

## Review Essay: The Quest for Green Religion

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A little essay by Lynn White, Jr., “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” appeared in the March 10, 1967 issue of *Science* (155:1203–207), and it has often been anthologized. At the time of initial publication, with national concern about the environmental crisis rising quickly—the first Earth Day was just three years away—White was interested in explaining why ecological destruction and environmental pollution originated in the West. At the time, aside from Japan, no other non-Western nation had industrialized significantly. With the exception again of Japan, the industrialized and polluting nations were all Christian, with the Catholic nations being more polluted than Eastern Orthodox and Protestant lands the worst of all. To White, a historian of medieval technology, the clear culprit was Christianity itself, which had disenchanting the landscape of its pagan deities and spirits and, on the authority of God’s command in Genesis 1:28, sent believers out to subdue the land and have dominion over it. “Christianity,” White charged, “is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen” (1205). “Our ecologic crisis” had arisen from Christian indifference to the intrinsic value of nature and from confidence in the human right to possess it and use it as we please.

### Seeing Green in Other Men’s Religions

White’s little essay had a big impact. Within a few years, three basic responses took shape. In the first response, countercultural and left political groups seized upon it as another argument against the racist, warmongering, profiteering, polluting “establishment.” Many concluded that Christianity was bankrupt concerning nature and the environment. To them, Western society must take its cues from religious beliefs and practices from putatively more earth-friendly religions, especially Daoism, Buddhism, Hinduism, pre-agricultural animism, and neopagan worship of the earth goddess. Re-sacralization of the world would counter the effects of disenchantment.

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The notion that the West had lost—and desperately needed to recover—a respect for nature and a spiritual relationship with the natural world, which Indians, Paleolithic peoples, and Eastern religions preserved, pervaded popular culture in the late 1960s and 1970s. The huge popularity of such books as Vine Deloria's *God Is Red* (1973) testified to that. Academia responded with an outpouring of confirming studies. J. Donald Hughes's *American Indian Ecology* (1983) related Native American spiritual beliefs with their supposed harmony with the natural world. Max Oehlschlaeger asserted in his *The Idea of Wilderness from Prehistory to the Age of Ecology* (1991) that Paleolithic cultures lived in harmony with nature and that modern proponents of wilderness, among them Henry David Thoreau and John Muir, were leading the way to a recovery of Paleolithic attitudes toward nature that would heal the Western alienation from nature that lay at the root of the environmental crisis. Stephen R. Fox's pioneering history of the American environmentalism, *John Muir and His Legacy: The American Conservation Movement* (1981), supported White's thesis by contending that environmental leaders had all rejected orthodox Christianity. Religious historian Catherine Albanese chronicled the history of the idea that religious harmony with nature would save or heal Americans or their culture in her *Nature Religion in America: From the Algonkian Indians to the New Age* (1990).

In the early 1980s, neopaganism, goddess worship, and feminism supported in various ways the idea that patriarchal religions had fostered the environmental crisis. Carolyn Merchant's landmark *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (1980) had analyzed the rising repression of women and exploitation of the earth in early-modern Europe and their interrelated rhetoric and goal of mastery. Merchant's book contributed to the rise of ecofeminism, which, in turn, produced both an ecofeminist theology and a goddess feminism. The former is best represented by the works of Catholic theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether. Taking a cue from James Lovelock's "Gaia" hypothesis of 1979, a scientific ecological theory whose name, for the Greek goddess of the earth, unintentionally suggested a spiritual aspect, Ruether's *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (1992) asserted that new models and a new consciousness was called for to heal the relationship between men and women, humans and the earth, humans and the divine, and the divine and the earth. Irene Diamond and Gloria Feman Orenstein's *Reweaving the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism* (1990) was one of the best-known books in a spate of works in the 1990s to draw from feminism, environmentalism, and goddess spirituality to propose ways to heal the earth. Beginning at the end of the 1970s, works by

Carol P. Christ, Starhawk (the former Miriam Santos), and others celebrated the earth-centered spirituality and rituals of neopagan goddess worship. Ronald Hutton studied and chronicled the neopagan phenomenon in *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft* (1999).

