

Assessment Component 1 – Catherine Lewis

MA Ecology and Spirituality

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

Introduction

Historian Lynn White's accusations against his own faith, regarding the religion's role in the demise of our planet's health, have had a significant impact on Christianity. This essay will take up some of the themes from White's multi-faceted arguments, exploring them in their historical contexts. From this assessment I will argue that Christianity as a belief system is not inherently the cause of our destructive behaviour on earth as White claims, but simply an instrument that humans can use for their own purposes. To understand the role of Christianity within our planetary crisis I focus on the historical interpretations of Christian doctrine to demonstrate that man has used this belief system as a tool just as science and technology are tools. These devices can function for the good of our planet or for destructive purposes and it is up to us as humans to decide how best to proceed.

In 1967 a provocative article related to religion and the environment was published by medieval historian Lynn White: *The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis*. White argued that the demise of animistic, pagan beliefs in Europe, as Christianity became the dominant religion, paved the way for human supremacy over nature. He claimed that Christianity being the most anthropocentric religion, is to blame for introducing ideas leading to the scientific and technological revolutions which ultimately permitted western culture to view nature as a resource for humanity's 'benefit and rule'(1967: 1205).

White's description of the environmental predicament in the 1960s coincided with analogous calls for action, such as Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring*, (1962) and the voice of philosopher, Aldous Huxley in White's article, notes the 'sad results' of 'man's treatment of nature' (1203). White accepts that progress is inevitable and that all living beings 'modify their contexts' enabling life to thrive, however it is also clear that this alters the local ecology and his article centres around the drastic increase in human impact on the environment over the centuries. White's words were a prophecy for our time; he highlights urbanisation, modern warfare, dependency on fossil fuels, rubbish disposal and over population as key aspects of the global problem long before these ideas became a concern in the mainstream (WWF 2016).

In searching for the roots of this crisis White tracks the problem back via western science and new technologies until he reaches religion. He instructs the reader to research the historical foundations of modern technology and science, claiming that Sir Francis Bacon's belief 'scientific knowledge means technological power over nature' (White 1967: 1204) became commonplace from 1850. From this point in history White believes that our impact on the earth 'changed in essence' (1967: 1204). He claimed our scientific outlook was rooted in the Western understanding of Judeo-Christian ethics and thus Christianity is the cause of our ecological crisis.

White suggests that although scientific knowledge is inherited from many cultures, modern technology and science are distinctly western in character and originate from before the Scientific or Industrial Revolutions which aided Europe's superiority globally in the guise of colonialism. He asserts that to understand the grip of science and technology on modern life we need to explore the medieval mind-set where it first started operating. If, as White wrote, an essential change took place during the nineteenth century then an exploration of this period's mind-set regarding the medieval relationship between church and science is also necessary. Historians differ in their opinion on the supportive role Christianity played in the development of science during the medieval period. Science historian David C Lindberg (1995) writes about this relationship explaining that for many centuries opinion was split. Christian dogma being blamed 'for the dismal state of medieval science' but conversely the medieval church was seen by some as 'a vital participant in the emergence of modern science' (Lindberg 1995: 67). Scientific theories and practices were not studied in isolation or autonomous to Christian theology during the early modern era but this was not the only philosophy having an impact on scientists. Lindberg argues that there was 'a complex amalgam to which Christian theology, the classical tradition, various medieval institutions, and many other cultural traditions and social forces all contributed' (1995: 79).

Culturally, the early European scientific tradition was shaped by the Renaissance and the Reformation. Counteracting these developments was the fear instilled by the Inquisition. Proponents of the scientific movement needed to carefully align their work with Christian beliefs and feared the consequences if they were found heretical, for example the censoring by the church of Nicolaus Copernicus and Galileo Galilei's work. Undoubtedly, the omnipotence of the church at this time often prevented scientists from disentangling their profession from their beliefs. Potentially, there was less fear in Protestant countries for Sir Isaac Newton in England, although described as 'an acute and learned theologian' (Austin 1970: 521), when discussing the relationship between the natural sciences and Christianity believed they are 'to be preserved distinct' (Austin 1970: 532). It is hard to decipher true faith from scientific motivation and if according to White, the development of science and technology is part of the root cause of our ecological crisis, we cannot wholly attribute methodologies in this field to Christianity; as Lindberg (1995) clarifies there were many forces at work when science was being developed and scientists were not always driven or encouraged by religious ideology.

