

The 'White Thesis' as Trojan Horse in Christian Culture

Marc Grenier

Abstract

This paper attempts to provide an exploratory critique and biblical evaluation of the long-established 'White Thesis' that the Christian faith is largely responsible for the environmental degradation facing modern society. The essay argues that it is not founded upon solid, reliable, and valid scientific evidence but, rather, an ideologically selective and skewed presentation of historical evidence. A brief review of the main theological arguments concludes that White posited his thesis without appealing to the appropriate and readily available theological resources while at the same time making highly suspect and questionable interpretations of biblical passages wholly out of context which he was not at all qualified to make. Further, as a minimum requirement to justify his accusatory claims, White failed to empirically compare the relationship of different faith systems throughout history to the treatment of the environment (Islam, Buddhism, Judaism, etc.) as well as other types of politico-economic systems (capitalism, feudalism, etc.) to the physical environment. Consequently, it's quite likely that the 'White Thesis' against Christianity (and capitalism) served the cultural function of providing weaponry to antagonists of both in the struggle to de-Christianize culture under the scholarly guise of making a sound contribution to historical knowledge. The appalling lack of methodological reflexivity goes without saying.

Keywords: ‘White Thesis’; environment; Christianity; theology; ecology; Trojan horse; de-Christianization; culture; capitalism; redemption; stewardship; Genesis; creation doctrine.

Introduction

This essay represents a critical assessment and evaluation of Professor Lynn White’s celebrated article published in the journal *Science* in 1967 (Volume 155: 1203-1207), titled, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis”, the effects of which Christianity has yet to recover from in earnest. As is surely well known by now, this is the brief essay that touched off a firestorm of both popular and scholarly criticism against Christianity as primary cause of the environmental crisis.

To call it scholarly is a misnomer since it was much more of an epistemological and theological argument against Christianity than it was a shining example of scientific scholarly work backed up by unquestionably reliable and valid empirical evidence. Since 1967, the ‘White Thesis’, as it has come to be known farcically, has actually been tested empirically and found to be wanting in most of its central claims, not to mention in its dubious theological arguments and raw misinterpretations and misunderstandings of Christian doctrine in general and the Creation doctrine specifically. In a word, it is anything but authentic biblical scholarship.

Needless to say, the various scholarly and popular antagonists of Christianity inside and outside of America latched on to White’s accusations of Christianity’s destructive ecological impact to push for their long-term ideological agenda, namely, the effective de-Christianization of culture. Critics on the political left of the ideological divide from mass media to Hollywood moguls and starlets to secular professors in Ivy League schools and throughout the upper echelons of higher education in America and around the world employed it steadfastly as a sort of socialist Marxist rallying cry for the overthrow of the capitalist system itself viewed largely as a

deformed and exploitative extension of Christian civilization.

So, then, before we review White's theological claims against Christianity and all the extended damnations that supposedly derive from that central theological complaint regarding politics, economics, and other institutions of Christian culture, it may be a wise academic strategy first to investigate what Christianity actually says about the environment or the ecology (Marxists are heavily represented in the modern ecological movement).

In such a brief presentation, we can't possibly provide a comprehensive overview, analysis, and evaluation of all biblical passages and source materials potentially related to the environment in any sense of that term, a subject about which hundreds if not thousands of publications have thoroughly addressed. In fact, nowhere in the Old Testament or New Testament nor other source materials is reference made to 'environmental' or 'ecological' concerns as contemporarily defined and understood.

However, at least at this initial stage of analysis and discussion, we can introduce enough of the central themes in Christian doctrine that may possibly relate to the natural environment and humanity's relationship to that environment so that we can put White's central damaging claims about Christianity's ecological impact into a somewhat more nuanced and balanced comparative perspective than would otherwise have been the case. Here we are talking about what biblical passages may possibly relate to or have bearing upon our contemporary understanding of what the terms 'environment' or 'ecology' actually mean. Let us begin by going through some of the more relevant biblical references while taking an organic wholistic view of the Bible itself.

Christian Doctrine on the Environment

First, let's talk in general terms, and then we can get down to specifics in terms of biblical passages. I shall first make reference to the traditional Protestant interpretations of relevant passages. Then I shall investigate what the Roman Catholic interpretations look like in order to find relevant biblical references to the environment that might cut across denominational lines.

