, finding that spirituality significantly influences environmental stewardship,⁸⁸ with 70% of respondents believing in a duty of care toward nature and over 60% indicating they would adopt conservation measures if spiritual leaders emphasized environmental teaching.

While Olujobi⁸⁹ praises the Act as Nigeria's definitive pathway to a net-zero carbon economy, the field data from Gombe reveal that the Act suffers from deep institutional alienation. Clerics from both faiths in Gombe expressed complete unfamiliarity with the National Council on Climate Change, supporting the critique raised by Ogbodo⁹⁰ regarding institutional bottlenecks and a profound lack of grassroots awareness in public environmental interest litigation. Because the statutory requirements of the 2021 Act rely on formal courts and Western-style regulatory sanction, local and religious leaders view it

⁸⁵Interview with Respondent 5 (Gombe State, Nigeria, 2025).

⁸⁶Interview with Respondent 3 (Gombe State, Nigeria, 2025).

⁸⁷Omoyajowo and others (n 44).

⁸⁸*Ibid.*

⁸⁹Olujobi (n 83).

⁹⁰Ogbodo (n 76).

as an elite, Abuja-centric instrument detached from rural realities in Gombe State.

This gap exposes a severe vulnerability in the Act's top-down, coercive approach. As Ekhtator⁹¹ notes, the Act's primary leverage point is its capacity to spark environmental litigation; yet this study finds that, in Gombe State, civil litigation is rarely pursued owing to widespread poverty and institutional distrust. Instead, as Mulia and Wahid⁹² observe in their study of eco-fatwas, and as Fachruddin and Mangunjaya⁹³ confirm, behavioral change in deeply religious societies occurs through community trust structures rather than state coercion. In Gombe State, the Gombe Goes Green (3G) Initiative and ACRoSAL projects have achieved success only where traditional and religious institutions actively mediated the policy.

5.3 Challenges to Environmental Conservation in Gombe State

Among the challenges to environmental conservation in Gombe State are low levels of awareness, alongside poverty and economic constraints, which deepen unsustainable practices of deforestation and waste management, particularly in the metropolitan Centre.

A major finding is that deforestation in Gombe State is becoming increasingly severe, with the potential to precipitate desertification. As one respondent attested:

⁹¹Ekhtator (n 75).

⁹²A Mulia and A Wahid, 'Eco-Fatwas and the Role of Local 'Ulamā' in Addressing Environmental Issues in Indonesia: Evidence from the Riau Islands' (2025) 12(2) Socio-Legal Studies Review 204.

⁹³M Fachruddin and FM Mangunjaya, 'The Flexibility of Islamic Law in Responding to Climate Change Impacts on the Economy: Analysing MUI Fatwa No 86 of 2023' (2026) 4(1) International Journal of Islamic Jurisprudence 112.

deforestation is more often a destruction of the environment for the purpose of farming, development or economic activities such as firewood and charcoal production. Human activity and encroachment have cost the state at least 0.5km of desert encroachment from the northern part of the state, particularly around Nafada Local Government Area bordering Yobe State.⁹⁴

The implication is that, over the coming decades, this loss will compound substantially, particularly in the northern part of the state, with a likelihood of further encroachment into other communities. Deforestation is not confined to the northern corridor: similar patterns are witnessed in Tula, Bambam and Yiri in the southern part of the state, while Shinga, Gwani, Difa and Pindiga-Tukulma forest reserves were the most affected areas in the central zone.⁹⁵

A further respondent⁹⁶ noted that thirty-one forest reserves have been gazette since the colonial era in 1946, some eighty years ago. Over time, however, most of these reserves have either been de-gazette or illegally encroached upon for development purposes farmland expansion, road construction, and residential or industrial use and overgrazing. A further fundamental challenge is the limited number of forest guards available to manage the existing thirty-one reserves, which exacerbates deforestation and, in turn, triggers soil erosion as one of the most common environmental problems in the state.

5.4 Potential for Collaboration Between Religious Leaders and Government

Joint environmental initiatives between government and faith-based programmes are indispensable, given the magnitude of the challenges

⁹⁴Interview with Respondent 4 (Gombe State, Nigeria, 2025).

⁹⁵ibid.

⁹⁶Interview with Respondent 1 (n. above) (n 77).

Gombe State currently faces. Government respondents encouraged the need to work with religious leaders across the divide, including traditional religious followers, as indispensable partners in promoting environmental awareness across the strata of society.

The state government's previous interventions, particularly in partnership with the Great Green Wall project, recorded considerable success, reclaiming approximately 150 hectares of land in the corridor local government areas of Dukku, Nafada and Funakaye in the northern part of the state. A further initiative, the Governor's Gombe Goes Green (3G) tree-planting campaign, launched in 2019, targets one million trees annually and, within five years, had planted approximately three million trees across the state.⁹⁷

It is noted by respondents that what success has been achieved owes in part to collaboration between the state government and religious clergy. To expand the frontiers of community engagement, a Task Force Committee was established, headed by a prominent traditional ruler, Mai-Tula Alh Buba Alare II, to implement the planting of further trees.

6. DISCUSSION

The study reveals that religion plays a significant role in shaping environmental attitudes and behavior in Gombe State. The findings further suggest that religious leaders can influence environmental conservation efforts by promoting sustainable practice and preaching environmental stewardship. A foundational finding is that both Christian and Muslim clerics in Gombe State maintain a theological convergence, sharing mandates of stewardship that interpret environmental preservation as a binding spiritual obligation rather than merely a secular civic duty.