The Enlightenment period then leads Europe towards a culture of modernity focussing on progress, reason, the individual, scientific knowledge and secularism (Swilling & Annecke 2012). This progress required extensive extraction of natural resources and White concludes that the justification for using and polluting nature for economic growth comes directly from the Bible. White specifically targets the opening chapters of the Bible as a catalyst for this attitude of domination over nature still at large today. He believed that words from the Book of Genesis, known as the 'dominion mandate' (Isaacs 2013), have lead man to exploit nature 'for his proper ends' (White 1967: 1205) establishing a duality between humans and the environment. White contrasts western Christianity with paganism, and Asian religions explaining that our 'faith in perpetual progress' (1967: 1205) was unknown in other belief systems and is integral to Judeo-Christian belief.

White was a Christian and did not abandon his religion but wanted Christianity to be radically adapted. In the decades following his essay Christianity has indeed responded. Published in 2008, The Green Bible proclaims Christianity's environmental legacy with textual examples and the Bible is described as a 'powerful ecological handbook on how to live rightly on earth' (Dewitt 2008: 25). Language in Genesis such as 'subdue, dominion, till, keep' has been translated from Hebrew and could have a range of meanings. Hence to support the notion that Christianity is an ecologically

sound religion, 'dominion' is described as 'stewardship' suggesting that humans are responsible for all that God has created rather than the abusers of our planet. Clearly, how we translate and manipulate the language of these ancient texts creates subjective views of the belief system. The book of Genesis is considered the work of various writers (Fretheim 2005) thus semantics and translation can be argued. The dualistic belief that humans are above nature can be drawn from certain passages of the Bible but equally compassion and respect for our natural world is also evident.

White mentions the culture of saints as the Christian church's attempt to replace animism but surmises that veneration of unearthly, human figures does not maintain our spiritual connection with nature. Conversely, he gave the example of St Francis of Assisi as a potential saint for ecologists noting that this monk, inspired by Jesus, worshipped a God who stood for humans and animals (White 1967). Indeed, a number of prominent Christian mystics from the Middle Ages demonstrated respect for our planet and an understanding of our dependency on all life. For example, Hildegard von Bingen's prophetic words; 'If we injure the earth we will destroy all life including our own' (1170-1173). It is important to consider why one version of Christian belief has dominated a gentler more humane interpretation such as that of St Francis. A key moment in Britain for establishing the Christian domination White condemns was at the Synod of Whitby in 664 A.D. Celtic Christianity was prominent in parts of the British Isles in the Early Middle Ages (Diemel 2011), compassionately celebrating nature, evident in manuscripts created from this denomination such as the Lindisfarne gospels (715-720 A.D.). The Celtic Christian form of worship closely aligned with pagan ways in existence before conversion and allowed individuals to find their own path to God. It honoured the spirituality of the land and employed male and female religious leaders. The outcome of the Synod of Whitby was a key spiritual conquest in Britain, as a decision was made to marginalise Celtic styles of worship in favour of the Roman approach to Christian belief, ensuring Europe held a united front and was under the control of Rome (Wormald 2006).

A closer look at Christianity's sacred text, the Bible, elicits nature and earth as common motifs. The land of Israel, for instance, is a prominent character in the Old Testament. As Theodore Hiebert purports (1995) the Bible focusses on the human experience but nature is integral to this existence. Central to Christian understanding is the belief that to reach God a follower must follow Jesus. 'I am the Way, I am the Truth and Life' (John 14: 6-10). Jesus's core teachings are of love and forgiveness and reveal a deep respect for nature (Matthew 10:16, Matthew 6: 25-34). Christianity originated in an agrarian society and nature has an integral connection in the sacraments with the Eucharist of wheat and wine manifesting as God. Jesus' parables demonstrate a way of life connected to planting, shepherding and fishing. A simple, unostentatious world set in Galilee where evidence of the precursors for our ecological crisis is not obvious.