Generally, then, perhaps most Christians believe that God viewed as Creator assigned human beings with a special cosmic spiritual duty or responsibility within creation. Broadly speaking, Christians must cultivate the environment, and then guard it and use it wisely. This divine assignment is commonly referred to as *stewardship*. This stewardship perspective of humanity's relationship to the God-created environment means that humanity must work within the created order and look after it or take care of it.

This argument goes back to Genesis 2:15 where God took man and first placed him into the Garden of Eden to work it and care for it. In this Garden of Eden, all the needs of human beings were provided for, and they were allowed to use whatever they want from that God-created environment in order to maintain their survival. The Bible notes that God said to humanity everything that lives and moves will be food for you, just as the green plants were given (Genesis 9:3).

However, there seems to be a fairly clear proviso in the Christian doctrine as to how far humanity can go for survival purposes. Since the Earth belongs to God, human beings must respect it as a sacred creation, and at some time in the future return it back to God unspoiled, undefiled. The Earth belongs to the Lord, everything in the world and all that lives within it (Psalm 24:1).

These brief biblical references illustrate very clearly what is the dominant message of the Christian God about the environment

and its relationship to humanity. Basically, the Christian belief is that God is the one who provides for human beings, and in turn human beings are enjoined to show their thankfulness by genuinely taking care of God's gift of sustenance. Along these lines, it's interesting to note here how the Christian Declaration of Nature drawn up at Assisi in 1986 firmly establishes the divine relationship between humanity and nature, notwithstanding critical references to "exploitation":

"All creation, both with and without humans, has a close interdependence which was made in this way by God. This harmony of creation is to the glory of God. Humans have the role of protecting all created things, not abusing or destroying them. All types of exploitation of the world and its resources and its creatures are rejected. Humans must not do anything that risks damage to the world, including nuclear warfare."

This "declaration" was made by all the major world religions regarding the conservation of nature from the point of view of Christianity and faith that emerged from the first inter-religious meeting on nature conservation held in Assisi, Italy in 1986 – Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, and Christianity. The argument here was that nature is God's creation and, as such, created nothing unnecessarily and omitted nothing that is necessary. In other words, there is a divine harmony or order or design even in the mutual opposition of elements within the universe, and human beings should do nothing to disturb that order.

The Environment Through Catholic Lenses

Catholics are clear about biblical insistence upon the integrity of creation as the seventh commandment orders or enjoins steadfast respect for this integrity. Like plants and inanimate entities, animals are by nature destined for the common good of humanity past, present, and future (Gen 1:28-31). Respect

for moral imperatives outlined by Christian doctrine cannot be alienated from the use of animal, mineral, and vegetable resources of the universe.

It is clear that humanity's so-called "dominion" over inanimate and other living beings which is granted by the Creator Himself is NOT absolute nor tyrannical, and nor is it symbolically or otherwise a critique of capitalist "exploitation" of resources or capitalism itself as an economic system. It is not a theological license for careless stewardship of Earth's resources. Rather, it is understandably and rationally limited by concern for our neighbor's quality of life and the generations to come, and it requires a reverent respect for and maintenance of the integrity of creation (CA 37-38).

Like human beings, animals also belong to God. They are God's animals, God's creatures. As such, the Bible argues that God surrounds animals with His providential care and claims that the mere existence of animals gives blessing and glory to God (Mt 6:26; Dan 3:79-81). Therefore, humanity owes animals kindness; humanity is strictly obligated to show kindness to animals (very much in the manner of St. Francis of Assisi or St. Philip Neri).

Genesis (2:19-20/9:1-4) makes clear that God entrusted animals to the stewardship of human beings who were created in His own image. Therefore, it is legitimate to use animals to provide food and to furnish clothing to human beings. It is also legitimate to domesticate them to assist human beings in their work and to provide leisure. If it remains within reasonable limitations and checkpoints and contributes meaningfully to caring for and saving human lives, then medical and scientific experimentations on animals appears to be an acceptable practice (Catechism of the Catholic Church, p. 640).

Most importantly, intentionally or carelessly causing any animals to suffer or die is contrary to human dignity as creatures created in God's image especially since these animals

belong first to God. It is likewise unworthy of human dignity to spend money on animals when the priority should be the relief of human misery. On the other hand, loving animals is a must, but one should not direct to them the kind of loving affection that is first due to human persons when they are in need.

The above statements are the general biblical enjoinders towards God's created universe and all that dwells within it. One can dispute the inferences or implications here and there, supposedly, if one stretches logic and imagination. But it should be clear from these general Christian statements about the environment that "dominion" over everything on the Earth or "subduing" living things on the Earth was never a carte-blanche license to damage the environment and its creatures at all but, rather, to serve them and God as good caring loving stewards of God's creation.

