

CHRISTIANITY AND THE ENVIRONMENT: THE LYNN WHITE CONTROVERSY

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“And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.” (Genesis 1:28)

IN 1966 the historian Lynn White, Jr. delivered an address to the American Association for the Advancement of Science in which he bluntly asserted that Christianity “bears a huge burden of guilt for the devastation of nature in which the West has been engaged for centuries.” The address was published as an article in the journal *Science* in 1967. White’s work was controversial in academic and theological circles, and its impact even extended into popular culture. His ideas inspired a vibrant and long-lasting debate, and many scholars subsequently weighed in – some supporting, some revising, and others rejecting the White thesis. Although White first introduced his thesis in 1966, the debate surrounding his ideas became most notable in the early 1970s, spurred on by the prominence of the environmental question in this era. Scholars faced with a surge in concern for the environment in society at large, in their search for the intellectual roots of the crisis, necessarily encountered the White thesis. Although interest in the White argument extended into the 1980s and in fact continues in the present, I am concerned here with this earlier era, especially as exemplified by the publication of *Ecology and Religion in History* in 1974, a book devoted entirely to a scholarly response to White. The editors of this volume, David and Eileen Spring, argued that by 1974, “to discuss religion and ecology in history

¹ Ernest L. Fortin, “The Bible Made Me Do It: Christianity, Science, and the Environment,” *The Review of Politics* 57, no. 2 (1995): 207.

is largely to discuss the Lynn White thesis.”² They held that as a result of the White article, “there has been a candid rethinking of Christian doctrine.”³

White himself was a devout Christian, and he intended his article not as a general attack on Christianity, but as a criticism of a particular strain of Christian thought which he saw as the source of western environmental degradation. However, Christian theologians saw the White thesis as a powerful critique of modern Christianity, and many felt compelled to respond. Historians, biblical scholars, and even ecologists participated in the debate. This essay will examine Lynn White’s thesis and the intellectual debate it engendered. It will also look at the cultural context in which White’s ideas were generated and received. This essay makes a unique contribution in that it will locate this relatively recent scholarly controversy within its historical framework. I argue that White’s ideas were formidable and attractive in scholarly circles due to the cultural context in which they appeared – the beginning of the second wave of American environmentalism. The responses I will examine include several journal articles as well as the 1974 book *Ecology and Religion in History*, a compilation of essays by several scholars. These essays, which I will analyze in depth, include “Creation and Environment” by John MacQuarrie, professor of divinity, “Man and Nature: The Ecological Controversy and the Old Testament” by the biblical scholar James Barr, “The Cultural Basis for our Environmental Crisis” by professor Lewis Moncrief, “Franciscan Conservation versus Benedictine Stewardship” by the ecologist Rene Dubos, and “The Religious Background to the Present Environmental Crisis” by the historian Arnold Toynbee.

Lynn White and “The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis”

In his controversial 1967 article, “The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis,” Lynn White asserted that the marriage of scientific knowledge to technical mastery over nature characteristic of the modern West had created a disturbing environmental crisis. He sought to understand this crisis by investigating the fundamental beliefs and assumptions which had allowed or encouraged its development. He focused on the impact of the Christian worldview. White asserted that Christianity’s ideological victory over paganism changed

² Eileen and David Spring, *Ecology and Religion in History* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 3.

³ *Ibid.*, 7.

man's relationship with nature. Whereas under animistic paganism man was part of nature, Christianity saw man as transcendent. Genesis could be interpreted as giving man dominion over all animals and nature. This established a dualism between man and nature which had not before existed, and by desacralizing nature made its destruction ideologically justifiable. White wrote, "by destroying pagan animism, Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects."⁴

Since White was a medieval historian, it is not surprising that he also looked for the origins of Western attitudes towards the environment in his era of focus. He argued that the technological revolutions of the Middle Ages, when combined with the intellectual changes engendered by Christianity, began an unprecedented destructive relationship to nature. White asserted that:

...Since both our technological and our scientific movements got their start, acquired their character, and achieved world dominance in the Middle Ages, it would seem that we cannot understand their nature or their present impact upon ecology without examining fundamental medieval assumptions and developments.⁵

He pointed to the introduction of a new type of plow to northwestern Europe around CE 600. This new plow, in contrast to the shallow scratch plow native to the Mediterranean area, cut very deep, overturned the soil, and "attacked the land with . . . violence."⁶ White wrote that as a result of this plow, "distribution of land was based no longer on the needs of a family, but, rather, on the capacity of a power machine to till the earth. Man's relation to the soil was profoundly changed."⁷ He became less a part of nature and more an exploiter of it. This development was intellectually buttressed by an interpretation of Christianity which granted man "dominion" over nature and supported new technologies of this type.

