

Christianity and the ecological crisis

Dr Andy Letcher





723CE St Boniface cuts down Donar's Oak at
Gaesmere

What is the relationship between ecology and religion/spirituality?

Environment ➡ Religion

Climate

Seasonality

Terrain

Flora

Fauna

Environment ➡ Religion

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Environment Religion

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Religion ➡ Environment

Cosmology

Diet

Sacred places – hierophany, topophilia

Religion ➡ Environment

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Religion ➡ Environment

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Sacred places – hierophany, topophilia

Is this relationship deterministic?

Religion  Environment

Why would we think this?

The Lynn White Hypothesis

- Lynn White (1907-1987)
- Professor of medieval history
- *The Historical root of our present-day ecologic crisis*
1967 *Science*
- medieval Christianity laid the roots of our current crisis



The argument

- Living things modify environment

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- Humans especially so  crisis

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- 19th century: science x technology

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- 19th century: science x technology
- Science begins in Middle Ages



7th Century

“Formerly man had been part of nature; now
he was the exploiter of nature.”

–Lynn White

The argument

- Living things modify environment
- Humans especially so 🖐️ crisis
- 19th century: science x technology
- Science begins in Middle Ages
- Science rooted in Western Christianity

Christianity

1. Grants Man dominion over nature



“Especially in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen.”

–Lynn White

Christianity

1. Grants Man dominion over nature
2. Indifference to feelings of natural objects





“In Antiquity every tree, every spring, every stream, every hill had its own genius loci, its guardian spirit.”

“The victory of Christianity over paganism was the greatest psychic revolution in the history of our culture.”

Christianity

1. Grants Man dominion over nature
2. Indifference to feelings of natural objects
3. Natural theology in West leads to science

