

A Discussion on the Religious Response to the Problem of Evil in Ghana Today



Peter Addai-Mensah¹

¹ Department of Religious Studies, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Ghana.

ABSTRACT

The existence of God is taken for granted by many believers. God is described as all good and all loving. The Bible tells believers that everything that God created was good and that God was so satisfied with the work of creation that God rested on the seventh day – cf. Gen. 1:31. This statement raises the question of the existence of Evil. Evil is a reality. The existence of Evil raises a lot of philosophical as well as theological questions such as: how can a benevolent God allow God's people to suffer? Why should an omnipotent God allow Evil to exist?. This article discusses the problem of Evil. It takes a critical look at the different forms of Evil and the havoc that Evil causes. Finally, it examines how the believer in God can respond to the prevalence of Evil in Ghana today.

Correspondence:

Peter Addai-Mensah

Email: addamens@yahoo.com

Manuscript

Received 13th July 2020,

Accepted 4th August 2020,

Published online 10th August 2020.

Keywords: Religious Response, Evil.

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INTRODUCTION

All people would want to be assured of their freedom and peace and enjoy life to the fullest down here on earth without any cause for alarm with regard to catastrophe befalling them. One phenomenon which has lived with human beings since time immemorial is “Evil”. McCloskey writes that “there is evil in the world; yet the world is said to be the creation of a good, omnipotent God. How is this possible?”² Evil which is not an illusion, but a reality has accounted for the predicament of the human race without consideration to a person's academic, religious or social background. On its reality Peck concludes that evil is not a figment, neither is it just a mere imagination but a certainty which one has to be aware of.³ It has ruined individuals, families, nations, and continents at large. It thus affects everyone. This might perhaps be the reason why Opoku writes that there are so many discussions about evil and its attendant problems in various disciplines.⁴ The problem that evil puts human beings in and how it has ridiculed life has resulted in the relentless efforts invested into various discussions. According to Nietzsche in Opoku, the concept of evil should be abandoned since it is not palatable for human. It means that it can negatively impact on human potential and validity through the suppression on the strong and promotion of the weak spirit person.⁵ This menace has done human beings no good than harm and the earlier mankind puts a stop to its deliberation the better. Nietzsche speculates that holding endless deliberation about evil might lead human beings to focus on the negatives of life which are inevitable. Ceasing to continuously hold discussions about evil may perhaps remove the pain that goes with it. The question is, does that mean that evil has so much terrified human beings to the extent that the mere mentioning of the word evil is tantamount to catastrophe?

Definition of Evil

Several explanations have been given to evil. *The Cambridge Advanced Learners' Dictionary* defines evil as “something that is very bad and harmful,”⁶ while *The Oxford Advanced Learners' Dictionary* also describes evil as ‘something

² H. J. McCloskey, *Journal of Bible and Religion*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, Vol. 30, No. 3 (Jul., 1962), 187.

³ M. Scott Peck, *The Road Less Traveled: A New Psychology of love, Traditional values and spiritual Growth*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1978), 277-8.

⁴ John Kwaku Opoku, *Understand Philosophy of Religion*, (Kumasi: Richmar Business Centre, 2018), 162.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 163.

⁶ *Cambridge Advanced Learners' Dictionary, Third Edition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

morally bad, wicked, very unpleasant or harmful.”⁷ For *The Chambers 21st Century Dictionary*, evil is “wickedness or moral offensiveness, or the source of it.”⁸ According to Singer “evil is the worst possible term of ‘opprobrium imaginable’”⁹. For Romig, “evil” has become increasingly unsettled even as it has narrowed, yet the word has proven to be an unshakable unit in today’s moral lexicon.”¹⁰ In all these definitions, words such as, bad, harmful, wickedness, unpleasant and offensive run through. These depict how unpalatable evil is and how it is a threat to human survival. Something that is very bad, harmful, wickedly offensive and unpleasant does not make human life living enjoyable as it replaces the good that there is in life, depraving meaningfulness thereof at its strike. Perhaps this is what *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* (Tenth Edition) denotes when it states, evil is a “profound wickedness and depravity, especially when regarded as a supernatural force. It is something harmful or undesirable.”¹¹

Moises Silver mentioning its origin in the Old Testament narrates that evil, which is the Hebrew word *ra* with the number H8273 basically refers to something that is physically undesirable and morally bad.¹² This adds to the physical connotation to evil since its presence is felt when it occurs. It thus makes evil a reality and not a figment or somebody’s imagination which brings pain and suffering along with it.

Apart from the above, evil have also been described by some scholars. Peck defines evil as “the exercise of political power – that is, the imposition of one’s will upon others by overt or covert coercion – in order to avoid extending one’s self for the purpose of nurturing spiritual growth.”¹³

Evil according to Peck’s definition always go against the will of the sufferer. Thus, what happens to a person in such a condition leaves the sufferer in an unpleasant, wicked, unpalatable, and depraves the person of the joy¹⁴ and happiness that every normal person should enjoy. McCloskey sees evil as something that is fundamentally unpleasing, shocking, disgusting and vile with certain repercussions like diseases of cancer, tuberculosis, cruelty, cowardice, betrayal, false witness, hypocrisy and the like which are realities that leaves humankind in a devastating condition. McCloskey’s description is not different from what the previous definitions have described. Evil thus puts human beings in a very devastating condition because cancers and tuberculosis have never bettered the living condition of anyone.