⁹⁷Interview with Respondent 4 (n. above) (n 94).

Local Islamic scholars across Gombe's emirates overwhelmingly rely on the concepts of *Khalīfah* (vicegerency) and *Mīzān* (cosmic balance) to contextualize conservation. This strongly aligns with the assertions of Gusau⁹⁸ and Murtala,⁹⁹ who observe that, across predominantly Muslim Northern Nigerian society, the *ulamā'* use the Friday sermon (*khutbah*) to condemn environmental degradation as *fasād* (corruption on earth). In Gombe State, this theological framework directly reinforces grassroots compliance, transforming the technical targets of the Climate Change Act into moral absolutes. Christian clerics in areas such as Billiri Local Government Area, by contrast, frame their ecological advocacy around Genesis 2:15,¹⁰⁰ emphasising humanity's divine mandate to 'dress and keep' the earth. This replicates the findings of Agbogidi,¹⁰¹ whose eco-ethical study of bush burning in Biliri, Gombe State, finds that adherence to conservation goals increases where ecological crises are viewed through a Christian ethical lens.

This study's discovery of a unified inter-faith ecological front in Gombe is further supported by a study of religious environmentalism¹⁰² evaluating Northeast Nigeria, which concluded that, despite clear doctrinal differences, Christians and Muslims share

⁹⁸M Gusau, 'Friday Sermon: Islamic Perspective on Climate Change' Premium Times Nigeria (Abuja, 12 July 2024).

⁹⁹A Murtala, 'The Islamic Viewpoint on Global Climate Change' (2024) 2(2) *Al-Hikmah Journal of Islamic Studies* 114.

¹⁰⁰Genesis 2:15.

¹⁰¹OM Agbogidi, 'Christian Environmental Ethics and Ecological Crisis: The Case of Bush Burning in Biliri Local Government Area, Gombe State, Nigeria' (2025) 6(1) *Gombe Journal of Geography and Environmental Studies* 123.

¹⁰²OM Agbogidi, 'Christian Environmental Ethics and Ecological Crisis: The Case of Bush Burning in Biliri Local Government Area, Gombe State, Nigeria' (2025) 6(1) *Gombe Journal of Geography and Environmental Studies* 123; AY Dunnamah and others, 'The Role of Traditional Religion in Natural Resources Conservation' (2016) 4(5) *International Journal of Education and Research* 37.

broadly similar theocentric and eco-centric motives for pro-environmental action. Both clerical groups in Gombe successfully translate the abstract concept of greenhouse-gas reduction into localised, faith-compliant vocabulary. The discussion also highlights the challenges to environmental conservation, including low levels of awareness and poverty and economic constraint; nonetheless, the potential for collaboration between religious leaders and government appears promising, with opportunities for joint environmental programmes.

The findings are broadly consistent with the wider literature on the role of religion in environmental conservation. Studies have shown that religious beliefs and practice can shape environmental attitudes and behavior in a given community,¹⁰³ and that religious leaders can play a key role in promoting environmental awareness and conservation through their respective pulpits.¹⁰⁴

The empirical data gathered in this study establish that religion functions as an indispensable non-statutory framework for environmental conservation in Gombe State. When evaluating how local Islamic scholars and Christian clerics interact with the Climate Change Act 2021, a profound paradox emerges: both faith traditions demonstrate substantial theological alignment with the ecological spirit of the Act, yet both display systemic alienation from its secular, top-down enforcement mechanisms. These findings carry implications for environmental policy and practice in the study area; policymakers and environmental practitioners could usefully work with religious

¹⁰³B Taylor, 'Editorial Introduction: Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture: A Decade of Critical Inquiry' (2017) 10(4) *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 417.

¹⁰⁴W Jenkins, ME Tucker and J Grim (eds), *Routledge Handbook of Religion and Ecology* (Routledge 2017).

leaders to develop and implement environmental conservation strategies that incorporate religious values and principles.

7. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study has provided valuable insight into the relevance of religion to environmental conservation. In-depth interviews with religious leaders, policymakers and other stakeholders suggest that religion can serve as a crucial agent of change in promoting environmental conservation, and that the involvement of religious leaders can enhance the effectiveness of environmental law and policy.

The study further highlights the need for policymakers to incorporate religious perspectives into environmental conservation efforts. Ultimately, it contributes to a deeper understanding of the complex relationship between religion, environment and law, with practical recommendations for harnessing the potential of religion to promote a healthier environment.

8. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the study, the following policy recommendations are made:

- 1. Environmental Education and Awareness Programmes:** government should incorporate religious perspectives into environmental education and awareness, including through curricula and awareness programmes grounded in religious values and principles at the grassroots. This could draw on the Universities' new Core Curriculum Minimum Academic Standard, for instance in Political Science, where a course such as POL 109 ('Environmental Politics') provides a vehicle for student engagement, awareness and action on the environment.

2. **Collaboration between Government and Religious Organisations:** this should foster unity of purpose in promoting environmental stewardship, as advocated by both Islam and Christianity. Religious organisations should be involved in policy formulation and implementation for environmental conservation, with training and capacity-building for religious leaders fostering partnership between government agencies, religious organisations and civil society groups in the state.

3. **Faith-Based Environmental Programmes:** government should be deliberate in developing and implementing faith-based environmental programmes that promote sustainable practice and environmental stewardship, in the manner of UNEP's Faith for Earth Initiative,¹⁰⁵ which should be encouraged among faith-based organisations across the state.

¹⁰⁵UNEP (n 4).