Christianity originates from Roman Palestine where the population was predominantly village peasants (Hiebert 1995). Early Christianity moved from a rural to an urban context but people in the city in this era were not isolated from nature. The New Testament regularly describes the deep connection between people and the environment where wild places offer transformative, spiritual experiences (Grenfell-Lee 2018). Nonetheless, descriptions of the destruction of the earth in the book of Revelations present firm support for White's argument and create much debate for scholars when searching for signs of environmentalism. Furthermore, the eschatological text 2 Peter 3 has been described as 'the most ecologically problematic chapter in the entire New Testament' (Rossing 2008). There have been attempts to explain the divine devastation described in these parts of the New Testament as transformative or purifying and that they should not be taken literally. As Rossing (2008) explains the 'end' described in Revelations and 2 Peter 3 outlines two different apocalyptic

perspectives. In Peter there is an end to the world as we know it and in Revelations, scripture is describing an end to the Roman Empire. Rossing (2008) parallels this with the 'end' we are currently experiencing in the changes to our planet due to human consumptions; loss of biodiversity, water shortages and deforestation and clarifies that we need to bring an end to the human causes of these crises in nature. Inevitably, Christians can either understand the end as God's will and a reason to not prioritise the environment, or as an end of one way of life and the beginning of a 'new earth' in which they can co-create, guided by their religion.

The accepted structure of the Bible was agreed at the Council of Nicaea in 325 A.D. leading to many texts being discarded and subsequently suppressed (Leloup 2002). Some of the lost Gospels from early Christian groups were discovered in the late nineteenth and mid twentieth centuries and their writings predate the canonical gospels. If White's view of Christianity is based on Christians taking the word of the Bible literally then it is important to explore the writings omitted from the standards of the Church. By reading these works we can have a fuller idea of Jesus' teachings and consider why in Constantine's time they were abandoned. It has been suggested that the ideas within these texts could alter central tenets of the Christian religion and steer Christianity away from Old Testament understandings (Luttikhuizen 1988) and bring further light to the eschatological texts in the New Testament.

Luttikhuizen (1988: 162) asserts that the Gnostic gospels include revelations that are meant to surpass if not replace the teaching of the 'earthly' Jesus as they are reported after his resurrection. The writings emphasise that even the apostles of Jesus were without 'gnosis' or inner wisdom (1988: 159) and that the final revelations are to come through Mary Magdalene (1988: 164). The metaphysical elucidations in these gospels shed new light on how Christians can interpret eschatological meaning in the Bible (Leloup 2002) but such texts were not chosen to be included in the Bible and those who continued to practice gnostic ideals were suppressed, often violently. (Leloup preface). Subjugation of these ideas perhaps stems from Constantine's need to run his Empire, and indeed those in power who have followed. The fact that Mary Magdalene was female and that her character and morals were questioned and tarnished by the church also demonstrates that the gnostic gospels portray women in a role which is not consistent with the treatment of women throughout the centuries. Throughout history Christian ideology has been moulded to suit the growth of civilisation, power and war, particularly in the West. Equally the core Christian teachings of love and forgiveness have brought much solace, relief and healing to parts of the world. Rather than blame the Christian faith as the root cause of either our ecological challenges I suggest we look to the way Christianity has been interpreted.

While I do not agree that Christianity is the root cause of our ecological crisis, White's accusations shed an important light on human behaviour and have initiated new interdisciplinary fields of study to protect our planet (Riley 2012). A central premise of White's views is that Christianity itself can assist in solving the problems we face but as I have explored in this essay, it is a question of how Christians interpret the word of God and how they enact their faith. Whether we rule, dominate or subdue nature there is no instance in the Bible where humans are told to destroy it. The earth described in Genesis is full of thriving life; rivers, trees, wildlife. It seems senseless that the creator of such a place would then instruct one of the living beings on the planet to destroy this creation. Humans have always recognised the destruction and suffering they cause and whether they chose to do it in the name of religion or not; it is our choice to take part. The belief system itself is not to blame but the human interpretation of the message.

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2016 Living Planet Report, World Wildlife Fund