

**THE DOCTRINE OF “REDEMPTION FROM  
EVIL AND CORRUPTION”:  
A CATALYST FOR ECOLOGICAL  
DEGRADATION IN AFRICA**

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**ABSTRACT**

*It would seem absurd to Evangelical Christians to suggest that Christians have no regard for the ecology. However, most Christians agree that God’s creation has to be preserved and that is a principle outlined in the Bible. The issue is the concomitant results of Christian activities in much of Africa relating to environmental degradation and hence de-forestation in certain cases. It is to be argued that although the stewardship of God’s creation is enjoined in the Bible, ecological concerns were pushed to the background inadvertently by Christian Missionaries, and theology—through the doctrine of “evil”—gained the upper hand that contributed to ecological disasters in many parts of Africa.*

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## Introduction

Ecology simply defined is “the branch of science that deals with the relationship living things have to each other and to their environment.”<sup>522</sup> The three levels on which Ecologists study the organization of the natural world in which they analyze the structures, activities and variations that occur within and among these levels include (i) population, (ii) communities, and (iii) ecosystems. Without question, the ecology is important to all humans and other creatures in the world, particularly for Africans and for that matter Ghanaians, because its conservation is essential for life. Africans pride themselves in the conservation of the environment. This they do by formulating rules that regulate the sustainable use of the natural resources at their disposal. Vegetation – forests and grasslands— water bodies and mineral extraction are managed in this way in a sustainable manner thus bringing equilibrium into the ecosystem.

Unfortunately, Africans who had hitherto been champions of environmental conservation have become its destroyers. There seems to be a paradigm shift. Many areas of Africa are experiencing environmental degradation due to human activities such as mining, urban expansion, estate development, bush fires and unscientific methods of agricultural practices. Michael Stocking<sup>3</sup> saw a link between horticulture and environmental degradation through factors such as political, social, economic and physical forces in a case study in Mkushi District of Central Province, Zambia. He did not, however, consider the possibility of cultural, and hence religious, antecedents to the situation. He concluded, though, that “traditional practices show fewer signs of

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<sup>2</sup> Charles A. A. Hall, “Ecology”. *The World Book Encyclopedia*, vol. 6. (Chicago: World Book, Inc,2001), 53.

<sup>3</sup>Michael Stocking, “Farming and environmental degradation in Zambia: The human dimension.” *Applied Geography*3/1(1983): 63-77.

soil erosion than commercial farming because of rational decisions taken by each group of farmers.”<sup>4</sup> This conclusion obviously does not appeal directly to, or credited, any religious underpinnings to the “traditional practices” referred to above. It is known, however, that much of the traditional practices in Africa are intricately imbedded in religious philosophy. J.O.Y. Mante sees three main ways in which the ecological crisis in Africa is demonstrated: extreme desertification, deforestation and high population growth rates.<sup>5</sup>

The paradigm shift mentioned above is to be attributed to the teachings of the missionaries who came to Africa with the intention of purging Africans of evil and corrupt practices. The burden of this paper is to explore how, in the attempt to propagate the gospel, early Christian missionaries by their doctrine of “redemption from evil and corruption” gave the impetus to environmental pollution.

The paper will be discussed in six sections. Section one forms the introduction. Section two portrays African as an environmental Conservationist, and section three gives account of Christian Missions and their encounter with African culture. The fourth section discusses a Paradigm Shift as a result of the Missionaries’ encounters with the African culture. The fifth section suggests some ways in which the downward spiral of the environmental degradation in the continent can be reversed, and finally the Conclusion. We shall adopt the socio-historical approach coupled with etymological study in our deliberations in the paper based on the idea of *the redemption from evil and corruption* alluded to in Romans 12: 9bc, 21.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Stocking, *Applied Geography*, 63.

<sup>5</sup> J.O.Y. Mante, *Africa: Theological and Philosophical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis*, Accra: SonLife Press, 2004, p. 14.

<sup>6</sup> Bible references shall be from the New King James Version, except otherwise stated for specific reasons.