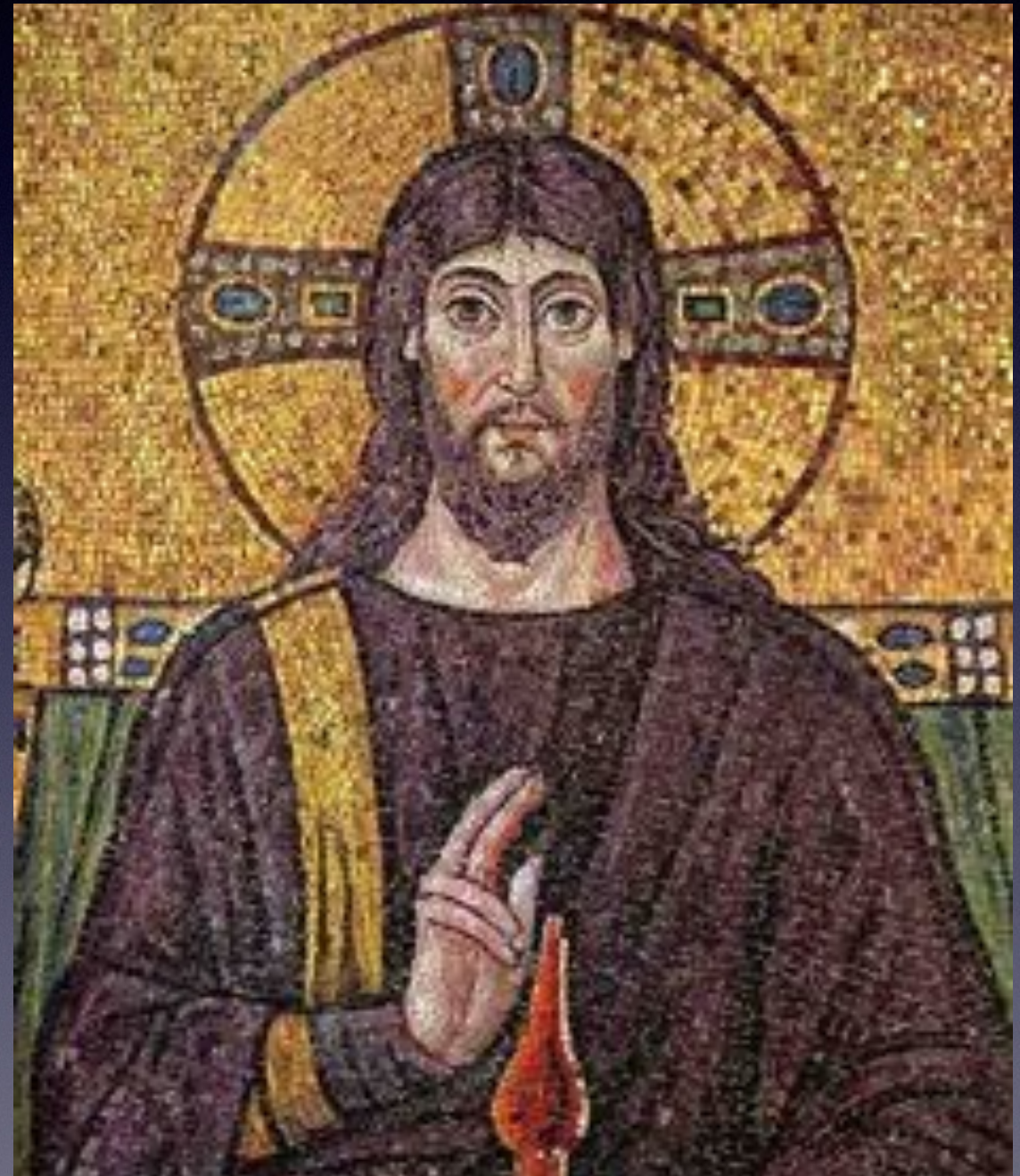


Natural theology

- nature is a symbolic system through which God speaks

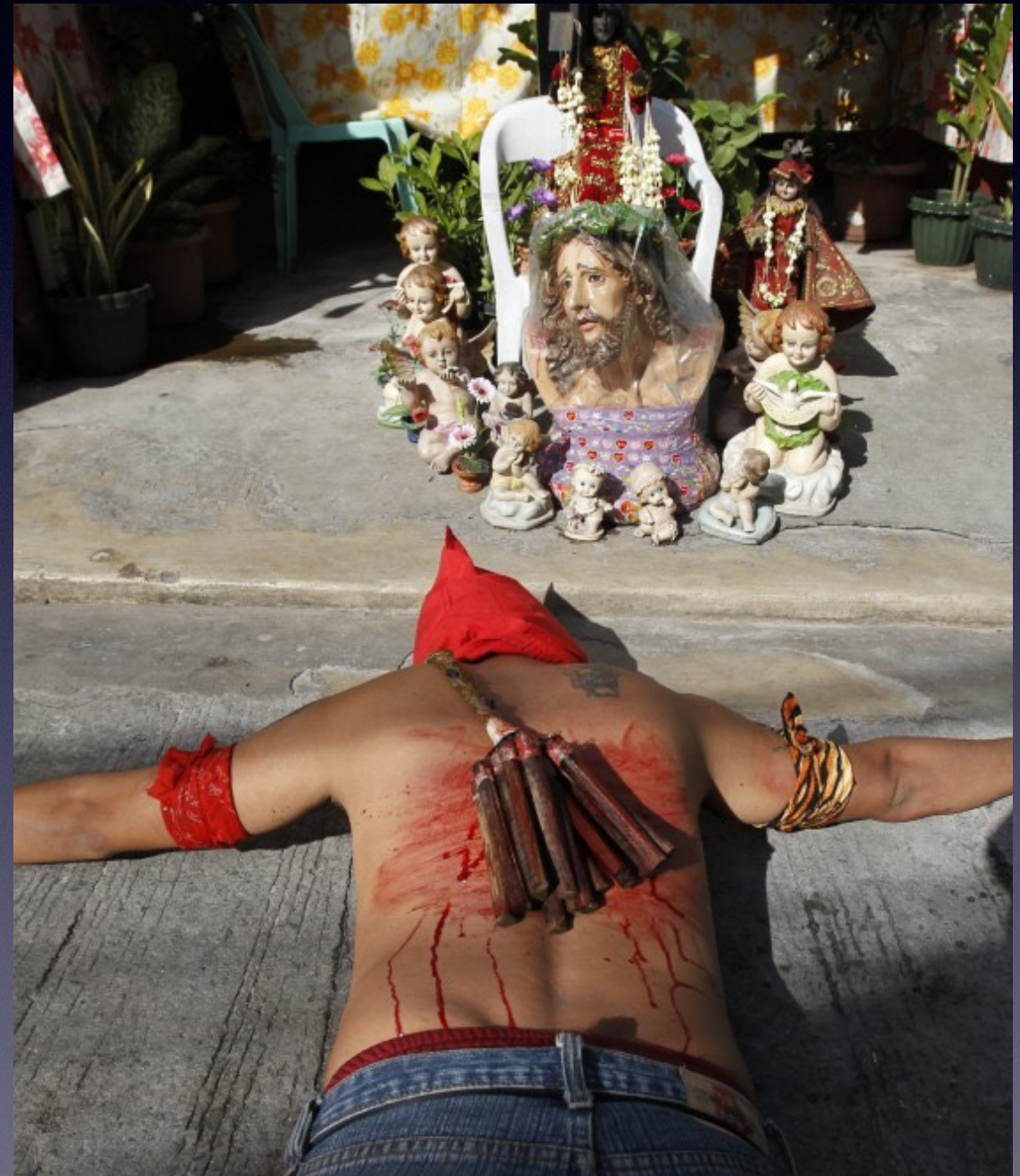
In the East

- Sin is intellectual blindness
- Natural theology requires contemplation



In the West

- Sin is moral weakness
- Natural theology requires action
- Understand God's mind by seeing how his creation works



The argument

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The argument

- Living things modify environment
- Humans especially so  crisis
- 19th century: science x technology
- Science begins in Middle Ages
- Science comes from natural theology
- Technology realises Man's mastery of nature

“Since the roots of our trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious.”

ALAN W. WATTS

Beat Zen Square Zen and ZEN



NESS	SPARKS	WEEK ENDING	SCINTILLANCE
POUSNESS	SUNBEAM	SUNSET	SOFT RADIANCE
VCY	SHINE	SHINE	SEAL OIL LAMP
	SCINTILLATE		SUPERNOVA
N			Z
9			JOKERS
NOON	INCA		ZODIACAL
LIGHT	CE		LIGHT
NORTHERN	IGN		ZIRCON
LIGHTS	FAT		LIGHT
NIGHT	INFR		ZINCZ
LIGHT	LIS		LIGHT
NAPALM	INCA		SPARK
FLAME	LAMP		
NEW	ILLUM		SPARK
LIGHT			IGNITER
NEEDS	IRRA		SUNBEAM
LIGHT			
NATURAL	ICE		SUNSET
LIGHT	LIS		
NORTH	IGN		SHINE
LIGHT	LIS		
NAPATHA	IGN		SUNRISE
LAMP	LIGHT		
NITRO	ILLU		STAR
LAMP	TI		LIGHT

Jackson Mac Low

Thing of Beauty

New and Selected Works

Edited by Anne Tardos

ALLEN GINSBERG SELECTED POEMS 1947-1995

"The new generation
reading *Selected Poems*