White applied his knowledge of medieval technology to attempt to explain how and why technology in the present day had come to threaten man's very existence. He concluded, "our science and technology have grown out of Christian attitudes towards man's relation to nature which are almost universally held."⁸ The West's

⁴ Ibid., 408.

⁵ Lynn White, Jr., "The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155, no. 3767 (1967): 21.

⁶ Ibid., 406.

⁷ Ibid., 406.

⁸ Ibid., 410.

Christian heritage, White argued, meant that these attitudes have had a profound influence up to the modern day, even among non-Christians.

Despite White's negative evaluation of the entrenched Christian roots of the ecological crisis, he still proposed a possible solution in line with his own professed Christian faith. White doubted that the crisis could be solved with the application of more science and technology. Instead, he advocated a radical rethinking of Christianity along the lines of Saint Francis. According to White, Saint Francis, who lived around 1200, was a Christian "radical who "tried to depose men from his monarchy over creation and set up a democracy of all God's creatures."⁹ White characterized Saint Francis' beliefs as "a unique sort of pan-psychism of all things animate and inanimate, designed for the glorification of their transcendent creator."¹⁰ Man, Saint Francis believed, had to approach creation with humility. Although Saint Francis was a Christian, White believed he had the reverence for nature that the pagan pantheists once had, and that the widespread adoption of Franciscan beliefs would prevent further abuse of nature. As such, White wrote, "I propose Francis as a patron saint of ecologists."¹¹

White's article showed a great faith in ideology to shape human action in the world, a faith which would later be disputed by later scholars responding to White. His argument rested on the fundamental premise that "what people do about their ecology depends on what people think about themselves in relation to things around them. Human ecology is deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny—that is, by religion."¹²

The Cultural Background to the Intellectual Dispute

In many ways White was an original contributor to the thought of the modern environmental movement. He both responded to the culture in which he lived and influenced the developing environmentalism of the late 1960s and 1970s. The era after World War II saw the expansion of a truly mass consumer society and the development of an extensive automobile culture in the United States. The culture reflected man's unprecedented dominance over nature. However, the

⁹ *Ibid.*, 411.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 411.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 412.

¹² *Ibid.*, 416.

immediate post-war era saw little public concern for the environment. According to the scholar Robert Gottlieb, this changed in 1962 with the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, which many position as the precipitating event of the modern environmental movement. *Silent Spring* analyzed the negative effects of pesticides, especially DDT, on the environment. It also implicated the modern chemical industry, and modern industrial society more generally, in the creation of a profound environmental crisis. By the mid to late 1960s, a "new environmentalism" began to take shape around some of Carson's seminal ideas. In contrast to the first wave of American environmentalism that developed in the late nineteenth century and which emphasized the protection of wilderness areas, this new environmentalism confronted "advanced industrial society."¹³ The new environmentalism emphasized "issues of production, consumption, and urban growth."¹⁴ Traditional environmental organizations like the Sierra Club at first largely rejected this new, different strain.¹⁵

White's ideas, formulated by 1966, can be seen as an early contribution to the developing modern environmentalism. White shared the conviction of the new environmentalists that "the question of nature could no longer be separated from the question of society itself."¹⁶ Wilderness preservation did not concern White as it did the first wave of American environmentalists, rather he was taken with society and the ideological assumptions about man's relationship to the environment that underlay this society. White and the developing new environmentalism shared a concern with "runaway technology." New environmentalism developed "an awareness of the dangers of a full array of human technologies to human health and safety."¹⁷ Some scholars have traced this concern with the abuses of technology to the development of the atomic bomb, the ultimate demonstration of technology's destructive potential, and the anxieties surrounding nuclear proliferation in the Cold War era. Eventually, the popular success of the first Earth Day and the extensive media coverage that surrounded it showed the extent to which environmental concern had been incorporated into popular culture and the popular consciousness by 1970.