## **The African as an Environmental Conservationist**

In the African setting, often agricultural practices are mingled with the traditional religion. The traditional gods give directions as to when to start the farming season, when to harvest, when to taste certain food crops, where to farm and even what acreage. Certain forests and rivers and water resources were reserved and could be accessed only during certain days and times. Sacrifices were made to the gods as thanksgivings and appeasements. For water bodies, there were sacred rivers with prohibitions for women for fetching water from the rivers and brooks during their menstrual periods, or sending black pots to fetch water from such sources. There were also sacred forests where no one was permitted to hunt, at least during certain periods, or used for agricultural purposes. Violators of such prohibitions were severely sanctioned and even at times expelled from the community. Much of these norms and taboos were ecological conservation strategies encoded in religious prohibitions.

## **Christian Missions and their Encounter with African Culture**

Christians believe that God is the author of all ecological blue prints for sustainable ecological management. He is thought to have given a specific instruction to the first humans on ecological management in the Garden of Eden. He instructed them “to work it and take care of it” (Gen 2: 15, NIV). This forms the basis for the stewardship of the environment (Gen 2: 26-28). The food chain is clearly outlined in the Bible, first in the creation story and then after the flood (Gen 1:29-30). The very injunction from God to the first dwellers of Eden “to work it and take care of it” (Gen 2:15) indicates the awareness of “ecology” and the efforts to be exerted to promote and maintain a healthy relationship. Right from the word go, there was a harmonious balance in the ecosystem, because God, after creation of the ecosystem declared it to be “very good” (Gen 1: 31). Elsewhere there are other instructions and examples relating to the conduct of humans in

their role in the relationship between organisms and the environment. This includes the various instructions relating to life-styles and agricultural practices of the Israelites during and after the Exodus. A remarkable practice dictated by God to the Israelites before entering Canaan was the Sabbath year (Lev 25:17). This was meant to cause the land to rest (vrs.5) and get rejuvenated.

There is, however, no “ecological” discourse in the New Testament (NT). It is obvious that although the Bible does not use modern scientific terms in describing ecology, it is taken for granted. The NT authors assumed this age-old relationship and only used it as illustrations in their theological discourses as in, for example, the stories of the sower (Matt 13: 1-23/ Mk 4: 1-9; Lk 8: 4-8) and the lost sheep (Matt 18: 10-14/ Lk 15: 3-7). They assumed ecology, for they were aware of the numerous variety of living things from the complex flora and fauna to simpler organisms such as fungi, amebas and bacteria, and their relationships. The NT writers were also aware that each depended in some way on the other living and nonliving things in their environment. But if God declared his creation very good, how come we see something different today. How did the antithesis of good which is “evil” or “corruption” originate? In what context is Paul talking in Rom 12: 9bc, 21? Has this any bearing on ecological concerns? To explore these questions, we shall turn to the doctrine of “evil” and corruption as in the use of the term *sponeros* and *phtheiro*.

It has been established above that Christians have the mandate to manage the ecosystem well to their own benefit. They were also commissioned to make disciples for Jesus Christ (Matt 28: 19-20).

One would think that these two “commandments” would be carried out without one having adverse effect on the other. However, the enthusiasm for missions, the urge to “overcome evil with good,” and for making disciples have had unintended ecological outcomes.

## ***The Good and Evil Dichotomy***

In Christian missiology one of the motivating forces is to deliver people who are perishing from *evil* and the *evil one* into the kingdom of God. The mission field is considered *evil* and so was Africa and the non-Christian world. By extension, the religion and culture of the African people were bounded together as *evil* and needed to be delivered and transformed to meet the standards of the cultures of the missionaries in order to obtain the full benefits of the faith. It is understandable that the culture of the African people include elements aimed at sustaining life in the communities. There are, therefore, practices, taboos, norms and values relating to the family, agriculture, health and healing, traditional education, sex and procreation. In the context of our discussion, the issue is with practices, taboos, norms and values concerning agriculture and nature conservation.

The very heart of Christian missions is to convert unbelievers. The central teaching in the conversion process is the teachings of Jesus Christ which fundamental basis is the Pentateuch, the Prophets and the Writings (Matt 5: 17-20). For that matter the critical issue of the stern and explicit prohibition of the worship of idols, and obeying their biddings (Exod 20: 4-5) take central stage in Christian missions in Africa, and indeed elsewhere.

### **The Doctrine of Evil (*poneros*: Romans 12: 9bc, 21)**

The first inclining of the mention of the term *good agathos/kalos* is found in Genesis 2: 9, and henceforth is often contrasted with *evil (poneros)* (Gen 3:5; Amos 5:14; see also Rom 12:17, 21). In fact, the idea of *good/goodness* permeates the creation account (Gen 1: 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31; 2: 19-20a), painting a perfect ecological setup.

