

Christian Thought in the Age of Ecology: Historical Roots of a Religious Crisis

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Americans and Canadians have long assumed that Christianity is the enemy of nature. This presupposition became common in academic circles in 1966 when Lynn White, a professor of medieval history at the University of California, Los Angeles, waxed philosophical in a paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science entitled, “The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis.” His conclusion that “modern Western science was cast in a matrix of Christian Theology” amounted to a damning indictment of the Christian community’s human-nature relationship in North America. The publication of the lecture in the journal *Science* the following year popularized to a broader North American audience White’s theory that “Christianity bears a huge burden of guilt” for America’s degraded environment.¹

It is unlikely that White understood his article’s far-reaching implications. Appearing five years after the sensational publication of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*, which questioned the moral authority of science in matters of the environment, it fundamentally undermined the Christian church’s future role in either reforming science or restoring the environment.² In the highly politicized atmosphere of the beginnings of the Age of Ecology in the 1960s, American society characterized Christians interested in environmental issues as interlopers. In subsequent decades the assumption predominated that Christian thought could contribute little to environmentalism because, as the cause of the earth’s degradation, it had no basis of reference or tradition for preserving what remained. That White, a

self-proclaimed churchman, would detail such a critical self-examination proved to those outside the church that biblical principles could not play a meaningful role in the burgeoning environmental movement.

The acrimony between western culture and nature resulted in a desire for a new moral compass not polluted by Christian traditions. As had been predicted by social critics in the 1930s, the triune of capitalism, science and technology had become gods unto themselves, the masters of society rather than the servant of humanity. In the turbulent 1960s and 1970s philosophies of nature in North America drew their inspiration from non-western traditions such as Asian and Native American religion. Of course the rejection of Christianity for alternative forms of spirituality was not confined to the post-war environmental crisis. Teitara Suzuki, for example, extolled the virtues of Zen Buddhism for a half a century after his arrival in the United States in 1897.³ Similarly, Alan W. Watts, the Buddhist immigrant from Britain, had wide-ranging impact on American thought with his twenty-five books on topics ranging from the fundamentals of Zen to the “seamless unity” of Buddhist thought in *Nature, Man and Women*, published in 1958. The transcendentalist movement and its most eloquent spokesperson, Henry David Thoreau, embraced Asian religious practices, as did the so-called beatniks in the 1950s led by Jack Kerouac and Gary Snyder. However, when *Christian Century* published articles on Zen as an alternative to Western attitudes it illustrated the degree to which Asian spiritual traditions – Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, Jainism, Shinto – had become a mainstream guide to restructuring humanity’s relationship with nature.⁴ Christians, especially those more theologically liberal, argued that their faith had lost in western culture what Asian spirituality had retained in the east, namely the unity of all things and the intrinsic value of all life.⁵

The dualistic and anthropocentric theology of western Christianity in the late 1960s faced powerful challenges from Native American spiritualists as well. “Ecology” became synonymous with the limitations that First Nations’ societies voluntarily imposed upon themselves for the sake of nature. “Bear people,” “fish nations” and “mother earth” became familiar symbols for a young environmentalist movement. Speeches by Chief Seattle of the Suquamish, or Luther Standing Bear of the Lakota, resounded with the oneness of humanity with nature. However unfair or inaccurate, Native Americans became the “first ecologists” and environmentalists recast their original societies as utopias that provided for the unity of all things. In stark contrast to western Christianity, which stressed the supremacy of humanity,

the pantheism of Asia and the animism of North America met in direct confrontation to the biblical injunction to “dominate and subdue” the earth.⁶ In the public debate, the positive attributes of the nature-human relationship were ascribed to Eastern and Native American religions while negative, environmentally degrading aspects of Western civilization were almost exclusively presented as Christian concepts.⁷

In the highly-charged atmosphere of race riots, the detonation of underground nuclear devices and the Vietnam War, Christians waded into the ideological conflict to rescue their faith. They quickly discovered, however, that while Asian and North American religions authoritatively drew on their traditions to explore the solution to environmental crisis, Christians, tainted by their association with the west, struggled to reinvigorate seemingly old, tired, worn out philosophies of the early church or to revive the forgotten and ignored teachings of Jesus. To many observers, even Christians, monotheism and the biblical responsibility of humanity in creation, to name two examples, precluded Christians from engaging in the environmental debate.⁸ By the mid-1970s most American and Canadians explicitly or implicitly understood that the Supreme Being, if they in fact believed in one, had only revealed a plan for nature to those outside of Christendom.⁹