¹³ Robert Gottlieb, *Forcing the Spring: The Transformation of the American Environmental Movement* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1993), 96.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 96.

¹⁵ Kirkpatrick Sale, *The Green Revolution: The American Environmental Movement, 1962-1992* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1993), 11.

¹⁶ Gottlieb, 105.

¹⁷ Sale, 19.

New environmentalism and White's ideas became connected with the New Left political movement. According to the ecologist Rene Dubos, White's lecture "has been reproduced *in extenso*, not only in learned and popular magazines but also in *The Oracle*, the . . . journal of the hippie culture in San Francisco."¹⁸ The New Left that developed in the late 1960s accepted White's critique that Christian ideology underlay the development of the voraciously exploitative technology characteristic of the modern age. While White believed that a rethinking of its theology could redeem Christianity, young radicals of the New Left emphasized an anti-Christian interpretation of White. White's criticism of a certain type of Christian thought appealed to a New Left which had begun to question the Judeo-Christian worldview more generally.

The Intellectual Background to White — Max Weber

In addition to appearing within a particular social and cultural environment, White's ideas grew out of and were received into a specific intellectual environment as well. For instance, Lynn White was greatly indebted to the late nineteenth century sociologist Max Weber. Two of Weber's most famous sociological theories – his "Protestant work ethic" and his "disenchantment of the world" arguments – were both present in modified form in the White article. While Lynn White's arguments focused on the impact of Judeo-Christian thought in general, Weber's theories focused on the specific impact of Protestantism. Max Weber argued that the rise of Protestantism and its emphasis on a godly but secular vocation in this world, as opposed to the medieval focus on the next, created a culture in which hard work was construed as a sign of God's favor. This religious emphasis on secular hard work and productivity, Weber argued, led to the development of capitalism, which in fact first arose in the Protestant countries of northern Europe. White made a similar argument, although with slightly different premises and implications. He argued that it was man's fundamental Judeo-Christian attitudes towards nature, even under Catholicism, that ultimately led to the development of capitalism, not only the idea of the Protestant vocation. White argued that capitalism and the environmental degradation it wrought first arose in northern Europe not because of Protestantism but because that is where Christian man's attitudes towards nature became most exploitative as a result of the introduction

¹⁸ Rene Dubos, "Franciscan Conservation versus Benedictine Stewardship," in *Ecology and Religion in History*, ed. David and Eileen Spring (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 118.

of the deep-cutting plow. His emphasis on the role of technology as well as ideology in the formation of modern attitudes was characteristic of his time, an era which saw increased critique of human technology.

Another of Max Weber's influential theories which formed part of White's intellectual inheritance was his concept of "the disenchantment of nature." Weber argued that the animistic and magical thinking about nature which was characteristic of paganism had remained alive in the "superstitions" and ritual practices of Catholicism. However, he asserted that the Protestant Reformation profoundly changed this way of thought, and with its emphasis on the eradication of "superstition" "disenchanted" the world and the magical, mystical thinking that had once marked people's attitudes towards nature. White echoed this argument but also revised it. He argued that it was Christianity's original "victory over Paganism" in its Catholic form which "disenchanted" man's attitudes, not its Protestant form, as Weber argued. Weber's scholarship emphasized the transformation Protestantism had on the western European psyche, while White emphasized the impact of the Judeo-Christian legacy in general. However, despite his greater emphasis on ideological justifications, one could argue that like Weber, the essence of White's argument resembled Weber's: he claimed not that Christianity created the ecological crisis, but that Christianity led to the creation of technology and capitalism which exploited the environment.

The Contemporary Intellectual Situation

In addition to drawing on the long legacy of Max Weber, several of the authors who responded to White explicitly situated their work in a more contemporary intellectual context and culture, in which White's ideas played an important role by the 1970s. In his 1974 article "Franciscan Conservation Versus Benedictine Stewardship," the ecologist Rene Dubos acknowledged the importance of the White thesis in the scholarly culture of the time. He wrote, "whether valid or not, White's thesis demands attention because it has become a matter of faith for many conservationists, ecologists, economists, and even theologians."

