



# Religion and Environmental Conservation: A Case Study of Abasua Prayer Mountain Ministry

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## ABSTRACT

Contemporary environmental issues continue to take center stage in various local and international discourses. This paper sought to examine the role of religion, in this context Christianity in environmental conservation at the Abasua prayer center. The study adopted an interpretivism approach which enabled the utilization of a qualitative research approach. The study used a descriptive cross-sectional survey design and both primary and secondary data sources were used. The primary data was collected with the help of interview guides where detailed interview was conducted across the ten prayer camps. The respondents were selected through a purposive sampling technique and the collected data was transcribed and thematically analyzed in the light of the study objectives. The results from the study indicated excessive environmental degradation which was evident in the continuous cutting down of trees by the camps to build without planting. The study furthermore showed that there are no proper waste management systems and the camps do not have environmentally friendly waste management systems. The study has highlighted the nexus between Christians and their role in environmental conservation. It could be asserted from all indications that, without intentional and pragmatic measures, the ecological circle at the Abasua forest reserve will continue to deteriorate with detrimental effects on future generations. It would be recommended that multi-sectoral stakeholder collaborations be conducted to educate the Christians who patronize the forest reserve on the need to protect the environment as it forms part of their basic mandate as Christians.

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## INTRODUCTION

There have been significant collaborations centered on environmental preservation and sustainable development in recent times and this has drawn moral inspiration from a range of people from every sector of society including the various religions. Gottlieb notes that although "earlier ecological problems were locally confined to a region, a community, even an empire, our plight today is global: there simply is no escape from it on this planet," the solutions to the environmental crisis are complex.<sup>1</sup> Gottlieb furthermore remarked that given the aforementioned claim, it is clear that over the ages,

<sup>1</sup> Roger S. Gottlieb, *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology*, ed. Roger S. Gottlieb (London: Oxford University Press, 2006), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195178722.001.0001>.

environmental degradation has been a major worry for humanity.<sup>2</sup> It is imperative to indicate that at numerous conferences and discussions, both locally and internationally, scientists, environmentalists, and concerned citizens have attempted to address the issue that endangers the existence of all life forms for both the present and future generations. A practical example is the Beijing Conference for Women in 1995 and the Rio Conference on Environment in 1992.<sup>3</sup>

According to the United Nations Environment Programme reports, there is a tendency to endanger the socio-economic well-being of people globally due to unmitigated environmental degradation.<sup>4</sup> International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN), also reported that contemporary anthropogenic activities have led to global concern about other environmental challenges, such as unsustainable patterns of production and consumption, conflicts and disasters, droughts, and water shortages.<sup>5</sup>

The report furthermore highlighted that environmental problems are already becoming more widespread and are predicted to worsen in the future. There is a decline in biodiversity, clean air, and the availability of resources. Biodiversity is declining quickly even though there are more terrestrial and marine protected areas and their total land coverage.<sup>6</sup> According to researchers Vucetich and Micheal, there is a lack of progress in sustainable conservation caused by initiatives that priorities technical fixes above solutions that align with people's beliefs and vision.<sup>7</sup> Hence, there a call for a fresh approach is required to make environmental conservation urgently relevant to everyone's values, regardless of background. It is imperative to assess the validity of religion as a potential source of inspiration and a means of advancing environmental preservation.

According to Taylor, more than 70% of people in nations that are hotspots for biodiversity practice have organized religion and that is more than four billion people. These very biodiverse and religiously adherent regions are also among the least developed.<sup>8</sup> According to Malgorzata et al., the majority of people in these hotspot nations such as those in Sub-Saharan Africa like Ghana are Christians.<sup>9</sup> It could hence be argued that research on religious institutions' acceptance of environmental issues is crucial, but the success of Christianity will be crucial for preserving biodiversity in these areas. UNEP nevertheless observed that although every religious text or practice provides compelling proof that nature is inextricably linked to human existence, religious and faith teachings frequently downplay or ignore the connection between environmental protection and their core beliefs.<sup>10</sup>

