

ECOLOGICAL EVIL

A Christian Response

Ajita Kullu♦

1. Introduction

Problem of evil is an age-old problem, beginning perhaps from the very first moment of human existence in this world. The existence of evil raises objections especially against the belief in the God of love. That is, the existence of evil brings forth serious threats to our belief in the existence of God. So, we are led to search for the sources of religious thought to offer some resolution to the age-old problem of evil.

According to pantheists, evil is seen as ultimately unreal as, for them, human suffering is a product of spiritual ignorance gathered in previous lives and distributed in the present according to the dictates of karma. In the dualistic religions, good and evil are two eternal and rival principles. Their duality can be overcome only by one destroying the other. In monotheistic religions, however, evil attains a personal identity. Its source is a being that has fallen from an initial good status as a result of misusing freedom of will.

The Christian thought on evil has always moved between the opposite poles of monism and dualism. Monism is the belief that there is an ultimate harmonious unity in the universe. It is based on the traditional Christian concept of the belief that God created everything and saw that it was good. There is also a belief that evil exists in the world though it is only apparent. God created human beings in his image and likeness; yet, in them we find good nature as well as evil nature. The evil nature is due to their free will to exercise the power given to them to take care of the earth and to make use of the resources in an appropriate manner. Human beings, however, due to their advancement in knowledge and development in technology, consider themselves to be more than God and, as a result, forget their freedom to use the natural resources in a responsible manner.

This aspect of negligence or superiority of human being has created a growing awareness that our world is threatened not only by inventive skills of arms race, regional conflicts, and continued injustice among peoples and nations, but also by a lack of due respect for nature which results in

♦**Ajita Kullu** is a research student at Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram, Bangalore. She is pursuing her philosophical research in the area of Inter-religious Studies.

aggressive plundering of natural resources and progressive decline in the quality of life. More than ever, people are worried about the ways through which the natural world is being harmed and destroyed. The sense of precariousness and insecurity that such a situation engenders is a seedbed for collective selfishness, disregard for others, and dishonesty. Faced with the widespread destruction of the environment, people everywhere are coming to understand that we cannot continue to use the goods of the earth as we have in the past. As experts from a wide range of disciplines are studying its causes, the public in general and the political leaders in particular are becoming more and more concerned about it.

The earth's biological systems such as food chains and food habits, and its physical biological system such as water cycle and the ozone layers, are being harmed by the modern habits (such as industrialisation) of human beings. Various problems such as drought, famine, global warming, the spread of deserts, vanishing forests, pollution of the seas, the extinction of species, etc., can be seen as signs as to know that the eco-system is dying and its life-support systems are crashing. What are the causes of this phenomenon? How is it caused and how can this journey into the doomsday be reversed? These questions call us to examine our consciousness and reconcile our attitude towards earth's resources. This study is an attempt to analyze the steps that Christians have adopted in solving the ecological crisis through a rereading of the Genesis.

2. Creation in the Beginning

The preciousness of the Earth is a central idea in the Bible. God is the creator and owner of this Earth (Gen. 1:1; Ps. 24:1; Is. 48:12-13; Job. 38-40). "God called the dry land Earth, and the Waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good" (Gen. 1:10). God is the giver and sustainer of all life (Ps. 104:29-30). In creation, God established order out of chaos (Gen. 1:1-34; Isa. 45:18). "The earth brought forth vegetation: plants ... and trees... God saw that it was good" (Gen. 1:12). "God made two great lights and the stars. God set them in the dome of the sky to give light upon the Earth... God saw that it was good" (Gen. 1:16-18). "God created ... every living creature that moves ... with which the waters swarm, and every winged bird... God saw that it was good" (Gen. 1:20-21). "God said: 'let the earth bring forth living creatures... God made the wild animals ... and everything that creeps... God saw that it was good'" (Gen. 1:24-25).