John MacQuarrie, a professor of divinity, in his 1974 article "Creation and Environment," situated his response within this contemporary theological situation. He wrote, "it has been fashionable in recent years among some theologians to make much of the claim that Western science and technology owe their origins to biblical influences." His use of the term "fashionable" to describe the reception of White's thesis even among theologians reflected the extent to which it had resonated within

the contemporary imagination, but also his annoyance at the simple acceptance and inadequate examination of the argument. By 1974, scholars like MacQuarrie and Dubos were ready to question the White thesis.

In his article "Men and Nature: The Ecological Controversy and the Old Testament," the biblical scholar James Barr explained how thinking about man and nature had evolved up to the present. He wrote that scholars in the years immediately prior to White had seen the connection between technology and Christianity (as first proposed by Weber) as something to be proud of. This proposed connection, Barr wrote, was "understood to redound to the credit of the Bible," and "to gain for biblical religion some reflection of the prestige attaching to science" in America before the second wave of American environmentalism in the 1960s and before the impact of the White thesis. However, from the perspective of 1974, Barr realized that "in the past few years . . . this rather sunny and positive account of the relation between science and biblical faith has begun to be countered by a darker and more negative one." He argued that White's thesis was so intriguing and created such an intellectual sea change because it turned the previous scholarly consensus on its head. White appropriated the same argument which had given positive value to the relationship between man, nature, and technology, but discerned the more negative, exploitative aspects of this relationship.

Barr also perceived a charged, unobjective political atmosphere swirling around a debate which he thought should have been an issue for "impartial" academics. This atmosphere was largely a result of White's implication of Christianity in modern environmental disasters. Barr felt compelled to respond to the charged intellectual situation by asserting that he made his argument on a politically impartial, intellectual plane. He wrote that "my original interest in this subject was not kindled by the present ecological discussion, but rather by my own doubts about the theological argument which linked the Bible to the rise of modern science." However, despite such claims, neither Barr nor any of the other scholars I examined took such an approach. Each article, Barr's included, connected the intellectual issues they were exploring to the contemporary ecological situation, and like White, proposed solutions to the crisis. In the intellectual and cultural environment of the early 1970s, this could not be a neutral, academic debate.

Responses to the White Thesis

In their article from 1989, “Varieties of Religious Involvement and Environmental Concerns: Testing the Lynn White Thesis,” Douglas Eckberg and Jean Blocker observe that:

Responses to White's argument have ranged widely, from agreements that it indeed explained a particularly Western exploitativeness, to arguments that the account in Genesis¹ meant something different from White's interpretation and/or that later chapters in Genesis offered a “stewardship” interpretation towards nature, to questioning the relationship between theology and culture, to arguments that culture does not operate in the straightforward manner that White proposed, to firm denials that the West is especially exploitative of the environment.

Among the responses which I investigated, some, especially those of theologians, sensed an attack on Christianity in White's argument, and rejected it outright. Others added nuance to White's thesis – some accepted his conclusions but arrived at them with a different argument and using different evidence. Still others analyzed the argument and agreed with White.

Objections

The White thesis inevitably had its detractors. Biblical scholars questioned White's interpretation of the Bible. Ecologists argued that man's exploitation of nature was not particular to the Christian world. Historians asked: if the Judeo-Christian attitude towards nature was so influential, why did Judaism or Eastern Orthodox Christianity not show the destructive tendencies of the West? Some asserted that modern secular attitudes, not ancient Christian ones, had caused the environmental crisis. Still others questioned White's basic assumption of ideology as the key factor in man's interaction with his environment. All these objections will be explored below.

The biblical scholars John MacQuarrie and James Barr both objected to White's interpretation of the Bible. MacQuarrie conceded that the readings of Genesis which White cited as evidence for his argument did portray an anthropocentric universe with a transcendent God essentially separate from the natural world. However, he argued that White had neglected those portions of the Bible that contradicted this view. MacQuarrie especially pointed to the covenant God made with Noah after the flood. In Genesis 9, God speaks to Noah and says, “Behold, I

establish my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the cattle, and every beast of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark" (Genesis 9:9-10, Revised Standard Version). MacQuarrie argued that this was a covenant to protect both men and all animals of the earth, and was not put in terms of man's "dominion" or superiority, thus counteracting the declarations of Genesis 1 and 2. He also cited the celebration of nature and the idea of God reflected in nature which was present in the Psalms as evidence of alternative attitudes within the Bible.