Forms of Evil

Evil, which from its definition above has been seen from time immemorial to have always brought predicament on peaceful living condition on humans have been categorized into two forms, namely moral and natural evil.¹⁵ First, there is a form of evil which is deemed to have emanated from activities of the human being. Being a moral agent, the action or the inaction of the human being can result in evil. Whenever there is evil resulting from the actions of the human beings, it is best explained that the human being did not act right in a given situation which resulted in the said evil. For instance, when a naked life wire is not insulated but used for electricity supply to a group of tenants living in an area and their roof is electrocuted and somebody dies as a result, it is concluded that the moral agent did not act right by covering the naked wire. The evil that happens in this situation is the result of human negligence. Opoku further states that this category of evil “contains the wrongful and hurtful acts as well as bad character traits of free human beings.”¹⁶ Examples of evil which are linked to the moral agent are, floods caused by building on waterways, motor accidents caused by bad roads due to inferior materials used by the contractors, stealing, murder, and massive death resulting from food poisoning as a result of expired ingredients used by school canteen managers. These according to McCloskey are expressions of immoral, heartless attitude towards human suffering.¹⁷

Secondly, evil caused by natural phenomenon without the influence or the involvement of human activities is natural evil. Opoku recounts that “natural evils are bad states of affairs which do not result from the intentions or negligence of moral agents.”¹⁸ Earthquakes, thunderstorms, hurricanes and floods not caused by human negligence are examples of natural evils. Evils in this category are beyond the influence of moral agents. They just occur and the pain, suffering and the destruction that come along with affect human beings.

Origin of Evil

The source of evil has been a very difficult thing to trace. However, talking about the beginning of all things in the

⁷ Albert Sydney Hornby, *Oxford Advanced Learners’ Dictionary*, Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1995)

⁸ Robinson, Mairi, and George W. Davidson, *Chambers 21st century dictionary*. (Edinburgh: Chambers, 1996)

⁹ M. G. Singer, “The Concept of Evil,” *Philosophy*, 79: 2004, 185-214.

¹⁰ Rollo Romig, “What do we mean by “Evil”, www.newyorker.com (assessed August 3, 2020).

¹¹ Allen, R. E., H. W. Fowler, and F. G. Fowler, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990)

¹² Moises Silver, ed., *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 945.

¹³ Peck, *The Road Less Traveled*, 278.

¹⁴ McCloskey, *Journal of Bible and Religion*, 187.

¹⁵ Opoku, *Understand Philosophy of Religion*, 163.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ McCloskey, *Journal of Bible and Religion*, 188.

¹⁸ Opoku, *Understand Philosophy of Religion*, 163.

creation story, evil has been seen as part of the beginning of humankind's existence. For instance, in Genesis God is seen as allowing or causing to grow every tree or plant that is pleasant for the eye and good for food. The tree of knowledge of good and evil was among the trees that sprout out.¹⁹ The mere presence of the tree of evil which was supposed to give knowledge about evil was thus part of the creation. Perhaps the knowledge of evil alone would mean subsequent actions into evil activities by the moral being created by God. Genesis 3:5 further describes how the serpent gives the tempted (Adam and Eve) 'throat wetting' appeal to taste the tree of knowledge of good and evil. The taste of the tree eventually led to the Creator declaring, 'man has become one of us' in verse 22. All these traces evil to have emerged together with the creation from the creator. John S. Mbiti cites Lystad saying "one of the Ashanti priests is reported as saying, that God created the possibility of evil in the world... God has created the knowledge of good and evil in every person and allowed him to choose his way".²⁰ If the only option available to the human person is only good and not evil attached, the human being would have been exceptionally good without the portrayal of any evil. The moment the possibility of evil is created by God, it means that possibility would have to be put to use hence the presence of evil in the world. There is however the general belief that God did not create evil. God who is all good cannot have evil emanating from him. Mbiti suggests there is a general myth that at the beginning of creation there was no evil and that there existed absolute harmony and family relationship.²¹ This means that the first couple enjoyed good because evil was absent. Komonchak claims that using Genesis 3 as their basis some theories which are allied to Augustine, Thomas Aquinas and most Catholic thinkers see evil as coming into the world after angels and human beings had sinned.²² The sin of human beings and angels led to their turning away from God and creator who is all good. The choices of human beings now led to evil.