Within the Ghanaian context, emissions from point sources cars, factories, dust from unpaved roads, etc. usually produce air pollutants in the vicinity of these sources. CO<sub>2</sub> is the most common greenhouse gas generated and released in Ghana. In recent times, Ghana's abundant biodiversity is progressively disappearing because of several anthropogenic causes. Among the most, notable ones are deforestation, habitat loss, and poaching. The issues of land degradation, deforestation and desertification, coastal erosion, river and lagoon pollution, ozone layer depletion, and air pollution have caused them to grow increasingly concerned.<sup>11</sup> From the assertion made by Awuah-Nyamekye, one could argue that there is a need for intentional efforts to mitigate environmental degradation considering the serious risk associated with it. Rapport *et al.*, (2009), remarked that despite the glaring

<sup>2</sup> Gottlieb, *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology*.

<sup>3</sup> Beijing Declaration, "Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action Fourth World Conference on Women" 112 (1995): 859–65.

<sup>4</sup> United Nations Environment Programme, "Faith for Earth: A Call for Action," 2020.

<sup>5</sup> IUCN SSC post-2020 taskforce at Newcastle University: <https://research.ncl.ac.uk/biodiversitypost> (2020)

<sup>6</sup> IUCN SSC post-2020 taskforce at Newcastle University: <https://research.ncl.ac.uk/biodiversitypost> (2020)

<sup>7</sup> John A. Vucetich and Michael P. Nelson, "Sustainability: Virtuous or Vulgar?," *BioScience* 60, no. 7 (August 1, 2010): 539–44, <https://doi.org/10.1525/bio.2010.60.7.9>.

<sup>8</sup> Bron Taylor, *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, vol. 1 (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2008).

<sup>9</sup> Malgorzata Blicharska et al., "Biodiversity's Contributions to Sustainable Development," *Nature Sustainability* 2, no. 12 (November 25, 2019): 1083–93, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41893-019-0417-9>.

<sup>10</sup> United Nations Environment Programme, *The Adaptation Gap Report: A Preliminary Assessment*. (Nairobi, 2014), <https://www.unep.org/resources/adaptation-gap-report-2014>.

<sup>11</sup> Samuel Awuah-Nyamekye, *Managing the Environmental Crisis in Ghana: The Role of African Traditional Religion and Culture with Special Reference to the Berekum Traditional Area* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014).

effect of environmental degradation on human existence, the environmental issue continues despite efforts made on a local and global scale to lessen, if not completely remove it.<sup>12</sup>

According to Awuah-Nyamekye, Ghana has been affected by the environmental crisis, much like a lot of other nations. The nation continues to face serious and intricate environmental difficulties despite the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) numerous interventions over the past 40 years.<sup>13</sup> As indicated by Roosbroeck and Amlalo, the main environmental issues facing Ghana include coastal erosion, land degradation, deforestation and desertification, and pollution of rivers and lagoons.<sup>14</sup> Roosbroeck and Amlalo furthermore asserted that Ghana adopted "Western" concepts of development, which is the reason for this environmental destruction. For them, the neglect of the Ghanaian religious and spiritual ontology in favor of Western philosophies should be blamed for the ecological menace Ghana is facing.<sup>15</sup> The assertion made by Roosbroeck and Amlalo seems to be problematic as one cannot solely blame the contemporary environmental issues on the adaptation of Western Philosophies. Thus, Kalu, contends that the prioritization of economic expansion on the government's development goal has resulted in the mining and wood sectors destroying the environment.<sup>16</sup> It is important to state that available records indicate that since the late 1940s, almost 90% of Ghana's high forest have been cut down, and the annual rate of deforestation outside of reserves is 5%.<sup>17</sup>

According to Gedzi, environmental mismanagement has been a significant problem in Ghana, with both domestic and foreign causes. Locally, individuals exploit and abuse the environment for their parochial interests. He stated furthermore that most lands are being degraded, the forest covers are rapidly disappearing, water sources are being contaminated, and species are in danger of being extinct.<sup>18</sup> Awuah-Nyamekye also reported that available studies of the pre-colonial Gold Coast (modern-day Ghana) environmental predicament would concur that Ghana's current environmental state is more concerning.<sup>19</sup>