James Barr asserted that White had misinterpreted Genesis 1 and 2, and argued that contrary to White's reading, close analysis of the original language of these passages showed they contained no justification for violent exploitation of the earth. However, despite his opinion as a biblical scholar, Barr acknowledged that the actual content of the creation stories of Genesis as he saw them was less important than their popular interpretation. Concerning Genesis 1, Barr wrote, "even if the original sense as I suggest laid little stress on exploitation, nevertheless, the general effect of the passage in the history of ideas has been one which encouraged ideas of human force and exploitation."

Scientists often rejected White's emphasis on the uniqueness of Western Christian exploitative attitudes towards the environment. David and Eileen Spring wrote that "the view of many natural scientists has been the constancy with which man has scarred his environment," denying the West as an exceptional case. In his article "Franciscan Conservation versus Benedictine Stewardship," the ecologist Rene Dubos argued that White's thesis was "a historical half-truth." He agreed that the Christian West had an exploitative relationship with the environment, but explained that this relationship was hardly unique to the Judeo-Christian tradition. Dubos had studied ancient civilizations throughout the world, including those that had caused the extinction of numerous large prehistoric mammals. He argued that it was not the Judeo-Christian mindset which was particularly destructive, but that "if men are more destructive now than they were in the past, it is because there are more of them and because they have at their command more powerful means of destruction, not because they have been influenced by the Bible." In his article "The Cultural Basis for Our Environmental Crisis," Lewis Moncrief argued that men everywhere had exploitative tendencies towards the environment and that no matter what ideological system they were operating under, "no culture has been able to completely screen out the egocentric tendencies of human beings" which led to environmental exploitation.

Another argument against White was the objection that Judaism and Eastern Orthodox Christianity did not develop the same relationship to

nature characteristic of the West despite sharing the same Genesis creation stories. John MacQuarrie, mirroring the Weber thesis, concluded that it must have been the Protestantism of western Europe and not Catholic Christianity or the Judeo-Christian worldview in general which warped man's relationship to nature. He argued that the greater influence of Greek philosophy within the Eastern Church, with its idea that the world was part of God, and "emanated" from Him, created "closer bonds between God and nature." In contrast, the western, Protestant view of the world as mere "creation," not intimately connected to God, according to MacQuarrie, led to the "utter devaluation and profanation of the physical world." James Barr also asked, "if modern science has its basis in the biblical worldview, why then did it not take its rise until many centuries after the biblical heritage in Christianity had become culturally dominant in the world?" White would have countered by pointing out that he argued that environmental exploitation was greatly facilitated by the Christian worldview, but that its effects only became obvious after science and religion became linked in the technological developments of the Middle Ages particular to northwestern Europe. To White, the absence of these same environmental conditions among Jews and Eastern Christians would explain their different treatment of, if not attitudes towards, the environment.

Lewis Moncrief and James Barr proposed that because the ecological crisis was a problem of the modern era, it followed that it more directly stemmed from modern, secularizing conditions. Moncrief theorized that the forces of modern America were the key factors in the crisis – democracy, technology, urbanization, capitalism, and apathy towards nature. He admitted that "the Judeo-Christian tradition has probably influenced the character of each of these forces. However, to isolate religious tradition...is a bold affirmation for which there is little historical or scientific support." The unleashing of these secularized forces in modernity was more influential than Christian ideology. James Barr interpreted the Bible as a limiting factor on man's destructive tendencies in the natural world and argued that secularization may have been a more important influence. He wrote that the ecological crisis identified in the 1960s and 1970s was a result of secular "liberal humanism in which man no longer conceives of himself as being under a creator" so that "his right to dispose of nature for his own ends is, unlike the situation in the Bible, unlimited."

Lastly, some scholars disputed the idea which underlay White's article that "what people do about their ecology depends upon what people think about themselves . . . i.e. by religion." The extent to which ideology influences action is a perennial problem in interpreting the