God created a very rich diversity of plant and animal species, a vivid testimony to his unsurpassable wisdom (Ps. 19:1-6). Every human being is made in the image of God (Gen. 1:27) and is, therefore, of equal worth and value before him; God created humans to be his partners in caring for creation (Gen. 1:28; Ps. 8:6); everything God created was perfect and formed a cohesive or integrated, interconnected whole (Gen. 1; Ps. 104:5). The Spirit of God is actively involved not only in the initial act of creation but also in the reproduction of life, in the continual sustaining and renewing of the Earth (Ps. 104:30). Thus, the Bible clearly shows that God created a perfect earth, with awe-inspiring grandeur and an amazing array of biological species. He also made provisions of abundant resources to satisfy the needs of humankind and all other creatures.¹

3. Understanding Creation

3.1. Integral Connection of Humanity with Earthly Matrix

In order to capture the flavour and meaning of the original text, the Hebrew words *adamah* and *adam* need to be translated in ways which communicate the integral connection of humanity with its earthly matrix. The word for the stuff from which the first human being is formed is *adamah*, usually translated as “ground” or “earth.”² The words for “human” and for “ground” are, thus, connected phonetically and perhaps etymologically. The English word “human” is not the combination of *hu* with *man*; Rather, it is derived from a theoretical Indo-European root (*ghum*), meaning “earth” or “ground” from which comes Latin ‘humans’, meaning earth, and Old English *guma* (man). The existence of the first ancestor is personalized in the *Adam*, which means “man” in Hebrew.³ In a profound manner, the story portrays the character of human existence in its interdependence with God, with soil, with woman, and with animal life. Both terms, *adam* and *adamaha*, stem from the root “red,” meaning “grounding.” He becomes a “living being” a body and spirit.⁴ Similarly, the Sumerians describe the special creation of woman, called *Nit-ti* as “the lady who makes live” and “the lady of the rib.” Eve’s name “*Havah*,” in

¹R. L. Sarkar, *The Bible, Ecology and Environment*, Delhi: ISPCK, 2000, 34.

²Anne Primavesi, *Apocalypse to Genesis: Ecology, Feminism, and Christianity*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991, 205.

³Gaalyahu Cornfeld, *Adam to Daniel: An Illustrated Guide to the Old Testament and Its Background*, New York: The Macmillan Company, 1961, 14.

⁴Cornfeld, *Adam to Daniel*, 14.

Hebrew, resembles “*chay*” or “living”⁵ (Gen. 3:20). Thus, the earth is the stage on which life is played, for human being becomes a tiller of the soil at the end of the story. Here, in this context, when we analyze the command to be fruitful, to multiply, and to fill the earth, it immediately follows the word of blessing and involves a sharing of the divine creative capacities. The study of the verb ‘dominion’ (Hebrew *rada*) reveals that it must be understood in terms of care-giving, even nurturing, not exploitation. As the image of God, human beings should relate to the non-human as God relates to them.⁶ The command to “subdue” the “earth” (Hebrew *kabas*) focuses on the earth, particularly cultivation (Gen. 2:5, 15), which was a difficult task in those days. What is shown here is a coercive aspect in inter-human relationships (Num. 32:22, 29); no enemies are in view here. More generally, “subduing” involves development in the created order. This process offers to the human being the task of intra-creational development, of bringing the world along to its fullest development, to its fullest possible creational potentials. Here paradise is not a lost state of perfection, not a static state of affairs. Human beings live in a highly dynamic situation. The future remains open to a number of possibilities in which creaturely activity will prove crucial for the development of the world.⁷

When God conveys blessings (Gen. 1:22, 2:3) God gives power, strength, and potentiality to the creatures. Such an action, therefore, constitutes an integral part of power. This image sounds very true today in a world where we have to re-invent our relationship with *adamah*. This connectedness shows that we are bodies of interacting spirit, intelligence, and matter. We are not put into the world, but we are in it. Every individual being is an intrinsic part of it and is responsible for what becomes of it.

3.2. Concept and Practice of “Power-over”

Another important concept we need to re-interpret in order to understand better the ecological crisis is “Power-over.” Ecology has different models of power. *Power from Within*:⁸ it re-unites spirit and body, humanity and nature, God and the world, in the name of immanent value. When matter is

⁵Cornfeld, *Adam to Daniel*, 16.

⁶Terence E. Fretheim, “Genesis,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, ed., Leander E. Keek, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994, 346.