In the light of the glaring environmental and ecological crisis looming over Ghana, a number of environmental movements and activists have emerged in addition to governmental agencies to find solutions to Ghana's environmental crisis due to the general public's concern over the degradation of the environment, the depletion of natural resources, and pollution of the environment. The intended results have not yet materialized despite numerous attempts by various governments in Ghana's various regimes to salvage this predicament. For most of Africa, including Ghana, comprehensive and all-encompassing ecological management and regulation are necessary for ecologically sustainable development. Based on this background this study sought to examine the causes of environmental degradation at the Abasua Mountain prayer retreat center, it also sought to explore some of the interventions of the Christians in mitigating the environmental degradation and finally the theological implications of the results.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

As indicated by Belshaw *et al.*, numerous major world religions uphold moral standards of behavior that advocate for environmental conservation and have contributed to sustainable development.<sup>20</sup> For Palmer and Finlay, the essential role of religious beliefs and practices in the environmental

<sup>12</sup> David J. Rapport et al., *Ecosystem Health: Principles and Practice* (John Wiley & Sons, 2009).

<sup>13</sup> Awuah-Nyamekye, *Managing the Environmental Crisis in Ghana: The Role of African Traditional Religion and Culture with Special Reference to the Berekum Traditional Area*.

<sup>14</sup> Roosbroeck P. and Amlalo D., "Country Environmental Profile of Ghana," 2006.

<sup>15</sup> Roosbroeck P. and Amlalo D., "Country Environmental Profile of Ghana."

<sup>16</sup> Ogbu U Kalu, "The Sacred Egg: Worldview, Ecology and Development in West Africa," *Indigenous Traditions and Ecology: The Interbeing of Cosmology and Community*, 2001, 225–48.

<sup>17</sup> Emmanuel Opoku Acheampong et al., "Deforestation Is Driven by Agricultural Expansion in Ghana's Forest Reserves," *Scientific African* 5 (September 2019): e00146, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sciaf.2019.e00146>.

<sup>18</sup> Daniel Anane Peprah, Victor Selorme Gedzi, and Evelyn Naa Kochoe Coffie, "NGOs, Spirituality and Community Development in Northern Ghana: Challenges and Sustainability," *Journal of African Political Economy and Development* 3, no. 1 (2018): 108–26.

<sup>19</sup> Awuah-Nyamekye, *Managing the Environmental Crisis in Ghana: The Role of African Traditional Religion and Culture with Special Reference to the Berekum Traditional Area*.

<sup>20</sup> Deryke Belshaw, Robert Calderisi, and Chris Sugden, *Faith in Development: Partnership between the World Bank and the Churches of Africa* (The World Bank, 2001).

conservation discourse, cannot be overemphasized.<sup>21</sup> Atfield stated that, with the publication of Lynn White's essay; *the Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis, in 1967*, religion became entangled in the expanding environmental crisis debate.<sup>22</sup> As recounted by Atfield, White contended that Christianity was largely to blame for environmental degradation because of a theology that was purportedly antagonistic to the natural order. Livingstone (undated: 38) cited in Atfield states that this religion led to "the human race coming to see itself as having dominion over nature and thus a license to violate the natural order." White's approach is still important in the current discussion even though it has not avoided criticism from other academics for being overly simplistic.<sup>23</sup>

Minteer and Manning mentioned that, White's "themes do not only form the conceptual backbone of White's essay, they also constitute a good part of the current intellectual scene in environmental studies more generally. They furthermore indicated that White assertion provides us with a unique and historically influential vantage point from which to explore a set of critical foundational questions in environmental thought and practice" as indicated by Minteer and Manning.<sup>24</sup> The paper by Lynn White is pertinent because religion and ecology, which started out as a discourse, has grown into a significant subfield in academic subjects including religious studies, sociology of religion, religious ethics, theology, etc.