Judeo-Christians Responsible for Ecological Crisis?

Lynn T. White was a professor at UCLA in medieval history and technology. As noted above, in 1967 he published an essay in the journal *Science* titled, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis", a rather misleading title since the entire article is largely a theological argument rather than a purely historical perspective backed by irrefutable empirical evidence. In the oftentimes frenetic debate over the exact nature of the relationship between theology and the environment, this article is one of the most-often cited works by a university scholar. What sparked the great controversy about this relatively brief and almost entirely theological argument lacking any solid empirical verification whatsoever was White's suggestion that Christianity is singlehandedly responsible for the deterioration of the physical environment.

He laid the foundation for his thesis first by addressing the nature of the relationship between human beings and the physical environment. Basically, his thesis adopted the following lines of argument. When the collective of human lives

changes, this causes changes in the physical environment. He pointed out some examples of the damaging environmental effects of some human actions: the use of hydrogen bombs in warfare, the high combustion rates of fossil fuels, the severe air pollution that resulted supposedly from the beginning of industrialization, thereby linking it implicitly and causally to the start of capitalism proper. He asserted without supporting empirical evidence that all of these human actions, and more, have been damaging to the environment in the sense that they have only destructively altered the course of all living things on Earth by degrading the environment, meaning that there have been no non-destructive human actions towards the environment nor benefits to human life.

Why is this the case? White asks. Answer: Our “human ecology is deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny – that is, by religion (p. 1205). In other words, our relationship with nature and the way it is treated by human beings is defined by, determined by, “conditioned by” religion. During the Medieval Ages, he claimed, humanity’s rapacious maltreatment of the environment developed in earnest, and this development occurred precisely at the time that Christianity was the dominant belief system in Europe. Hence the strongly implied causal link between Christianity (however it is defined) and environmental degradation. White claims that during this period of time, agricultural technologies developed that allowed human beings to lose their integral connection as part of nature which, in turn, promoted them to ‘exploit’ it.

So, then, the damaging effect of Christianity on the environment works through a correlation between the spread of Christianity and scientific/technological progress. However, White continues, it is not by coincidence that Christian believers developed technologies that allowed them to exploit the physical environment. The degradation of the non-human world was led by Christian followers because the values of Christianity itself caused them to have an exploitative attitude toward technological development, human beings, and the physical

environment. What's worse, as scientific progress advanced through European colonial conquests, so did Christianity and consequently environmentally exploitative attitudes, values, and beliefs.

Evidently, White didn't care to look at how socialist countries had related to their physical environments in order to provide an adequate comparative basis for his theological claims. Nor did he look at other kinds of political-economic systems throughout history to see if humanity's relationship was comparatively different in any significant ways, such as feudal economies. In other words, his supposedly 'historical' analysis was, in fact, selectively historical.

Before Christianity, White claims, there was a common belief that every component of nature contained its own spirit, the doctrine of pagan animism. At that time, this belief meant that a branch could not be cut off a tree nor an apple from that branch without first making peace with the spirit in that tree, so to speak. Then he claims that this particular view of nature changed when Christianity entered into history and triumphed over paganism, thereby implying, of course, the causal role of Christianity in environmental degradation. In any case, afterwards the notion that elements or pieces of nature contained spirits quickly died out. According to White, this allowed human beings filled with nasty Christian beliefs to use and abuse nature at will without feeling any emotional connection to it or any responsibility towards it.

It goes without saying that there's a question White had to ask and answer in order to arrive at his narrow negative conclusion about Christianity's alleged callous damage over the environment. Precisely why did the Christian faith change the attitudes of human beings toward the physical environment in such a way that it would permit massive unrestrained maltreatment of nature over and over again, assuming that it actually did, of course?

This is where White gets down and dirty with the Christian faith system and engages in highly questionable theological interpretations of biblical texts for which he is wholly unqualified on both religious and secular grounds, let alone scholarly grounds. He identifies many passages in Genesis which he claims can only be interpreted as providing broad Christian support for rapacious human domination over the physical environment on Earth.

He begins with the sequence events of creation in Genesis. His argument is that Genesis demonstrates only the rule of domination over the physical environment because God created first the man, then the woman, and then instructed man to name all the animals. Then after God had created humanity, God instructs: “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish and the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth” (GEN 1:28).