The assumption that linked Christian principles to anti-environmentalism was illustrated well by the way in which Christians responded to the ideological conflict over the earth and humanity’s place on it. The hostility towards Christian ideas of environment led to desperate attempts of “the church” to remake itself and renew its commitment to “earthkeeping.” Revised notions of “dominion” and the biblical mandate to “subdue the earth” became common. Immediately after White’s thesis, a burgeoning of Christian scholarship revitalized theological debates over the accurate biblical portrayal of “stewardship.”¹⁰ The greening of religion even produced new genres of theology such as theology of nature, theology of ecology, and theology of creation. Perhaps the most significant, although certainly not the most sophisticated, response was that of Francis Schaeffer with the publication of his *Pollution and the Death of Man: the Christian View of Ecology* in 1972.¹¹ The evangelical Protestant community’s high regard for Schaeffer meant that the book received broad readership in the churches and became mandatory reading in seminaries and Bible colleges across North America.

In the midst of the raging cultural conflict over the environment, essentially a battle over moral authority over the rights of nature, most Christians tried to remake their ideological framework in order to overturn the anthropocentric and dualistic assumptions inherent in their relationship with nature.¹² Unfortunately, in calling for a “new relationship” with creation and characterizing their scholarship as “new thinking,” Christian scholars reinforced White’s full argument, namely, that since 1850 Christians have been largely unconcerned with the environment and have utilized a misinformed theology developed in medieval times to exploit and degrade God’s good creation. By separating themselves from the historic past of the church most Christian environmental authors and organizations magnified the assumptions of other authors. Thus, the predominant characterization of Christianity as “so heavenly minded as to be no earthly good” became entrenched within and reinforced by the church, even though integration was one of the central themes of the new Christian environmental conscience.¹³

The theological arguments on the human-nature-God paradigm amounted to variations on a theme across the Christian doctrinal spectrum.¹⁴ The sheer weight of the voluminous studies on Christian responsibility for nature propelled Christians from different traditions to assume leadership in the attempt to rectify the dualism between Christianity and the world around it. So great was the response, and the perceived need to create a Christian response to the environmental crisis facing North America, that numerous workshops and even separate programs in religiously affiliated universities and colleges began to train leaders to be “stewards” of the earth. In 1979, the Au Sable Institute of Environmental Studies in Madison, Wisconsin became a central gathering place for ideas around which the church has responded to the “environmental crisis.” The Institute’s attempts to train Christian environmental sciences and their efforts to host significant conferences on different aspects of the theology of creation greatly enhanced the respect of Christian ideology.¹⁵ Other organizations such as the North American Conference on Christianity and Ecology have also contributed with journal publications such as *The Quarterly of Christian Ecology*. New programs, such as the Environmental Studies program at Trinity Western University in Langley, BC will undoubtedly have an impact in the future as well. As these academic efforts increase, so too does the sophistication with which environmental issues are approached through a faith perspective.

These scholars, agencies and ecumenical associations did not, however, stimulate a broad-based activism within the Christian church. All

of the work on the theological basis of the human-nature-God paradigm did not equip parishioners, who were able to recite the re-duce, re-use, and recycle pledge, with a clear connection between their environmentally aware actions and their faith. Similarly, theologians, or Christian academics from various disciplines disguised as theologians, only scratched the surface of the historical context of the rich tradition that Christians had developed in response to their understanding of humans in their relationship to God through different eras and various cultural settings. The result is that while Christian ecology thrived in theory, it had little connection to reality for most North American Christians.