It is imperative to highlight that, numerous publications and forums attest to the increased environmental consciousness brought about by these international initiatives, as has the interest in the relationship between religion and the environment. Associations like the European Forum for the Study of Religion and the Environment were established in 2003 by a group of researchers from 24 universities and other institutions in eleven (11) countries in Europe. Again the International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature, and Culture, founded in 2006 by Bron R. Taylor, are examples of these ecotheological movements, which have emerged in recent times. These movements have sought to establish a nexus between religious beliefs and environmental conservation.

Awuah-Nyamekye is of the view that the increase in interest in the topic of religion and the environment is sometimes referred to as "religious environmentalism which is aimed at establishing a more rigorous nexus between religion and environmental conservation."<sup>25</sup> Thus for Tomalin, it "represents a creative and innovative tendency, which aims to find support for contemporary environmentalist thinking within a religious and cultural context. As stated by Tomalin, this discourse is based on a particular "expressive religiosity" that is both modern/postmodern and developed in western contexts, in addition to a certain perception of nature (as important in itself).<sup>26</sup>

In the view of Vajpayee, religions shape both individual and societal identities, which has an impact on adherents' cultural norms and behaviours. For instance, societies have sacrificed and fought wars in the name of religion throughout history. Vajpayee nevertheless remarked that religions have also used compassion and a shared sense of destiny and purpose to impose morally righteous behavior.<sup>27</sup> Thus, examining the role of religious contribution to environmental sustainability is imperative considering the worldwide pandemic; pollution, biodiversity loss, and climate change are all gravely undermining the progress made in the last six years towards reaching the Sustainable Development Goals as reported by the United Nations Environment Programme, Faith for Earth.<sup>28</sup>

With over 70% of the entire population aligning themselves with Christianity, one would have expected them to become the leading voice in environmental conservation discourse.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless,

<sup>21</sup> Martin Palmer and Victoria Finlay, *Faith in Conservation: New Approaches to Religions and the Environment* (World Bank Publications, 2003).

<sup>22</sup> Robin Atfield, *Environmental Ethics: An Overview of the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge UK: Polity Press, 2010).

<sup>23</sup> Atfield, *Environmental Ethics: An Overview of the Twenty-First Century*.

<sup>24</sup> Ben A Minteer and Robert E Manning, "An Appraisal of the Critique of Anthropocentrism and Three Lesser Known Themes in Lynn White's 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,'" *Organization & Environment* 18, no. 2 (2005): 163–76.

<sup>25</sup> Awuah-Nyamekye, *Managing the Environmental Crisis in Ghana: The Role of African Traditional Religion and Culture with Special Reference to the Berekum Traditional Area*.

<sup>26</sup> Emma Tomalin, "Bio-Divinity and Biodiversity: Perspectives on Religion and Environmental Conservation in India," *Numen* 51, no. 3 (2004): 265–95, <https://doi.org/10.1163/1568527041945481>.

<sup>27</sup> Juhi Vajpayee, "How Religion Influences Behaviour," *Monk Prayogashala*, 2016, <https://www.monkprayogshala.in/blog/2016/5/15/how-religion-influences-behaviour-1>.

<sup>28</sup> United Nations Environment Programme, "Faith for Earth: A Call for Action."

<sup>29</sup> Ghana Statistical Service, "Population and Housing Census. Religious Demographics," 2020.

there seem to be no intentional actions from the Christian community to address the contemporary environmental and ecological crisis. Indeed, scholars such as Agyarko, just as White have blamed the Christian community for the worsening environmental issues in Ghana.<sup>30</sup> The Pentecostal/Charismatic doctrine of escapism and dominating the world has according to him led to the exploitation of the environment in Ghana.

## METHODOLOGY

The study focused mainly on the Christian religion even though there are several religions in Ghana. The recent population and housing census projected Christian adherents to be 73.3% of the total population.<sup>31</sup> Thus, focusing on them was justifiable considering the fact that they represented the majority of the Ghanaian population. The Abasua Mountain prayer retreat center was purposively selected for the study mainly because of the impeccable role it has played and continues to play in the contemporary Pentecostal/charismatic and prophetic movement in Ghana. Over the last two decades, the place has served as a place for spiritual renewal and thousands of Christians visit the place every year. Currently, the prayer center, which has been designated as a forest reserve by the Forestry Commission, also serves as a place for Christian pilgrimage. There are ten (10) camps, which comprise both churches from the mainline churches (Presbyterian Church of Ghana, the Methodist church of Ghana) and other Pentecostal/ Charismatic Churches.