Notwithstanding that the words “subdue” and “dominion” in this Genesis passage must be interpreted biblically from the organic point of view of the Bible itself in its own terms and surely from the perspective of first-century Christians at the very least, White implies that the word “dominion” can only lend itself to a meaning of abusive rule and authority, while the term “subdue” can only lend itself to a meaning of destructive conquering and suppression.

White’s conclusion here is that these Genesis passages prove that Christianity as a system of religious beliefs promotes only the abusive domination of human beings over the physical environment and all nonhuman beings within it. In this rather loose process of careless liberal interpretation without considering alternative competing interpretations and without providing solid irrefutable, valid, and reliable scientific evidence, White condemns Christianity as a faith system devoted to environmental destruction.

As an additional point to confirm his Christianity-destroys-the-environment 'thesis', White asserts that the Christian faith system honors and promotes the unbridled belief that God created everything in the environment, in nature, exclusively for humanity's unlimited or unrestrained benefit and without additional purpose or related purposes. It is in this specific sense that he claims that the Christian faith system is the most anthropomorphic religion or human-centered religion in the world, that is, selfish. So, then, White's claims about Christianity here is essentially twofold. It "established a dualism of man and nature" and it claimed that God instructed mankind to "exploit nature for his proper ends" (p. 1205).

In other words, there is a hierarchy in the created universe envisioned by Christianity which effectively placed human beings above and superior to the physical environment, nature. Worst yet, there is a divine stamp of approval placed upon this hierarchy. It is all of these ideas and beliefs in the Christian faith that have caused the exploitation, abuse, and degradation of the physical environment for many centuries now. In effect, it is the source or 'historical root' of the contemporary ecological disaster.

Given the severity of White's charges against Christianity and the highly significant import of his broad theological claims and implied politico-economic critique, you might think that his Nature article was filled with all kinds of reliable and valid scientifically tested and confirmed empirical evidence to back them up. However, you would be grossly mistaken in making this assumption. Now it's time to look at some of the available scientific evidence that bears on White's assumed causal relationship between Christianity and environmental crisis.

Evaluating White's Religion-Crisis Link

There's plenty of evidence available to soundly and confidently refute White's claims about the Christian-environmental degradation nexus. All of that evidence cannot be fully

presented and assessed in this brief essay, but rest assured that the empirical evidence presented here is representative of a sound negative finding across the board in terms of supporting White's thesis. As such, the argument here is that White's thesis operated more in terms of a cultural Trojan horse than it did as a sound contribution to historical knowledge, ironically enough, coming from an established historian of some repute.

That is, it served the function of providing weaponry to antagonists of Christianity in their efforts to de-Christianize culture while posing as a solution to an environmental problem and a legitimate contribution to knowledge. For example, Hayes and Marangudakis (1993) carefully analyzed a survey directed and completed by the International Social Survey Program's Environmental Survey, an extensive survey that collected massive amounts of cross-national data on religion and the ecology from the U.S., Canada, Great Britain, and New Zealand. Many religious groups were surveyed extensively – Liberal Protestant, Other Protestant, Catholic, Non-Christian, and Independent religious groups.

It asked questions about the contemporary ecological crisis, the human actions that could be taken to help or hinder this crisis, and ideas, beliefs, attitudes about the physical environment. The results showed conclusively that there is “no uniform or direct link between adherence to a Christian belief and an anti-environmental stance either in terms of attitudes or behavior” (p. 170). There were no found correlations in any of the countries between Christianity and anti-environmental attitudes or behaviors. White's conclusion about Christian blame for environmental degradation finds no support nor credibility.

Gillmor's article titled, “The Ecological Crisis and Judeo-Christian Religion” is an even stronger refutation of White's thesis than the previous study. Gillmor's first argument against White's thesis concerns his interpretation of the biblical term

“dominion” to mean power or domination over. White simply makes this interpretation without providing an accurate account of the historical definition at all, absolutely disreputable behavior for both a scholar and an historian.

Gillmor points out that “dominion implied kingship and in the Bible, this was often linked with responsibilities to subjects rather than tyrannical despotism” (p. 263). Generally speaking, it is unfounded to project contemporary meanings of terms into ancient biblical usage of those terms and then claim that’s the way the term was interpreted at that time. When we hear the word “dominion” in the contemporary context of authority or supreme rule, it does not apply to biblical meaning of that time. When God instructs human beings to exert “dominion” over the land, in terms of biblical meaning it could have easily meant taking care of and protecting the land. White is imputing contemporary meanings to biblical terms which leads to interpretations wholly inappropriate, inaccurate, and out of context, says Gillmor.