past. Both Lewis Moncrief and James Barr asserted that White may have overestimated the effect of Christian ideology on man's treatment of nature. Moncrief framed the origins of the environmental crisis more in terms of actual historical experience than the proposed influence of ideology. He argued that the concrete historical developments of democracy, the industrial revolution, and accompanying scientific advances created environmentally destructive conditions independent of the influence of ideology. Moncrief also proposed that the American frontier experience encouraged exploitation of the land, and thus made Americans particularly rapacious. He took the Marxist-influenced position that at base, man's treatment of nature was determined by economic factors. Christian ideologies may have existed and may have been used to justify certain actions, but ideology was never the real motivation. It was rather a false screen attempting to conceal the economic motivations which are the true movers of history. James Barr was also generally skeptical of the profound influence White attributed to ideology. Although he never developed his arguments to the extent that Moncrief did, he wrote, "I would be against all attempts to explain a complicated modern process by setting against two or three remote models such as 'Biblical thought' or 'Greek thought.'" He also argued that "to support that doctrines not only influenced the rise of science but had an extremely vital and preponderating causal relation to it, seems just enormously improbable" Barr didn't preclude a Christian influence, but held that White inaccurately exaggerated it since ideology could never be as influential as he supposed.

Support

Academic debate, by its very nature, emphasizes disagreements with and revisions of accepted ideas. Because White's thesis by the early 1970s had become generally accepted, the scholars I studied could not contribute to the debate by simply agreeing with White, although many did to some extent. Instead, their work largely offered objections and new interpretations. However, the scholar I looked at who displayed the most unqualified support of White was the historian Arnold Toynbee in his article "The Religious Background of the Present Environmental Crisis." Like White, Toynbee identified "runaway technology," technology that led to "the recklessly extravagant consumption of nature's irreplaceable treasures, and the pollution of those of them that man has not already devoured," as the key element in the crisis. Toynbee agreed with White that this rapaciousness could "be traced back in the last analysis to a religious cause, and that this cause is the rise of

monotheism,” the rise of the Judeo-Christian worldview. Toynbee, as a fellow historian, was thoroughly convinced by the arguments White presented and offered his emphatic support.

Solutions to the Environmental Crisis?

The fact that many of the scholars I examined, like White, offered possible solutions to the environmental crisis shows that they saw this as not only an academic quarrel but as one with important implications for the present and for their broader society. However, in accordance with the scholarly orientation of the debate, the solutions offered tended more toward the abstract and ideological than the practical.

John MacQuarrie agreed with White that since the origins of the crisis lurked deep within Christian ideology, a solution could only be achieved by grappling with this tradition. He took White’s implication of Christianity in the modern degradation of the environment as a profound challenge to the faith that had to be responded to. MacQuarrie, as a professor of divinity, had a keen interest in supporting the Christian tradition, and proposed that this could be done “by asking what latent resources remain in the tradition that might respond to the needs of the present situation by introducing correctives and promoting the new attitudes demanded” – that is, a reinterpretation of Christian doctrine. MacQuarrie took a liberal and not a fundamentalist approach towards Christianity, holding that Christian doctrine may have been seen in one way in the past, but this did not mean that interpretation was necessarily correct or permanent. Rather, Christianity could be reexamined and reinterpreted in light of the present crisis, and in this way redeemed. While White saw possible redemption in Saint Francis, MacQuarrie proposed that it could be achieved by transitioning “away from the monarchical model of God toward the organic model,” or the idea that nature was part of God.

The historian Arnold Toynbee agreed with MacQuarrie that Christianity had to be reexamined in light of the present since its traditional interpretation had become destructive. He observed that in the seventeenth century Genesis “read like a blessing on the wealth of Abraham in children and livestock; in 1971, it reads like a license for the population explosion, and like both a license and an incentive for mechanization and pollution.” Toynbee agreed with White that attitudes that grew out of religion could only be changed with “a religious counter-revolution.” However, while White and MacQuarrie looked within Christianity for such a revolution, Toynbee offered a radical proposal to abandon monotheism, which he saw as the root of

the problem, and return to a pantheistic worldview. However, Toynbee's proposal was vague and he offered no analysis of how practical or even possible it would be.