It is ironic that the Christian church after 1980 did not develop the same respect for its theology as academia did for Christian principles. Indeed, one of the unforeseen consequences of White's paper was that it signaled a departure in science away from its strict creed of religious exclusion that it had held since around the 1920s. That *Science* even considered an article with a religious theme, however damaging to the evangelical cause it might have appeared to be, provided an avenue within the scientific establishment itself to at least begin to dialogue with issues of Christian faith and not dismiss them as the antithesis of reason. White provided an unmistakable link between the rise of science through Judeo-Christian traditions in the middle ages even though the moral costs were largely borne by Christianity, not science. Nevertheless, he made the firm connection between reason and faith that had been lost to the church in the early-twentieth century.¹⁶ In his words, "since the roots of our trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious, whether we call it that or not."¹⁷

Since 1967 academia has been increasingly open to Christian ideas on the environment. This is not to say, however, that they have accepted the simplistic paradigms too often presented from a Christian perspective. Environmental historians have been especially vehement in their forthright appraisals of the intellectual baggage associated with Christianity. Roderick Nash, a historian noted for his exploration of the intellectual origins of wilderness, decried the "pervasive otherworldliness of Christianity."¹⁸ Nash recounts the generally accepted interpretation that "Christians' aspirations were fixed on heaven, the supposed place of their origins and, they hoped, their final resting place . . . Indeed, Christians expected that the earth would not be around for long. A vengeful God would destroy it, and all unredeemed nature, with floods or drought or fire," and concludes that "obviously this

eschatology was a poor basis from which to argue for environmental ethics in any guise."¹⁹ With reference to resource exploitation, for example, Donald Worster exclaims: "What we humans have done over the past five hundred years to maim this continent and tear apart its fabric of life is in large degree the consequence of the Judeo-Christian religious ethos and its modern secular offspring – science, industrial capitalism, and technology."²⁰

Despite the antipathy towards Christian thought on the environment, most authors agreed with White's basic notion that Christian ideas operated within a particular cultural context to shape the environment. Indeed, analysis of the conquest of the American west, for example, clearly illustrated that Edenic myths and metaphors of virgins shaped the interaction between humans, land and resources.²¹ In the exploitation and conquest of the west it was not necessarily Christianity, but rather a particular interpretation of biblical passages acting within a unique historical context that provided justification for human action. Unfortunately, the recognition and appreciation of the complexity of Christianity thought as found in good analytical writing did not result in an exploration of people whose actions on behalf of nature reflected their biblical beliefs.

Scholars who attempted to articulate a Christian theology of nature, such as Calvin DeWitt and Loren Wilkinson, felt compelled to distance themselves from Judeo-Christianity's historical record of environmental abuse.²² Attempts of Christian authors to separate themselves from their maimed historical roots in the short term, however, produced unintended consequences for the long-term viability of Christian environmentalism in both the church and academia. In attempting to develop distinctness from the past, Christian scholars effectively gave up the rich traditions that would ground their theology in history. While much work went into exploring the nature of biblical relationships to nature, little exploration of Christian thought and action on ecological issues has been attempted in what only can be termed as the missing century of "creation history" between 1850-1950. This is especially troubling when the environmental studies are pre-occupied with putting humans back into the environment and exploring the way in which human agency has impacted the earth.²³ As Simon Schama has explicitly stated recently, no part of landscape is beyond memory, all of nature expresses humanity's occupation and use.²⁴

The Judeo-Christian tradition, with its long, detailed history of man-nature interaction should be included in this history, but too often its past is limited to biblical history or explicitly Christian epochs.²⁵ Because little has

been done to ground balanced Christian interpretations of nature within the context of our modern age, theologies of nature flounder and historical treatments remains incomplete. One cannot ignore the ways in which religion, and especially Christianity, justified “subduing of the earth.” However, one would be remiss not to explore the ways in which men and women of faith have, in fact, inherited the earth in the past 150 years.