According to Gillmor, another point that has to be seriously taken into consideration by White is the historical context of the Genesis account itself, the timeframe in which the Bible occurred, and the context surrounding the common use of vocabulary. Genesis itself points out that when God created human beings, the Earth was not exactly a highly hospitable place. Rather, it was a dark, chaotic, cruel physical environment. God apparently intended to make this foreboding physical environment a place where human beings could live and thrive. In this particular context, the term “subdue” obviously was not intended to have a typical negative contemporary connotation.

Gillmor points out that had White interpreted the biblical passages he examined in greater comparative context with other ideas and concepts in the Christian Bible and employed even minimal significant reputable resources to do so that were easily available, he would have arrived at different

interpretations. For example, Gillmor examines the idea of environmental retribution or revenge in the Hebrew Bible (p. 265). His point is that there are several examples in that Bible when the environment exerts sovereignty and power over human beings.

When humans engage in wrongdoings, they can expect an environmental disaster or a deteriorating environment. The Hebrew Bible shows that God has, can, and does employ the natural environment in order to punish human beings for their wrongful acts. In this way, God makes sure that human beings will never attain sovereign authority of His created earth regardless of their misguided, wrongful efforts.

Christianity's Counterbalancing Elements

Rupp's study of the relationship between religion and the ecology comes to the same conclusion as the two previous studies, arguing that White's claims about Christianity are deeply flawed because there are many factors or considerations that are excluded, intentionally or not. Beyond White's selective misinterpretation of biblical terminology, he states that White fails to notice how other components in the structure of the biblical Christian religious belief system operate tend to counterbalance sometimes confused or foolish human tendencies to exercise power over nature seemingly without care or respect. There are other parts to the Christian religion that operate to counter-balance or offset human sovereignty over the physical environment.

First, Christians readily acknowledge that everything God created is good; and second, human beings have a spiritual need for redemption. If all of God's creations are 'good', then it stands to reason that nature is 'good'. Since nature as God's creation is good, that means it is divine, and human beings must practice respectful and careful stewardship towards it. In terms of the second counter-balancing component, redemption, it's hard for Christians to believe they will be 'saved' from sin

and death in the eyes of God when they are in reality committing sin against God's created environment!

The fervent Christian belief in redemption applies to the ecology. The source of this belief goes back to the story about the Fall from God's grace. Rupp says that due to the Fall, humans are just on Earth as "pilgrim's passing through" on their way back to God. If they are just spiritual pilgrims, then they must watch their steps while on earth. They must "tread lightly" on their way to redemption, otherwise they may not make it back. Therefore, the Christian faith as a whole enjoins believers to treat the earth properly with all due respect as a sacred, literally 'divine' creation if they wish to be saved or 'redeemed'.

Sources

- Bolak, J. 2016. "The Ecological Crisis: Questioning Christianity's Contribution". in *Verbum* 13(2): 1-12.
- Ford, Leighton. 2016. "What did Jesus have to say about the environment?" in *The Charlotte Observer*, April 21, pp. 1-6.
- Gillmor, Desmond A. 1996. "The Ecological Crisis and Judeo-Christian Religion". in *An Irish Quarterly Review* 85 (339): 261-270.
- Hayes, B.C. and M. Marangudakis. 2000. "Religion and Environmental Issues Within Anglo-American Democracies". in *Religious Research & Association Inc.* 42 (2): 1-12.
- Hiers, R.H. 1984. "Ecology, biblical theology, and methodology: biblical perspectives on the environment". in *Zygon* 19 (1): 43-59.
- Jenkins, Willis. 2009. "After Lynn White: Religious Ethics and Environmental Problems". in *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 37 (2): 283-309.
- Nelson, M.P. 2016. "The Long Reach of Lynn White Jr.'s "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis"". in *Nature Portfolio Ecology & Evolution Community*, pp. 1-8.
- Rupp, G. 2011. "Religion, Modern Secular Culture, and Ecology". in *Daedalus* 130 (4): 23-30.
- Skirbekh, V. et al. 2020. "How Religion Influences Our Relationship with the Environment: in *State of the Planet*, Columbia Climate School, October 15, pp. 1-4.
- White, Lynn Jr. 1967. "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis". in *Science* 155: 1203-1207.