Rene Dubos offered his own solution based on a critique of White's advocacy of Franciscanism. Dubos argued that Saint Francis' "ethic of nature" which White praised was impracticable and in conflict with human nature. He wrote that even Saint Francis' "immediate followers soon abandoned his romantic and unworldly attitude. They probably realized that man has never been purely a worshipper of nature or a passive witness to his surroundings." Dubos instead looked to Saint Benedict of Nursia for a Christian model of environmentalism. He argued that Saint Benedict, founder of the Benedictine monastic order, inspired a practical, sustainable management of nature. Benedictinism promoted manual labor as an element of spiritual discipline, and Dubos argued that the labor of Benedictine monks was directed towards a stewardship of the land. When setting up their abbeys, the Benedictines cleared forests, drained swamps, and created good farmland in a respectful, non-exploitative way. According to Dubos, the Benedictines saw such labor and "stewardship" of the land as "a prayer which helps in recreating paradise out of chaotic wilderness." Dubos wrote that Saint Benedict "can be regarded as a patron saint of those who believe that true conservation means not only protecting nature against human misbehavior but also developing human activities which favor a creative, harmonious relationship between man and nature." Dubos' contrast of Franciscanism and Benedictinism recalled the preservation versus conservation debate which arose early in American environmentalism.

Although White never characterized Franciscan thought as explicitly preservationist, or oriented towards the idea that land should be guarded in a "pristine" state, "untouched" by man, Dubos accused the Franciscan stance of being impractically idealistic just as he thought preservationism was. As an ecologist, Dubos lived more in the realm of man's actual actions in nature than his attitudes towards it. He concluded that man would inevitably affect nature, but he could choose to be constructive rather than destructive towards it. Because of human nature and because of the realities of actual historical experience, Dubos proposed that "Saint Benedict is much more relevant than Saint Francis to human life in the modern world and to the human condition in general." To Dubos, Saint Benedict represented wise use of the land while Franciscanism was a utopian dream that was doomed to fail.

Lastly, while White emphatically stated that technology could not solve the ecological crisis because it was the root of the problem, James Barr believed that it could. He argued that man's hierarchical relationship with nature could not be escaped. However, he proposed

that instead of taking an attitude of “dominion” over nature, he should see his role as “leadership” of nature. Barr wrote that “man’s dominion or eminence should from now on increasingly be applied to the task of conserving and caring for the natural resources of God’s world, by using man’s own scientific, technical, and planning skills to limit and control what these same powers, if left unlimited, would perpetrate.” Barr’s proposed solution of the application of technology to the environmental problem is one which has maintained its appeal up to the present day.

The Enduring Influence of the Lynn White Debate — Historiographical Review

The possible solutions that White and the other scholars I examined proposed cannot be judged as to their effectiveness because they were essentially thought experiments and did not involve any concrete applications. However, after being integrated into intellectual culture, these ideas have continued to influence academics and more practical-minded environmentalists alike. In this section I will cover a sampling of the later (post-1980s) historiography influenced by the White controversy.

In the 1997 book *Protestantism, Capitalism and Nature in America*, the author Mark Stoll positions himself within the Lynn White tradition. He argues that Christianity has had a much more complex influence on man’s relationship to nature than White’s negative characterization suggests. Stoll’s thesis is that Christianity has compelled people towards contradictory attitudes towards and actions in nature, and has thus left an ambiguous legacy. The influence of Christian ideology, Stoll argues, has justified both “the conquest and control of nature for the benefit of humanity,” and the simultaneous belief that “the mountains and forests are sacred places where mankind might find mystical experience or moral renewal.” Stoll describes how Christianity in American history has simultaneously led to the idea that the earth was made for man, thus justifying its use and abuse, but also to a belief in the possibility of “a transformation of the wilderness into a new Eden for the Second Coming of Christ.” He traces the contradictions he presents from their origins in Christian and Protestant thought to their various expressions in American history up to the present. Like White in 1966, Stoll argues in 1997 that ideology has had a profound impact on man’s actions in nature. In his 1995 article “The Bible Made Me Do It: Christianity, Science, and the Environment,” Ernest Fortin also shows interest in the White thesis, or as he calls it, “Lynn White’s Bombshell.” Fortin fundamentally disagrees with White and his article “challenges the premise that

...modern science is a child of premodern Christian thought.” He argues, “in view of the enormous respect shown for nature by both the [Christian] theological and philosophical traditions, it comes as something of a surprise to learn that the blame for the ecological catastrophe for which we appear to be headed is [still] being laid at the door of Western Christianity.” Fortin’s attempts to refute the White thesis still in 1997, show the amazing resilience and longevity of the argument. He also analyzes and criticizes the scholarly debate that has occurred, as typified in the books he cites, *Cry of the Environment: Rebuilding the Christian Creation Tradition*, edited by P.N. Joranson, from 1994, and *The Travail of Nature: The Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christian Theology*, by P. Santmire, from 1985. Fortin writes that the problem with the debate that has occurred is not a lack of interest – “many...have been only too eager to jump into the fray – but that they have yet to agree on the appropriate response to it,” despite all the various “solutions” proposed. What scholars have generated instead, Fortin argues, is “a wide range of positions that claim to be Christian but mostly reflect the confusion that prevails in the larger academic community.” In Fortin’s analysis, debate around the White thesis is still very active and unresolved in 1995.

