

Religion and the Environment

An Introduction

The Legacy of Lynn White, Jr.

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[1] Reflection on the relationship of religion and the environment is not new. Indeed, the earliest evidences of religion attest to the ubiquitous human concern for reproduction and fertility – human, animal, and of the field. And so, talismans were fashioned and offerings were made to ensure that the environment was conducive to life.

[2] In the biblical religion, which has shaped so much of Western values and thought, religion and the environment were integrally related, as we would expect in an agrarian society. The ancient Israelites viewed the condition of the natural world as a barometer of their relationship to God. The biblical laws, for example, are tied to the environment. If the Israelites keep the laws of God, then God will “bless [them] in the land” and “make [them] abound in prosperity, in the fruit of [their] womb, in the fruit of [their] livestock, in the fruit of [their] ground in the land” (Deuteronomy 28:8, 11). If the Israelites do not obey the commandments of God, however, then the “sky over [their] head shall be bronze, and the earth under [them] iron. The LORD will change the rain of [their] land into powder, and only dust shall come down upon [them] from the sky until [they] are destroyed” (Deuteronomy 28:23-24). Furthermore, in the prophetic pronouncements, the condition of the environment is linked not only to the Israelites’ moral behavior but also to God’s beneficence. When God redeems Israel from oppression by all the surrounding nations, God will also transform the natural world, restoring it to its created condition before it was polluted by human sin.

[3] Similarly, with the advent of Christianity, the new hope of bodily resurrection included also a transformation of the rest of creation (see Romans 8:19-21). Redemption of the natural, human body is part and parcel of the redemption of the entire creation. And although Greek idealism and Gnostic dualism threatened to sever the relationship between religion and the environment in Christianity, the theological voice of the environment was never lost. It emerges in nascent tones in the theology of Irenaeus and Augustine and in full symphony in the teaching of Francis of Assisi, though, admittedly, its voice goes unheard in much of the Christian tradition (see Santmire).

[4] What is new about reflection on religion and the environment today is not that they stand in relationship to one another but in the formulation of their relationship – and this is the legacy of Lynn White, Jr. In 1967, Lynn White, a historian of medieval history, wrote a brief essay linking our current technological exploitation (and abuse) of the natural world with the biblical religion. According to White, Christianity provided the conditions for the democratic fusion of science and technology that enables us to alter our environment radically and permanently. What were these conditions? Again, according to White, Christianity had desacralized and demystified nature: “By destroying pagan animism, Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects” (1205). The anthropocentrism of the biblical tradition and Christianity placed humans at the center of creation, separating man from nature, and insisting that “it is God’s will that man exploit nature for his proper ends” (1205).

[5] Although his arguments were not wholly new, White’s essay has been accepted, reprinted, and preached as gospel by innumerable environmental advocates (see Derr). White has not been without his critics, whether it be biblical scholars who criticize his interpretation of the Genesis creation story (Trible; Barr; Anderson), historians who challenge his thesis that modern science and technology is rooted in the Christian worldview (Sessions), or others who note that environmental destruction is not limited to the Christian West (DuBos; Hughes; Tuan). Nevertheless, his seminal essay has transformed reflection on religion and the environment. Prior to White, the relationship of religion and the environment was generally not problematic. Some religions were more explicitly focused on the natural world, whereas others, such as Judaism and Christianity, had a more historical focus, though connections to the environment were also recognized. After White’s essay, however, the relationship between religion and the environment became problematic. On the one hand, religions were mined for their contributions to the public dialogue regarding the environmental crisis, and, on the other hand, a religion’s relationship to the environment became the basis for both assessing its continuing value and rethinking its fundamental doctrines. Indeed, some have even argued that only environmentally friendly religions – “green” religions – will have a future in human society (Taylor).

[6] Can religion contribute to a better, more ecologically balanced environment? Lynn White thought so and recommended the teachings of St. Francis of Assisi, whom he dubbed the patron saint for ecologists. Others are less sure, noting the lack of correlation between religious ideals and actual environmental practices (see Tuan; Sherkat and Ellison). What is certain is that humans are at the center of the environmental crisis – it is *our* activities that are unsustainable and damaging the environment – and that humans, for better or worse, are shaped in part by their religious convictions. And although humans are also shaped by

economic, political, and social factors, religion has the potential, at least, to focus human concern and action beyond the self to serve a greater good. The preservation of an environment suitable for the flourishing of human and other life is such a good.

[7] In the present volume, eleven scholars address the relationship of religion and the environment from diverse methodological and disciplinary perspectives. The papers were originally presented at “Religion and the Environment,” a symposium sponsored by the Kripke Center at Creighton University on October 25-26, 2007. Forty years after writing his seminal essay, the legacy of Lynn White, Jr. continues. Recognizing the problematic of religion and the environment, the essays in this volume offer distinct ways in which religion can contribute to the betterment of the environment.

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