Church historians have also embraced the notion of Christianity forming the peripheral matter of American and Canadian association with nature. Mark Noll argues that the political and social marginalization of Christians has been ongoing since roughly 1920. Although he does not specifically mention the church’s relationship to nature or the environmental movement, it is evident in his choice of metaphor, “Wilderness Once Again” that such considerations were never very far below the surface. In Noll’s analysis the only thing left to decide about Christianity’s twentieth century walk in the wilderness is whether the future will entail renewal or readjustment.²⁶

It is a sad fact of history that more Christians did not disavow their connection to western culture with the rise of modernity. This is not to say, however, that since the eighteenth century, Christians have not actively engaged in the debate over the status of nature (creation),²⁷ the care of animals (husbandry),²⁸ and debate over human agency in the environment (conservation, preservation).²⁹ A cursory overview of Canadian and American history reveals plenty of examples of Christian actors that made significant contributions to creation history. John William Dawson, the Canadian geologist and articulate defender of creation through science.³⁰ William Howland, the mayor of Toronto the Good, implemented Christian principles into politics with the result being the defense and protection of the poor, women and animals. John Muir who rejected formal Christianity and adopted a “religion of nature,” yet articulated in his journals and writings a deep struggle to be faithful to the basic tenants of the Christian faith.³¹ Walter Lowdermilk, the forest and hydrologist turned land conservationist, who constructed an “eleventh commandment” that began: “Thou shalt inherit the holy earth as a faithful steward.”³² All of these actors and more reveal an abiding tradition of creation history in our time. Although none of them are perfect or ideal, they are nevertheless the models and examples of people living out their faith in the historical context of North American society. Their history is something North American society and creation history desperately needs.

Endnotes

1. Lynn White, Jr., "The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis," *Science* 155: (10 March 1967): 1203-1207.
2. Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (Greenwich, CN: Fawcett Publications, Inc., 1964).
3. C.J. Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore: nature and culture in western thought from ancient times to the end of the eighteenth century* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1967).
4. William R. Hoyt, "Zen Buddhism and Western Alienation from Nature," *Christian Century* 87 (7 October 1970): 1194-1196; and Hwa Yol Jung, "Ecology, Zen and Western Religious Thought," *Christian Century* 89 (15 November 1972): 1155.
5. Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968); and John Cobb, Jr. *Beyond Dialogue Toward a Mutual Transformation of Christianity and Buddhism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982).
6. J. Baird Callicot, *Nature in Asian Traditions of Thought: Essays in Environmental Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989).
7. For a forthright critique of Christianity that is representative of the time see C. J. Glacken, "Man Against Nature: An Outmoded Concept," in *The Environmental Crisis: Man's Struggle to Live With Himself*, ed. H.W. Helfrich, Jr. (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 1970).
8. This attitude can be readily apparent in the coverage of the "White controversy" (see *Time*, 2 February 1970; and "The Link Between Faith and Ecology," *The New York Times*, 4 January 1970). The most clearly articulated critique of Christian theology is a thoughtful analysis by John Passmore in *Man's Responsibility for Nature: Ecological Problems and Western Traditions* (New York: C. Scribner, 1974). Passmore argued that Christianity cannot create an environmental ethic without ceasing to be distinctly Christian. Interestingly, he also argued that pantheism, mysticism and non-Christian traditions would not offer the solution, but rather they should be sought in Western philosophical, scientific and religious traditions.
9. Even those inside the church began calling for "a new Christianity" (Frederick Elder, *Crisis in Eden: A Religious Study of Man and Environment* [Nashville: Abingdon, 1972]). Elder, who was a student at Harvard Divinity School in 1972, called for the church to follow the teachings of Aldo Leopold in order to overcome its "ethical parochialism." Other authors like Henlee H. Barnette, in

The Church and the Ecological Crisis (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), called for an “expanded zone of ethics” that included the “organic and the inorganic.”