will find... that Ginsberg's
"Knox Field of Language"
will create a powerful
imaginative presence."
—William S. Vassler,
The New Yorker



Jack Kerouac



Satori in

SELECTED WRITINGS OF D. T. SUZUKI

ZEN BUDDHISM



EDITED BY WILLIAM BARRETT

anniversary edition

Gary Snyder
rap
and Cold Mountain Poems





Counter arguments

The World religions argument

- Environmental devastation occurs in non-Christian cultures

Dislocation

- Agriculture
- Agricultural revolution/enclosures
- Literacy/printing press
- Industrialisation
- Urbanisation
- Virtualisation

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Philosophical atomism – Freya Matthews

- Newtonian atomism ➡ individualism, egoism, competition

Stereotypes

- White caricatures
Christianity and paganism
- ignores vernacular
religion: seasonal ritual,
pilgrimage



Christian responses

after Bron Taylor

1) Indifferent/hostile

- Usually theologically conservative
- Ecology a distraction from religious priorities
- Idolatry: worshipping creation not creator

2) Apologetic

- If properly understood, Christianity is environmentally friendly

The stewardship argument

- Genesis actually contains two creation stories
- In the second, humans are given *stewardship* over nature

3) Confessional/reconstructive

- aim to reform traditions



March 2013

Bron Taylor

- World religions are sluggish to respond to ecologic crisis
- May even be impediment
- Nonetheless there are Green Christian responses