Christians believe that this perfect ecological balance that had been established in the beginning of the earth had been compromised by sin (Gen 3: 17-18). God warned our great grandparents: “cursed is the ground for your sake; in toil you shall

eat from it All the days of your life. Both thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you ..." (Gen 3:17, 18). What necessitated this curse that has resulted in the imbalance of the ecological order? Did Paul have this in mind when he described this condition or act of *evil* in Rom 12: 9, 17, and 21? In his letter to the Romans, Paul repeatedly prompted the congregation there to be aware of the conflict between *evil* (*poneros*) and good (*agathos/kalos*) and act appropriately. In order to explain the term "evil" we shall give its etymological definition according to biblical usage, and according to Apostle Paul in Rom 12: 9, 17, 21.

### **An Etymological Sketch of *Poneros***

The term *evil* (*poneros*) and its variants appear seventy-eight (78) times in the Greek New Testament and translated *evil*. In the LXX it appears 360 times. The usage of the term went through transformation in the Greek world from the Classical period through to OT (LXX) and later Judaism, then to the New Testament. In the classical Greek it depicts the sense of sorrow and unhappiness, a situation "laden with care."<sup>7</sup> It can also denote that which causes trouble and brings sorrow."<sup>8</sup> It was used for all unpleasant situations, be it in politics, social or business life. Finally, the term came to assume its moral sense of "morally reprehensible" in conduct towards the gods and men, "willingly and knowingly bad."<sup>9</sup> By the close of the Hellenistic period the moral sense of *poneros* meaning "morally reprehensible," "useless," "bad," "evil," had been established. We thus, find the

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<sup>7</sup> Gunther Harder, "poneros, poneria", *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. VI, edited by Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1968), 548.

<sup>8</sup> Harder, *Theological Dictionary*, 548.

<sup>9</sup> Harder, *Theological Dictionary*, 548.

*poneroi* –“evil ones,” being “contrasted with the *kaloikagathoi* or ethically with the *agathoi* and *megalopheleis*”<sup>10</sup>

In the LXX and other Greek translations, *poneros* used for *raa* is an all inclusive term which encompasses all that is diametrically opposed to the “divinely appointed harmony of the universe.”<sup>11</sup> The impulse, the heart, or the eye, particularly the covetous eye are “evil.” Acts are evil or false before both men and God (Neh 2:10; 13:8; Gen 38:7; 1King 11:6; 14:22), but it is only God who determines what is good and evil and hence understood as that which is in opposition to God, for it is only God who is good (Matt 19: 16, 17). For usage *ho poneros* can be used to apply to “the wicked man.” It is expressed sometimes with *adikos*, *skleros*, and *anomos* and sometimes in contrast with *agathos* or *dikaios*. The wicked man is the one who transgresses the Law, does not seek Yahweh or His commands or who will not be guided by him (Ez 11:2); and deserves to be exterminated (Deut 17:7, 12; 19:19; 21:21, 22:21-24; 24:7). It is worth noting that in this developmental stage of the word, *ho poneros* is not yet used for Satan in the OT.

In the NT *poneros* has maintained its two senses of meaning: (i) the sense of *bad, harmful, unserviceable, useless*; and (ii) the moral sense in terms of its adjectival use in application to *persons*—in antithesis to God, and denoting obstinacy despite God’s offer of salvation; *things and concepts* such as names (James 2: 7); and its noun use in application to the *bad man*—he who do not meet the righteous demands of God; *the devil*—the absolute antithesis to God (Matt 13:19<sup>12</sup>; Eph 6:16; 1Jn2:13, 14; 5:18). The peculiar use of the word for Satan has no precedence until NT times. There is also the debate whether to understand the

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<sup>10</sup>Harder, *Theological Dictionary*, 549.

<sup>11</sup> Merrill F. Unger, “Evil”, *The New Unger’s Bible Dictionary*

<sup>12</sup>Compare parallels Mark 4: 15—*erchetai ho satanas* and Luke 8: 12 – *erchetai ho diabolos*. The word however, does not occur in Matthew 4: 10, nor in 12:26. The discussion of why so will not be taken up here as it is not relevant to our discussion in this paper.