The study adopted a qualitative research approach to conduct the study and this approach was selected to enable the researcher have an in-depth understanding of social phenomena in their natural environment through the naturalistic inquiry technique. Thus, it enabled the researcher to have firsthand information based on the experiences of people rather than by statistical and logical methods. This approach further allowed for the use of semi-structured questionnaires, interview guides, and participatory observations to conduct detailed interviews with respondents. Hence, both primary data and secondary sources of data were used to conduct this study. By adopting a descriptive cross-sectional survey design, the study was able to provide a detailed description of the phenomenon investigated.

The population of the study constituted three groups of people, which were (a) the Forestry Commission (b) overseers of the various camps (c) Christians who visit the mountain, and (d) the community multi-stakeholders. The researcher through observation found out that there are ten (10) identifiable camps on the mountain and therefore through purposive sampling technique ten (10) respondents were selected from the various camps to participate in the interviews. The study furthermore selected one person from the Sekyere East Municipal Assembly responsible for revenue mobilization from the campsite to participate in the interview. Finally, focus group discussions were held with the community stakeholders (i.e. traditional authority, assembly members, citizens, and faith-based organizations). The data collected was then transcribed and thematically analyzed in relation to the reviewed literature.

## PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSIONS OF FINDINGS

The Abasua Prayer Retreat center is part of the forest reserve areas designated by the Ghana Forestry Commission. Interestingly, the study found out that the place has been turned into a sacred prayer groove by many denominations in Ghana. Predominantly, the Presbyterian church of Ghana and the Methodist church are the notable churches, which have been running camp meetings for over two decades. This has resulted in considerable environmental and ecological degradation over the years. The results on the background respondents indicated that all the various leadership of camps were all males and some of the camps had been operating for over three decades.

The entire Abasua prayer center development is credited to the late Rev. Osei Asibbey of the Methodist church of Ghana. Making the Methodist church camp (3), the oldest camp at the center and thus, the church has a significant role to play in the entire operations of the activities carried out on the

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<sup>30</sup> Robert O. Agyarko, "God of Life: Rethinking the Akan Christian Concept of God in the Light of the Ecological Crisis," *The Ecumenical Review* 65, no. 1 (2013): 51–66.

<sup>31</sup> Ghana Statistical Service, "Population and Housing Census. Religious Demographics."

mountain. It was noted that the prayer camps, which are found within the forest reserve have several buildings and utilities for the people who patronize the place. Most of the raw materials used by these churches to develop their infrastructure such as wood, water, and stones were all derived from the forest. It is estimated that an average of over one ten thousand Christians visit the place annually.

### **Christian Anthropogenic Actions Causing Environmental Degradation**

The main objective of the study was to examine some of the causes of environmental degradation at the Abasua Mountain prayer retreat center. This objective was measured through observations and interviews with the respondents. In order to achieve this objective, the respondents were asked to indicate some of the activities of the Christian camps, which were leading to environmental degradation. As indicated in the methodology, multi-stakeholders such as workers of the Ghana Forestry Commission in charge of the forest reserve, church leaders, camp overseers, and random Christians were interviewed. From the results, the study found out that the main environmental issues at the forest reserve included excessive deforestation and stone quarrying destroying land covers and arable lands, and poor waste management systems among others.