Evil again have been given a source as originating from evil forces. These forces are believed to have originally been created good but ended up to be evil. Mbiti attests to this when he writes that some cultures believe that evil comes from and is associated with spiritual beings and not God.²³ Although humans were created by God, evil cannot be said to have emanated from God since these spiritual beings were created good initially. Mbiti further narrates: "For example, the Vugusu say that there is an evil divinity which God created good, but later on turned against Him and began to do evil. This evil divinity is assisted by evil spirits, and all evil now comes from that lot. Thus, a kind of duel exists, between good and evil forces in the world."²⁴ In a typical African setting, deities are believed to exist and are responsible for the evil that exist. These are either the origin of evil or the agents through whom evil originates from. Mbiti describes a situation when someone dies and he is forgotten after about five generations have passed, that they become disconnected with society and they are deemed as evil or injurious.²⁵ They hence cause several maladies to the human society. One may argue that if God originally created these spirits good, what happened to the omnipotent power of God for his creation to turn from what it was originally meant for?

Again, human beings have been described as another source of evil. The question is how can the human being created in the image and the likeness of God be the source of evil? Being part of the creation of God, the humankind was created good and the 'Fall' through the taste of the tree of knowledge of good and evil made the humans the source of evil. The person now chooses what would let him/her turn his/her back on what is good and toward what is evil. Armed robbery, arson, carjacking are all heartless moral agents' activities. There is an old Akan (a tribe in Ghana) myth which explain the fact that there was an old woman who was preparing fufu and light soup(a local delicacy). She continuously and incessantly pushed the good God away with the pestle she used in pounding the fufu.²⁶ The good God was thus pushed very far away from human beings who in the end became much closer to evil. Human beings now make choices which are evil and thus would not listen to the Creator. It is thus interesting to suggest that between the Creator and human being evil exists. Kwame Gyekye agrees to this when he states that the Akan believe humankind is one of the main sources of evil. This Akan thought attributes the human will to a source of evil. This will is turned into action and ends up being the character of the human being.²⁷ The Author cannot agree more with Gyekye and the old Akan myth about the old lady who pounded God away with a pestle as the humans always go in for that which tilts away from God but towards the human being's selfish interest.

Religious response to Evil in Ghana Today

It is relevant to acknowledge the fact that in the world today there is evil. There is evil caused by human negligence and wrong actions and also there is evil cause by natural forces. All these have put the human life in a very unpleasant

¹⁹ Genesis 2:9 KJV

²⁰ John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, (Oxford: Heinemann, 1995), 199.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Komonchak, *The New Dictionary of Theology*, 361.

²³ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 199.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ This has been an old Akan myth used to explained how the human being makes choices which are always not in consonance with the Creator is all good.

²⁷ Kwame Gyekye, *An essay on African Philosophical thought: the Akan conceptual scheme*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), 125.

condition which leaves much to be desired. Evil affects everyone when it strikes. It is not a respecter of persons. As human beings and creations of God, it is very essential to consider the choices one makes. Choices which tilt toward what is good and shun evil will always help in alleviating at least the evil that is caused by moral agents.

Again it is always important to imitate the incarnate Christ as a Christian. This will perhaps prove to the whole world that it is possible to live in a world without the evil that emanates from human beings should all lead that kind of life. For instance, Komonchak et al explain:

Evil is not a problem, finally, that can be solved by theories, by the explanations of theodicies or by defenses of the coherence of Christian beliefs. To see evil as part of the divine mystery rather than as compelling evidence for atheism requires a perspective such as one a Christian can develop by being part of a community that imitates Christ in recognizing sin, suffering, and exploitation and in overcoming evil by incarnating the patient power of a harsh and dreadful love that reconciles.²⁸

For Komonchak, humans should see the hand of the divine being behind evil and not so much create certain theories and concepts for their explanation but rather it is good to live a life that is imitating of Christ which in the end would overcome evil. If all should act right, at the end of the day, evil that is caused by moral agents would be eliminated. Since no one can control natural forces and avert their occurrence and not all human beings will be willing to avoid the lifestyle that brings unpleasantness to fellow human beings, it is significant to always prepare for the unexpected. For instance, for the heartless attitude that would originate from a fellow human being, one would have to take safety measures against armed robbery.

It is again imperative to acknowledge the existence of the almighty and as a matter of truth see God's hand in every evil that happens to humankind as God's creation.

CONCLUSION

Evil has been with humans right from the beginning of creation and its devastating effects on the human race have been evident throughout human existence on earth. It is very important to see evil as part of the plan of the Creator for humans living down here on earth. What is more important is to imitate the life of the incarnate Christ²⁹ to at least minimize or entirely eliminate evil caused by moral agents.

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ABOUT AUTHOR

Peter Addai-Mensah(STD) is a Catholic priest of the Archdiocese of Kumasi and a Senior Lecturer at the Department of Religious Studies, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, (KNUST), Kumasi-Ghana.. He has authored six books and co-authored six other books. He has eighteen articles to his credit. His areas of research are Theology and Spirituality.

²⁸ Joseph A Komonchak, A. Mary Collins, Dermot A. Lane, eds., *The New Dictionary of Theology*, (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1987), 363.

²⁹ Ibid.