10. Those wanting a fairly exhaustive bibliography of the response from theologians to White’s thesis should consult the excellent bibliography compiled by Joseph K. Sheldon entitled *Rediscovery of Creation: A Bibliography of the Church’s Response to the Environmental Crisis* (Metuchen, NJ: American Theological Library Association and Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1992), 27-28.
11. Schaffer, *Pollution and the Death of Man: The Christian View of Ecology* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale Books, 1970).
12. Roderick Nash makes this point well. He argues that the environmental movement was about extending American liberalism, the political theory of natural-rights, to nature. While some Christian traditions moved more quickly to support this notion, others, especially conservative or fundamentalist denominations resisted either because they viewed the “new theology” as heresy or because they distrusted “this world” as a result of their belief in pre-millennial dispensationalism (*The Rights of Nature: A History of Environmental Ethics* [Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989]).
13. It is telling, for example, that in the introduction to almost every book there is a reference to Lynn White and his thesis about the history of the Christian church and then a statement that somehow the book written deviates from that tradition or is a new interpretation of Christian doctrine. Of course there is the exception and books after the mid-1980s tried to underscore the Christian tradition but few detailed its history. For example, Ian Bradley, Minister in the Church of Scotland, writes: “greening Christianity does not involve grafting on to it some alien philosophy but simply restoring its original character” (*God is Green: Ecology for Christians* [New York: Image Books, 1990], 7).
14. J.K. Sheldon, “Twenty-One Years after ‘The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis’: How Has the Church Responded?” *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith: Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation* 41, No. 3 (1989): 152-158.
15. See Sheldon, *Rediscovery of Creation*, 30, for bibliographic citations of conference proceedings.
16. George M. Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991).
17. White, “Historical Roots,” 1207.
18. Roderick F. Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 1967).

19. Nash, *The Rights of Nature*, 91-92.
20. Donald Worster, "John Muir and the Roots of American Environmentalism" in *The Wealth of Nature: Environmental History and the Ecological Imagination*, ed. Donald Worster (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 185.
21. Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (New York: Vintage Books, 1950); Patricia Limerick Nelson, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: Norton, 1987); and Richard White, *It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own: A New History of the American West* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).
22. Loren Wilkinson, ed., *Earthkeeping: Christian Stewardship of Natural Resources* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980); and Calvin DeWitt, *Caring for Creation: Responsible Stewardship of God's Handiwork* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998).
23. William Cronon, ed., *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature* (New York: Norton, 1995).
24. Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 1996).
25. As Lynn White, Jr. discovered in his attempts to bring St. Francis of Assisi into the twentieth century taking actors and ideas out of their historical context is extremely problematic. This is lucidly analyzed by Roger D. Sorrel in *St. Francis of Assisi and Nature: Tradition and Innovation in Western Christian Attitudes Towards the Environment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988). White's characterization of St. Francis as the patron saint of nature in the modern sense is largely false. Sorrel states; "Francis himself never used the term *natura*, and this lack is revealing in a saint who is often portrayed as a "lover of nature." Francis instead talks of the "heavens," "earth," and "the world," and "all creatures which are under the heavens." The terms – and indeed, his whole outlook – arise not from a modern concept of nature as the intricate array of scientific laws governing the universe, or the personification of these laws . . . instead the biblical literature Francis draws on . . . asserts the belief in a divine creation, organized according to a plan that is hierarchical and unchanging, with all parts having their established positions and dependent on divine will and action. This was the most fundamental basis for Francis' conception of the natural world.
26. Mark Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992).

27. Two important works on this include P.N. Joranson and K. Butigan, eds., *Cry of the Environment: Rebuilding the Christian Creation Tradition* (Santa Fe, NM: Bear & Co., 1984), which argued that Christian traditions needed to be “rebuilt;” and P. Santmire, *The Travail of Nature: The Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christian Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), which argues that the notion of “nature” is undergoing a transformation, not Christian thought. For a good overview of the problem of faith and the environment see Ernest L. Fortin, “The Bible Made Me Do It: Christianity, Science and the Environment,” in *Human Rights, Virtue, and the Common Good: Untimely Meditations on Religion and Politics*, ed. J. Brian Benestad (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.), 111-133.
28. Andrew Lindzey, *Animal Theology* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995); and Rod Preece, *Animals and Nature: Cultural Myths, Cultural Realities* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1999).
29. Wendell Berry, “The Gift of Good Land,” *Sierra* 64 (November/December 1979): 20-26.
30. Susan Sheets-Pyenson, *John William Dawson: Faith, Hope and Science* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1996).
31. The environmental movement has made a hero of Muir. The themes and concepts expressed in his writing have made him out to be less a Christian seeking to address the man-nature dichotomy in his faith and more a disciple of “untutored Buddhism.” For an interesting alternative exploration of Muir’s faith see R.C. Austin, *Baptized Into Wilderness: A Christian Perspective on John Muir* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1987).
32. Nash, *Rights of Nature*, 97.