The continuing lack of consensus on the Lynn White thesis by the 1990s led Douglas Eckberg and Jean Blocker to publish an article in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* which attempted to address the continuing White controversy using sociological, statistical methods. Their article, “Varieties of Religious Involvement and Environmental Concerns: Testing the Lynn White Thesis,” is motivated by their observation that although there has been much theoretical analysis of White’s broad argument, it “has received little empirical research at the level of individual differences in religious experience.” Through surveys, Eckberg and Blocker measure degrees of religiosity and degrees of environmental concern and find a correlation which offers “substantial support for the White thesis.” They conclude, “belief in the Bible and only belief in the Bible predicted scores on all four indexes of environmental concern and did so in the direction expected by White’s thesis.” Exasperated that White’s thesis was still being disputed in theoretical, ideological terms, Eckberg and Blocker took an ingenious sociological, more concrete approach, and “proved” the White thesis. However, their article did not diminish continuing theoretical debate.

The *Green Bible*, published in 2008, is a striking example of the continuing relevance of White’s key question. The book is a reprint of the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, interpreted through an environmental lens. The editor Matthew Sleeth strongly believes that Christianity is “green.” The frontispiece of the book quotes a kinder,

gentler section of Genesis – “God saw everything that he had made, and indeed it was very good.” The foundational premise of *The Green Bible* is that the Bible encourages environmentalism. Sleeth sees God working through nature and reflected in nature. He writes that it was his experience of nature and concern for environmental issues that led to his Christian conversion. Just as in many standard bibles, “direct quotations” from Jesus are printed in red, in *The Green Bible*, passages relating to the earth are highlighted in green. In his introduction Sleeth asserts that “with over a thousand references to the earth and caring for creation in the Bible, the message is clear: all in God’s creation – nature, animals, humanity – are inextricably linked to one another...we are called to care for all God has made.”

The *Green Bible* exemplifies the increasing interest in environmentalism among both liberal and evangelical Christians since 2000 as the issue of global warming has come to the public consciousness. Examples of other recent publications (from 2006 to 2009) which demonstrate this phenomenon include: *Saving God’s Green Earth: Rediscovering the Church’s Responsibility to Environmental Stewardship* by Tri Robinson, *Green Revolution, Coming Together to Care for Creation* by Ben Lowe, and *Our Father’s World: Mobilizing the Church to Care for Creation* by Edward Brown. These books are in part motivated by the prevailing cultural perception that Christianity is somehow anti-environment, an idea greatly indebted to Lynn White.

Conclusion

The stark contrast in the interpretations of the Bible by White (in 1966) and Sleeth (in 2008) show the longevity and the complexity of the questions brought to the forefront by the White thesis. Christians continue to grapple with the White critique. It must be admitted that few today would be familiar with Lynn White. This may be a reflection of the fact that so many scholars have weighed in on the debate that the origins of the “bombshell” which precipitated it have been obscured, and that the argument has become commonly accepted. One might cynically argue that the debate is not as much about Christianity as it is about politics, with liberal, secular environmentalists agreeing with White’s critique of Christianity and conservative Christians who have in the past been unfriendly towards environmentalism opposing it. There is some truth to this view because both environmentalism and Christianity became elements in the culture wars that emerged after the 1960s. However, this view ignores the complexity of the response to White and the fact that it was usually framed more in terms of ideas than politics.

The controversy saw Christian theologians agree with White's critique and secular scientists refute it. In recent years, the widely noted turn to "Green Christianity" and "Creation Care" by some Christians reflects an expanding popular environmentalism separate from political alignments. White's ideas have had such appeal and relevance even up to the present because they provided a uniquely deep analysis of the environmental crisis. While concern for the present problem became widespread, White was the first to offer a serious, searching analysis of culture and the type of thinking which may have generated a seemingly incomprehensible destruction of nature.

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