

Is the historian Lynn White correct in attributing the roots of our ecological crisis to Christianity?

The article *The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis*, published in 1967 in Science magazine by Lynn White (1907-1987) posed a new set of questions to enquire the History scholarship; when, where or with what effects man-induced changes in environment come from? Inevitably, Lynn's enquire and his article affected many other disciplines beyond that of History, to the extent that fifty years later scholars from numerous disciplines are still referencing and debating the assertions White made in that article.

Lynn White was a medieval historian who, through studying the technology in the medieval period, traced the presuppositions that underlie western civilization's way of thinking and its impact on the history of ecologic change through modern technology and science. The principal conclusion he arrived at was that Christianity lay at the roots of the modern ecological crisis.

Inspired by Aldous Huxley's worry concerning 'Man's unnatural treatment of nature and its sad results', White's argument starts from the assumption that 'all forms of life modify their contexts' (White 1967: 1203). He subsequently notices that human beings, in particular, have especially affected their environment to a point of reaching an ecological crisis affecting nonhuman nature too.

White's understanding of history leads him to focus on the marriage between science and technology as a pattern of action that paved the way for how mankind has related to nature under the Baconian assumption of 'scientific knowledge means technological power over nature' (White 1967: 1203).

By tracing the developments and leadership of Western technology and science, White established that their dominance dates back to much older than the Scientific or Industrial Revolutions of the 17th and 18th centuries. He dates the beginning of Western science in the Middle Ages or late 11th century. Therefore, White contends that we must pay attention to some of the fundamental medieval assumptions concerning man and nature. These include, for instance, the technology or agricultural methods that started to be used in northern Europe in the 7th century, which changed man's relation to the soil profoundly: 'Formerly man had been part of nature; now he was the exploiter of nature' (White 1967: 1205). For White this seemed to be in harmony with larger intellectual patterns as we are going to see.

Convinced that 'Human ecology [or environmental practices] is deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny –that is, by religion' (White 1967: 1205), White saw the victory of Christianity over paganism as a turning point in the narrative of how Western societies see and think about themselves in relation to things around them, this is, their ecology or their environmental behaviours. White points out, first, that the Christian narrative awarded the monopoly of the spirit to man, dispossessing natural objects of their spirit and allowing the

exploitation of them with indifference. And second, he argues, Christianity (inherited from Judaism) impregnated the daily life – and the science and technology – with a strong faith in perpetual progress, a linear conception of time, as well as with the figure of a creator all-powerful God who had planned everything in the world for man's purposes. Against this backdrop, we can see the relevance of one of White's most repeated assertions: 'Especially in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen' (White 1967: 1205).

In addition, White traced a connection between modern Western science and Christian theology, being the first one an extrapolation of natural theology, which was the interpretation of God's communications with man through nature. This conceives nature and man as dualistic and separate realities; moreover, man is nature's master because man is able to 'understand God's mind by discovering how his creation operates' (White 1967: 1206). Which also leads to perpetuate the mastery and right of man's transcendence over nature and shows the pattern on how modern science was modelled. Herein resides White's attribution of Christianity as the roots of the ecological crisis.

For White, science and technology are so intertwined in the ethos of the Christian tradition and attitudes toward man's relation to nature that no solution or satisfactory answer to the ecological crisis can originate in them. Rather, only with a new religion or a rethink of our old one. White thus asserts that: 'since the roots of our trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious, whether we call it that or not' (White 1967: 1207). As White does not consider other religions such as Zen Buddhism, which posit a different relationship man-nature, to be a viable option for Western man due to them not having been part of the West's historical experience, he outlines an alternative Christian view of nature and man's relation to it, not a new one but a proposal that has been already taught and practiced by Saint Francis of Assisi. In this vision, there is a spiritual autonomy of all parts, animate and inanimate, with all of nature being equally God's creatures. White ends his article by proposing Francis as a patron saint for ecologists.

Given the range of responses to White's paper from different fields – professional historians, philosophers of technology, environmentalists, conventional Christian voices or religious scholars –, it is clear that the ideas of White opened a new discussion about the relationship and connection between religion and the attitudes toward nature, making it an important and relevant question as well as more visible and present. No scholar before him had quite so strongly associated Christianity with the birth of Western science and technology, though others had suggested earlier some causal links, for instance Max Weber, Robert Forbes and Ernst Benz (Taylor 2005). Furthermore, White established that those connections would have promoted the anthropocentric and dualistic views that have been the cause of the environmentally destructive behaviours.

Let us consider now in more detail what has been happening around the main claims he made since then. From one side the interpretations of pro-environmental attitudes in religious traditions, particularly in the Judeo-Christian one but also others. And from other side the

possibility of the world's religions becoming more environmentally friendly, in particular again in the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Some of White's responses and critics are those coming from ecotheologians, pointing out that the Judeo-Christian tradition in fact proclaims man to be the guardians of nature, not its despoilers. These critics, however, are still in agreement with White's thesis of religion being the most powerful ethical base for environmentalist attitudes. An example of this can be the Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato si* of 2015 in which the anthropocentrism of Christianity is accepted, but which makes clear that the moral value and dignity of man is tied to its role of protector of the divine order. Others voices within religious fields have noted that environmental devastations occurred also in non-Western and pre-Christian cultures, which would weaken the thesis that Christianity's condoning of the exploitative approach to nature is a unique or main cause behind environmental destruction (Taylor 2005).