⁷Fretheim, “Genesis,” 346.

⁸Primavesi, *From Apocalypse to Genesis*, 219.

sacred, inherently valuable, it is seen to be empowered by the Spirit, which awakens all to a new life and brings that life to fullness. Power within is the power we sense in a seed, in the growth of a child, in writing, working, making choices, recovering health, etc. The power from within has to do with the root meaning of the word ‘power’, from the Late Latin root *posse* (to be able).⁹ It is the power within, from the earth community, which is present as connectedness, sustenance, healing, and creating. Power within is more than a feeling, more than a flash of the individual enlightenment or insight. It involves our sense of connection with others, our knowledge of the impact we have on others. Power from within is the power that comes from the willingness to spend ourselves, to be there for others at the price of risk and effort. Therefore, it is ‘power’ that creates and sustains ecological community. It enables us to exercise ‘power-with’: the power to cooperate, to share, and to change. It also embodies a particular kind of consciousness: it is conscious of the world as a pattern of relationship between men, women, and nature, which can be shaped and shifted. It values beings, forces, and people according to their effects on others and the appropriateness of their actions. It takes account of the effects of its own actions in relation to the largest number of systems possible.

This is a caring form of power. It is power aligned with love. It is the combination of both power and love, which makes a community workable and sustainable. It is the combination of power and love which Christians call the Spirit, and which empowers us to shape our common future for the good of all.¹⁰

4. Ecological Crisis as a Problem

In order to understand the ecological problem one needs to look at the verse of Genesis, “Cursed is the ground because of you” (Gen. 3:17). The first being, Adam, lived in the garden of God (Gen. 13:10; Ezek. 28:13; 31:8; 36:35; Joel 2:3), i.e., in an environment of peace and harmony with all God’s creation and nature: eco-balance in a state of symbiosis. He is to cultivate and keep the garden as a responsible steward. A limit is also set: he is not to eat of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, “for in the day that you eat of it, you shall die” (Gen. 2:17). To “die” may here mean “to be cut off” from having communion with God. Later, Adam and

⁹Premavesi, *From Apocalypse to Genesis*, 220.

¹⁰Premavesi, *From Apocalypse to Genesis*, 221.

Eve were driven out of the garden for having eaten the fruit of the forbidden tree, but not killed.

In reading the account of creation, we see that Garden of God, a paradise, a symbol of *oikos*, an ecosystem in which the different species of organisms in God's creation, from the smallest to *Homo sapiens*, co-exist in a state of symbiosis, fulfilling God's plan and purpose for which they are created. In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve lived in close relationship with every living creature, the birds of the air and the beasts of the field, in an environment of natural beauty and splendour unspoiled by ecological degradation. Such a beautiful description of the garden of God is visualized further in the book of Ezekiel (28:13f.; 31:1-9). God himself is very much present with the whole of his creation in a human anthropomorphic way. Hence, any ecological degradation, whether in the form of imbalance in nature created by humans, discrimination and inequality in human relationships, injustice, and reckless destruction of the ecosystem or depleting the Ozone layer, is a destruction of God's creation. All these affect human existence and subsistence in God's own *oikoumene* and interfere with God's order of creation. God's creation and ecosystem must be saved if human beings have to survive.¹¹

The verses describing the "curse on nature" need a closer look. Gen. 3:17-19 is often read in such a way as to suggest that "thorns and thistles" – that is, weed in general, all plants, which "get in the way" – are not a part of the created order, but a consequence of human sin. In the Middle Ages, this doctrine was expanded from biology into geology, and the very ruggedness of the earth, which so often was a burden for human attempts to move about on it, was seen as a result of the Fall. But, as our own time has shown us painfully, there are very few plants, animals, hills, or valleys, which can be regarded as weeds. The ground is cursed because we are set against it. Interestingly, the word used there for signifying "ground" is also *adamah*, suggesting that the curse pronounced on Adam is, in fact, describing a division within himself.

That division is his own inability to be in harmony with the earth, his tendency to regard his difference from nature as enmity with nature. In short, the curse describes not a quality in the earth itself, but human misuse of his dominion. An accurate reading of the Hebrew text would mean, "Cursed is the ground to you!"¹² Because of this attitude of enmity

¹¹Sarkar, *The Bible, Ecology and Environment*, 41.