#### ***Deforestation***

The results from the study showed that there was excessive deforestation as many of the camps relied on the trees in the forest to build their camps. Unfortunately, the study showed that while the various camp leaders were cutting down the trees to build their housing infrastructure; there were no intentional actions to replant the trees. Again, there was no policy regulating how the churches and Christians using the place should cut trees and the extent they can cut the trees. One of the respondents who was a forest guide at the Municipal confirmed this and remarked that:

*Since the inception of the camp about two decades ago, most of the churches have been expanding their buildings and largely depended on the forest trees. Unfortunately, there have not been any intentional efforts by this camp leadership to replant the trees. We have done everything humanly possible through enacted policies to regulate the extent they can cut the trees, but these actions have not yielded much results. These actions have had serious ecological implications for the forest.<sup>32</sup>*

On this account, one of the respondents who served as a camp overseer also shared his personal view on that:

*We have over the years benefited mainly from the trees and it is true that all the wood used in our constructions has been harvested from this forest. As you can see, the nature of this place means it will not be possible to bring wood from the town to construct our building. Indeed, we have also not really been intentional about replanting the trees, which are cut, but through the recent initiatives by the Assembly, we are doing our best.<sup>33</sup>*

During the study, one of the respondents who is an ecologist and has been studying the pattern of the anthropogenic activities of the Christians and how it is causing environmental degradation at the Abasua asserted that:

*I have been coming to this mountain to pray for over a decade now and I have seen drastic ecological change. This is because of the excessive deforestation activities led by the churches and the various camp leaders in their quest to expand. While I do not have a problem with their spirituality, I think they have not been intentional about regulating their activities and also replanting the trees which is negatively affecting the environment. From an ecological point of view, there has been considerable disturbance in the ecological cycle, which needs immediate attention.<sup>34</sup>*

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<sup>32</sup> Interview with forest Guide; March 20<sup>th</sup> 2024

<sup>33</sup> Interview with Camp 10 overseer; 20<sup>th</sup> March, 2024.

<sup>34</sup> Interview with a Christian ecologist, March 20<sup>th</sup> 2024

From the above results and findings, it will be apt to argue that there is a direct relationship between the activities of the Christians and the current state of the environment at the Abasua Prayer Retreat Center. This finding supports the earlier studies by Ghanaian researchers such as Awuah-Nyamekye,<sup>35</sup> the Ghana Forestry Commission (GFC) report,<sup>36</sup> and the Environmental Protection Agency report, that there is a huge threat to the current state of many forest reserves due to anthropogenic activities such as poaching, encroachment, farming and setting of camps in the various reserves.<sup>37</sup>

Interestingly, it is important to state however that, some of the camps (i.e. camp 5) have made some effort and have planted some teak trees along the part that leads to the camp. That notwithstanding, these actions are not enough to contribute to the replacement of the number of trees cut and used by the churches. There is a need for intentional efforts, which are guided by the biblical principle of stewardship, which provides a framework for Christians to engage in environmental and ecological issues. The understanding of the Christians tailored towards the need to maintain a balance between the spiritual and physical lives of the believer will in many ways create an awareness among them.

### **Waste Generation and Management**

Through participatory observation and interviews, the researcher found out that several tonnes of waste are generated at the prayer center. The researcher observed that most of the waste generated was not biodegradable and was mainly plastic waste. That is, most of the waste cannot be recycled naturally by the ecological system of the forest reserve. The researcher observed that even though most of the camps provided dustbins to collect the waste, there was no proper way to dispose of that waste. The camps resorted to burning of the waste generated which in the end also contributed to global warming which also affects the general climate change of the place. Some of the other camps buried the waste generated. For the camps, these two main approaches were the most pragmatic measures considering the topology of the place, which makes it impossible for waste trucks to come for the waste generated. On this account, one of the worshippers shared his view and remarked that:

*I think there is a major problem with how the camps manage waste here, especially during the peak seasons. It is very common now to find lots of plastic waste scattered throughout the forest, which is left there by people who came to pray. As you can see, there are dustbins to collect the waste, but there are no proper waste management systems. So some of the waste generated is burnt or thrown down the mountain.*<sup>38</sup>

The assertion made by the respondent was also supported by a member of the forest staff who lamented the lack of proper waste management systems at the mountain. He stated that;

*It is very challenging when it comes to how the various camps manage waste generated by the people who visit this place. During Christmas and Easter festivities, thousands of non-biodegradable waste are generated and there are no proper waste management systems such as waste separations (i.e. biodegradable and non-biodegradation, solid and liquid waste), recycling, or reuse among others.*

Other respondents collaborated with the views shared by the earlier respondents and indicated that there seem to be few options available to the camp managers. That is because the location and the natural topology of the places make it difficult to send the waste down the mountain to be recycled or properly managed. Hence, in most cases, the only option available to them was the burning of the waste. This finding supports the assertion made by Adu-Boahen *et al*, who made a similar observation

<sup>35</sup> Samuel Awuah-Nyamekye, *Managing the Environmental Crisis in Ghana: The Role of African Traditional Religion and Culture With Special Reference to the Berekum Traditional Area* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014).