There have been many other voices that have found Western religions to be responsible for environmentally destructive tendencies through its anthropocentric worldviews. In the 20th century, Aldo Leopold (1949) and Rachel Carson (1962) are two particularly prominent examples. Both would like to see humanity (re) take a more modest place within the order and belonging within nature, this is, an understanding of the ecological interdependence, which includes the respect and kinship feelings with the non-human organisms too. We see then, that during the last decades of the 20th century the link between anthropocentric religions – this is not only Christianity but also all Abrahamic religions – and environmentally destructive attitudes and behaviours has been discussed and demonstrated by different voices. Bron Taylor grouped all these voices that argue similarly to Leopold and Carson under the term 'dark green religion', being the common definition of all of them as a spirituality of ecological interdependence with emotions and science based perceptions that lead to kinship feelings towards the animate and inanimate organisms (Taylor 2010).

Other important voices in line with White's assertions were those who turned to Oriental and indigenous traditions, as well as pagan cultures, which were considered more ecologically oriented than those of the Western tradition. Among these voices are Ernest Friedrich Schumacher and his 'Buddhist Economics' (1973), Gary Snyder with his poetry that mixes indigenous cultures and Zen Buddhism (1969), and Arnold Toynbee and his enquiry for pantheist traditions (1972). These diverse thinkers have done important work preparing the ground for fields that have emerged since, including the environmental ethics as a philosophical discipline after the 'Rights of Nature' Conference in Southern California, the term and movement 'deep ecology' of the Norwegian philosopher and mountaineer Arne Naess (1973), and the 'Traditional Ecological Knowledge' that anthropologists and ethnobiologists have been studying to promote more sustainable societies (Taylor 2016a).

What is interesting is that notwithstanding all the differences between the ideas, the similarities between the new tide of ideas are extremely significant, and have gained strength and consensus in the world of environmentalists, scientists, religionists and activists. The wanting to promote environmental concerns and actions about it, as to join

collaborations between religionists, conservationists and institutions, has been increasing in the last decades. As Taylor argues, the dialogue and meeting between religion and the environment at Assisi – where leaders from the largest religious traditions participated – or the establishment of the Alliance for Religion and Conservations (ARC) are good examples of this growing ferment that White anticipated in his article (Taylor 2016a).

More recently, in light of the advanced stage of the global warming alarm and the efforts made by a new generation of scholars and religionists, there are strong movements towards prioritising the religious – and scientific – duty of environmental protection. The emergence of ‘Religion and Ecology’ as an academic field and the inception of the ‘New Ecumenical, Religious Movement’ (Taylor 2016a: 292), exploring the wisdom inherent in different traditions that can bring about more positive ecological understanding and practices, can be seen as the fruit – and future seeds – stemming from White’s work fifty years ago. These efforts respond to the work of Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim and others on ‘greening the world religions [...] by fusing [...] with scientific narratives of cosmological and biological evolution’ (Taylor 2016a: 293).

Other voices of the now well-established field of religion and the environment are Roger Gottlieb (2006, 2010) and Susan Bratton (2006), and of course, the already cited Bron Tylor.

In the following and in order to conclude, I would like to expand on two main lines of thinking that remain with me after having read White’s article and the posterior ideas claimed around the same trail until the present moment.

Firstly, it seems important to clarify on not simplifying White’s hypothesis into “Christianity represents the roots of our environmental crisis”. Instead, we should focus on the broader assertion of “framed worldviews shaping environmental behaviours”. By looking at the history as White presented, the narrative of worldviews has been framed by religion most of the time, in particular Christianity –and Abrahamic traditions– with the anthropocentric worldviews of the Western tradition having since been globalized as the hegemonic narrative. This worldview has shaped environmental behaviours that are directly responsible for the environmental decline and ecological crisis of our society. That is to say that for White, Christianity is associated with science and technology and therefore in environmental attitudes as Christian religious perspectives were permeated in every dimension of human life in medieval and later people.

Secondly, taking by demonstrated the hypothesis that Abrahamic religions promoted environmentally destructive beliefs and behaviours, I would like to put the focus and current importance on the relevance of the hypothesis that claims “Human ecology [or environmental practices] is deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny – that is, by religion’ (White 1967: 1205) followed by ‘Since the roots of our trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious, whether we call it that or not’ (White 1967: 1207). By putting the emphasis on ‘whether we call it that or not’ is an important field opened since White wrote his article and that still speaks in great fervour today. In other words, it remains to discuss the possible role of religion – or spirituality – to inspire environmental values and behaviours for our current societies and its crisis. This also takes

into consideration and places the debate on the view that values are the most effective antidote to environmental degradation over politics or economics.

From one side, the modern ecological crisis (of unprecedented scale of catastrophes) is the main challenge humankind face in the 21st century. Small doubts are held on the impact of human-induced climate change and the urgent need to mitigate this impact. From other side, the legacy of religious belief is essential to appreciate the profound relationship between the natural world and humankind, and nonetheless the current reflection happening in recent decades to discern what, if anything at all, this field might be able to offer.

As White anticipated, this concern by scholars and religious correspond to the massive influence religion continues to exert worldwide today, therefore what have said or purported to say – the religion – cannot be ignored or undervalued.

Many scholars and religious are participating in this field that works on creating a universal secular ethics framework, from which everyone from all the different traditions and individualistic experiences can adopt. A form of spirituality that everyone can embrace from the perspective of putting life – and therefore nature as a source of life – in the center. This is also the reason why Schumacher College offers a postgraduate masters program on “Ecology and Spirituality”, and the reason why my colleagues and myself have chosen the relevance on coursing and deepening on such an actual and vivid debate.

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