¹²Sarkar, *The Bible, Ecology and Environment*, 42.

between people and nature, human beings lost their ability to be the “preserver” of the garden in which they were placed. Their misunderstanding of dominion, a dominion that issues from enmity, makes them unable to “guard” or “preserve” the life of the garden. It is this inability we still see manifested in the degradation and destruction of the Earth.

The environmental crisis is often equated with the destruction of natural resources. There are thousands of examples: ozone layer depletion, climate change, land degradation, water pollution, deforestation, habitat destruction, species extinction, use and misuse of biotechnology. Every day seems to bring news of some new environmental deterioration. Then, the environmental crisis is, in fact, found in the human soul. All that is happening to the environment are but symptoms of the crisis in the human component of this planetary ecosystem. Solution to the environmental crisis requires establishment of proper relationship with all of Gods’ creation, both non-living and living. We may have tools and techniques that will continue to document ozone layer depletion, increase in greenhouse gasses, and radioactive plutonium release from nuclear power plants; but we can never resolve the environmental problems if we fail to understand the root cause of the crisis.

5. A Christian Response in Building the Earth

Theology, philosophy, and science speak of a harmonious, ordered universe, of a “cosmos” endowed with its own integrity, its own internal dynamic balance. This order must be respected. The human race is called to explore this order, to examine it with due care, and to make use of it without distorting its integrity.

The best moral case for a pro-active environmental policy is trusteeship and stewardship. This view is found even more widely among Christian writers. Pope John Paul II spoke of human “stewardship over nature” in 1985.¹³ The Church of England General Synod, in July 1990, called for a statement on “Christian stewardship in relation to the whole of creation to engage in a critical view of human responsibility to the living environment.”¹⁴

The popularity of the idea of stewardship of nature may stem from the upsurge in the use of the term ‘stewardship’ in the 1950s and 1960s. At

¹³Cited in Sarkar, *The Bible, Ecology and Environment*, 153.

¹⁴Sarkar, *The Bible, Ecology and Environment*, 153.

this time, stewardship came to the forefront of the churches' campaign for more resources, largely, but also of time and talents. Stewardship campaigns took place in many churches, particularly among Methodists and Anglicans; stewardship advisors were appointed in dioceses and districts. All of these focused on the need to recognize that neither money nor time belonged to humanity, but were ultimately God's; man was responsible to God to make the best use of them. The term 'stewardship', connecting the wise use of money and talents, was widely accepted in many churches during the 1960s and 1970s when awareness of environmental problems sharply increased. The idea is seen more strongly in a speech made by Pope John Paul II, in August 1985: Exploitation of the riches of nature must take place according to criteria that take into account not only the immediate needs of people, but also the needs of future generations. In this way, the stewardship over nature, entrusted by God to man, will not be guided by short-sightedness or selfish pursuits; rather it will take into account the fact that all created goods are directed to the good of all humanity. Here, the Pope speaks of nature as 'riches' to be 'exploited',¹⁵ but with a view to the future wellbeing of humans. Thus, the term 'stewardship' has been widely deployed in recent years to justify Christian involvement in environmental action. It is the duty of human beings to preserve the face of the earth in beauty, usefulness, and fruitfulness. Indeed, for many Christians this is the primary meaning of 'stewardship'. Furthermore, the relationship between human dominion and divine sovereignty which has emerged in the argument so far suggests that we may fruitfully correlate the ways in which God exercises His sovereignty with the ways in which human dominion is expressed. Thus, it seems natural to look to God's sustaining activity for insights into the concepts of environment stewardship. God's present activity of sustaining creation in being refers back to the original creation: it is preservation of creation from dissolution into chaos. But, at the same time, it refers to the future for the consummation of all things.

The Norwegian philosopher Naess first used the term Ecosophy (deep ecology) in 1973. 'Ecosophy' derives from the Greek *oikos*, meaning "house" and *logos*, meaning knowledge; thus, ecology is employed to describe all aspects of our dwelling in the Earth Household.¹⁶ It studies our planet in the Earth Household and concerns itself with earth

¹⁵Sarkar, *The Bible, Ecology and Environment*, 153.