<sup>36</sup> Ghana Forestry Commission, "Annual Forest Review Report," 2020, <https://fcghana.org/>.

<sup>37</sup> Environmental Protection Agency, "Annual Environmental Report for Tain II Forest Reserve near Berekum in the Berekum Municipality of Bono Region," 2020.

<sup>38</sup> Interview with a Christian worshipper, March 15<sup>th</sup> (2024).

and stated that waste management was one of the menaces affecting the ecological and environmental systems in Ghana.<sup>39</sup>

### ***Quarrying of Stones and Incessant Clearing of the Forest to set up Camps***

The results furthermore showed that most of the buildings on the campsites were built from stones quarried from the top of the mountain. Linking this activity to the excessive cutting down of trees, the churches clear large portions of the land to be able to quarry the stones. While these actions seem to have minimal effects on the environment, they still significantly impact the environment. Due to the large number of people that visit the place during the peak seasons, it becomes a necessity for more land to be cleared to make room for them. The study observed that there were signs in the forest that prohibited the clearing and creation of new camps. The churches and the camp owner do however not heed these warnings. One of the respondents claimed that:

*Sometimes we do not have an option but to allow the people to clear more areas and use the place as a meeting place. During Christmas, Easter, and the convention of the Presbyterian Church of Ghana and the Methodist Church, over five thousand people climb the mountain to come and pray. This puts pressure on the little space we have. It hence becomes necessary that more lands be cleared.*

The results from the study have become evident that the overbearing number of people who visit the camps every year has resulted in the abuse of the environment. Indeed, while the government through the Forest Commission has proposed some interventions to safeguard the forest, there seem to be few results. The church and Christian activities continue to pose a significant threat to the environment.

### **Christian's Response to Environmental Degradation**

The study furthermore sought to examine some pragmatic and proactive measures outlined by the church to mitigate environmental degradation. The researcher sought to find out some of the intentional actions and practices, which resonate with good environmental practices. This was essential considering the numerous calls by multi-sectoral stakeholders for the church to get active in environmental sustainability debates. As indicated by Gedzi, the sustainability model concentrates on creating a strong economy that long-term supports and sustains the organization, community, initiatives, and environment.<sup>40</sup>

Thus, while the study found out there are several theological and ethical basis for Christians to get involved in protecting the environment, there were no significant and intentional efforts from the churches. From the results obtained from the study, there were no pragmatic actions through the teachings or the actions of the churches to get their members to be interested in protecting the environment. While the researchers were there, they observed that there was not an instance where any of the preachers or camp overseers engaged the attendants in the need for environmental conservation. Most of the messages and theological expositions seemed to be tailored more toward domineering and lack of recourse to the environment. Practically, most of the verses they used were from Genesis 1: 26-28;

<sup>26</sup> Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals,[a] and over all the creatures that move along the ground."<sup>27</sup> So God created humankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. <sup>28</sup> God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground."<sup>29</sup> Then God said, "I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. <sup>30</sup>And to all the

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<sup>39</sup> K Adu-Boahen et al., "Waste Management Practices in Ghana: Challenges and Prospect, Jukwa Central Region," *International Journal of Development and Sustainability* 3, no. 3 (2014): 530–46.

<sup>40</sup> Peparah, Gedzi, and Cofie, "NGOs, Spirituality and Community Development in Northern Ghana: Challenges and Sustainability."

beasts of the earth and all the birds in the sky and all the creatures that move along the ground everything that has the breath of life in it—I give every green plant for food.” And it was so.