¹⁶Sarkar, *The Bible, Ecology and Environment*, 59.

wisdom. It draws on wider philosophical and religious traditions. According to Naess, there are eight principles of deep ecology. Deep ecology seeks to challenge our culture’s fundamental human assumptions, especially those which have led us to accept materialism, militarism, and human domination over nature as normal human behaviours. Deep ecology seeks to understand and challenge the root of our planetary disposition. From the concept of deep ecology that Naess has established, other deep ecologists have identified a more precise platform, which specifies political values flowing from deep ecology: the primacy of wilderness, a sense of place, opposition to stewardship, opposition to industrial society, spirituality, and self-realization. Naess thinks that every religious movement, from Buddhism to Christianity, has some elements consistent with deep ecology. He suggests that everyone identifies principles of deep ecology in his/her respective religious traditions.¹⁷

There are eight basic principles in deep ecology. They are: 1) The wellbeing and flourishing of human life on Earth have value in themselves. These values are independent of the usefulness of the non-human world for human purpose. 2) Richness and diversity of life forms contribute to the realizing of these values and are also values in themselves. 3) Humans have no right to reduce this richness and diversity except to satisfy vital needs. 4) Flourishing of human life and cultures is compatible with a substantial decrease of human population. The flourishing of non-human life requires such a decrease. 5) Present human interference with the non-human world is excessive and the situation is rapidly worsening. 6) Policies must, therefore, be changed. These policies affect basic economic, technological, and ideological structures. The resulting state of affairs will be deeply different from the present. 7) The ideological change is mainly that of appreciating life quality – dwelling in situation of inherent value – rather than adhering to an increasingly higher standard of living. There will be profound awareness of the difference between big and great. 8) Those who subscribe to the foregoing points have an obligation directly or indirectly to try to implement the necessary changes.

6. Conclusion

Human beings are relational beings and our existence becomes meaningful only in our interconnectedness. This connectedness urges us to respect and behold every creature on earth. We need to create a vision of commitment

¹⁷Sarkar, *The Bible, Ecology and Environment*, 64.

to a sustainable ecosophy and life vision, which express and explore the interconnectedness of the Spirit and created beings. They arise through the power from within and there emerges an interaction among all beings. It comes to consciousness within human communities. It is nourished by the companionship of faith and the friendship of those who call themselves believers and whose lives are clearly guided by the desire to dwell unconditionally in truth. Together, we may find a deeper awareness of the mystery of our sustenance through the earth's fertility, a mystery represented to us in the imperatives of ecological community.

Human being is not a finished product. However, he has been bestowed with grace and free will to realize his purpose in the world. The call of the creator is always for his good as well as the good of his creation. In Christian tradition, we have many prominent persons who did have great respect towards created beings. For example, we have Noah, the first deep ecologist, who saved the created beings from destruction; we have Prophet Joel who provided a holistic approach to ecology and environment; we have Francis of Assisi, the patron saint of ecology, who offered Christians an example of genuine and deep respect for the integrity of creation. As a friend of the poor who was loved by God's creatures, Francis invited all creation – animals, plants, natural forces, even Brother Sun and Sister Moon – to give honour and praise to the Lord. 'The poor man of Assisi' gives us a striking witness that when we are at peace with God we are better able to devote ourselves to the building up of peace with all creation, which is inseparable from peace among all peoples. In turn, it is our responsibility to remind each other our serious obligation to respect and watch over them with care, in the light of that greater and higher fraternity that exists within the human family.

In our present scenario, where we experience extensive ecological evil, the Bible helps us to understand a new ecological consciousness, leading to a new ecological enlightenment. In the last two decades, there appeared a remarkable renewal in Christian philosophy as well as in Christian theology in the field of environmental ethics. The central vision of world history in the Bible is that all creation is one. We need to uphold this vision today. We need to firmly believe that we are only stewards (or, caretakers), and not masters. Hence, we need to promote life in its interconnectedness. We need to respect every being as creation of God and, thus, together uphold our world to bloom and make a place of paradise once again.