The text above, which according to White and Agyarko has been the basis for the exploitative nature of the church and Christians. Such text when not properly interpreted leads to environmental subjugation and exploitation. Again, the study showed that one of the central themes for most of the churches was the concept of escapism, which sought to indicate that this world was not the home of Christians. It postulated that there was a better place and thus Christians should not indulge themselves in the affairs of this world. This assertion made by some of the church leaders could also be the reason for the lack of enthusiasm for controlling environmental degradation. Thus, this confirms the assertion made by Agyarko; who made similar claims against the contemporary churches.<sup>41</sup>

Whiles some interpret the text in the light of stewardship and creation care, most Ghanaian churches, especially those at the retreat center interpreted it as the absoluteness of Christians over everything. From all the ten camps the researcher visited, there were no intentional efforts from the churches to mitigate the environmental issues emerging. In fact, they seem to be indifferent about their actions and the long-term effects on the general ecological circle. This also aligns with the assertion made by Golo, who also remarked that most of the churches in Ghana are not intentional about environmental conservation and ecological sustainability.<sup>42</sup>

This is somehow problematic considering the fact that, several Christians and denominational leadership have become assertive to the need for the church and Christians to actively get involved with climate change, which is induced by environmental and ecological issues. If the trend continues unabated, there will be predictable changes in the climate and ecological circle such as changes in the rainfall pattern, and extinction of macro and microorganisms, mammals, and birds who are using the forest as their habitat.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and discussions, it is recommended that the various camps should collaborate with some of the waste management organizations in Ghana, to find a way to clean the waste generated periodically.

Again, there is a need for multi-sectoral stakeholder collaborations to educate the Christians who patronize the forest reserve on the need to protect the environment. The churches can include ecotheological and Christian environmental ethics in their ministerial formation training for the camp overseers.

Finally, the Forestry Commission should strengthen advocacy and put in place punitive measures to reduce the rate of environmental abuse and exploitation by churches and Christians.

## CONCLUSION

There is a call for a renewed interest in the call for Christians and the church to actively participate in environmental conservation. This has heralded what has come to be known as Christian environmental ethics and ecotheology. This has aimed to defuse the several perceptions of people that Christians and the church should be blamed for current ecological and environmental issues. While the results from the study seem to corroborate these assertions; there are also undoubtedly several evidences that heightens the role Christians and the churches have been playing in mitigating environmental issues.

Indeed, within the Ghanaian Christian enterprise, there have been some considerable social actions, which the churches and Christians have undertaken. Howbeit, conspicuously missing is their actions toward environmental and ecological conservation, which has been found in this study. From the study, it has become evident that there is a blatant disregard by the churches and the Christians who patronize the forest reserve to obey the various policies outlined by the Forestry Commission.

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<sup>41</sup> O. R. Agyarko, “God of Life: Rethinking the Akan Christian Concept of God in the Light of the Ecological Crisis,” *The Ecumenical Review* 65, no. 1 (2013): 51–66.

<sup>42</sup> Ben-Willie Kwaku Golo, “The Groaning Earth and the Greening of Neo-Pentecostalism in Twenty-First-Century Ghana,” *Penteco Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal for Research on the Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements* 13, no. 2 (2014): 197–216.

Again, there seems to be a lack of control and proper supervision from the stakeholders to hold the Christians and churches accountable for the destruction of the forest reserve. Thus, it will take intentional and more pragmatic measures from multi-sectoral stakeholders to control the extent of the degradation. Leveraging on the assertion made by Brodowicz, it is imperative to argue that the preservation of natural resources and ecosystems will guarantee the survival of both flora and animals in their native habitats and contribute to the preservation of ecosystems and species biodiversity.<sup>43</sup> Overuse of natural resources, such as overfishing and deforestation, can upset the natural order of things and harm the ecosystem permanently.

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<sup>43</sup> Mateusz Brodowicz, "The Importance of Environmental Conservation in the 21st Century," 2024, <https://aithor.com/essay-examples/the-importance-of-environmental-conservation-in-the-21stcentury>.

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