The search in ancient or foreign religions for the lost key to the solution of the environmental crisis gradually faded under the criticism that scholars and popular writers were romanticizing or projecting their values. Yi-Fu Tuan rebutted the Western image of Chinese harmony with nature grounded in Daoist or Buddhist belief in the flow of nature and the lack of firm boundaries between human and nonhuman. In "Discrepancies between Environmental Attitudes and Behavior: Examples from Europe and China" (*in Ecology and Religion in History*, edited by David and Eileen Spring, 1974), Tuan described how the supposed Chinese religious respect for nature historically did nothing to stop rampant deforestation and other environmental catastrophes. Dismayed at the sight of whites on vision quests and in sweat lodges, American Indians objected to the appropriation of their beliefs, traditions, and history, as Philip J. Deloria has written in *Playing Indian* (1998), while Shepard Krech collected the mounting evidence that Native Americans were perfectly capable of inflicting significant environmental damage in his controversial *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History* (1999). Works from William Cronon's *Changes in the Land* (1983) to journalist Charles Mann's *1491* (2003), for their part, presented the persuasive archeological and historical case that pre-Columbian Indians had thoroughly remade the landscape, which was by no means "natural" or a "wilderness" when Columbus arrived.

### Greening Christianity

In a second response to White's thesis, Christian groups began soul-searching inquiries to determine whether White's charges were indeed true and, if so, how they might formulate a Christian environmentalism. Mainstream Protestants soon realized that the Christian tradition was not quite as hostile to the natural world as White had claimed. In *The Travail of Nature: The Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christian Theology* (1985) and other works, Lutheran theologian H. Paul Santmire argued that a Christian ecological ethic counterbalanced the exploitative ethic that White highlighted. Non-evangelical Protestants as well as Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christians responded to White's challenge by ramping up the greener parts of the Christian tradition. Many denominations released statements

of environmental stewardship and instituted related projects such as the “Earth Care Congregation” program of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). About the time that Santmire published *The Travail of Nature*, “ecotheology” began to coalesce. Several themes have been common to these new developments, all responding to points that White raised. Humanity’s dominion over nature as given by God in Genesis 1:25 might be softened or countered by emphasis on stewardship, which demotes humankind from conquering ruler of creation to God’s manager. The democratic, anti-hierarchical mood that emerged from left political rhetoric of the 1960s also comported well with stewardship, which was compatible with the notion that humankind was equal with nature. “Ecocentrism” could replace the anthropocentrism of traditional Christian doctrine. In essentially an act of baptism of the thoroughly secular Aldo Leopold’s “land ethic” in *A Sand County Almanac*, stewardship and ecocentrism also agreed nicely with ideas of a moral community of nature. Against White’s charge that Christianity had disenchanting nature, theologians placed heavy emphasis on God’s immanence in creation, sometimes called “panentheism,” in Charles Hartshorne’s term, to distinguish it from pantheism or idolatry of the earth. Sallie McFague’s *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (1994) was an influential example. This recognition of God’s continuing presence in creation allowed a re-sacralization of the world. These new attitudes, with their elements of care for repair of the earth, would lead to a greater respect for the earth and a religious solution to the environmental crisis. Theologians John B. Cobb, Jürgen Moltmann, and Rosemary Radford Ruether have numbered among the best-known thinkers in ecotheology. (For a recent summary of ecotheology, see Peter Manley Scott, “Which Nature? Whose Justice? Shifting Meanings of Nature in Recent Ecotheology,” in *God’s Bounty? The Churches and the Natural World*, ed. Peter Clarke and Tony Claydon [Rochester, N.Y.: Boydell and Brewer, 2010], 431–57). Concurrently, some Calvinist theologians—notably Calvin B. DeWitt, author of *Earthwise: A Guide to Hopeful Creation Care* (1994; 3d ed., 2011)—and the rising generation of younger evangelicals—notably Jonathan Merritt, son of a leading Southern Baptist pastor, author of *Green Like God: Unlocking the Divine Plan for Our Planet* (2010), which described his “conversion” to a greener gospel—have moved beyond the environmental hostility born of the 1970s to preach the ecologically responsible tenets in the doctrines of fundamentalist and conservative Protestantism.

Political scientist Robert Booth Fowler traced these trends in *The Greening of Protestant Thought* (1995). Historians at the same time came to recognize the positive contribution that Christians had made

toward environmentalism. In my *Protestantism, Capitalism, and Nature in America* (1997), I argued that major conservationists and environmentalists as well as leading industrialists came out of essentially the same churches—primarily in the Calvinist tradition—and that, moreover, many capitalists had a love of nature as strong as any environmentalist's. Earlier, two essays by Robert G. Athearn, "The Wilderness Evangelists," in *The Mythic West in Twentieth-Century America* (1986), and Donald Worster, "John Muir and the Roots of American Environmentalism," in *The Wealth of Nature: Environmental History and the Ecological Imagination* (1993), had explored Protestant influences on American environmentalists. These works countered White's claim that Protestantism, and Calvinism in particular, promulgated a particularly hostile attitude toward wilderness and the natural world and pointed out that, in fact, Reformed Protestantism more than any other had fostered the American environmental movement.

In the early 1990s, the conviction took hold that any solution for the environmental crisis must include religion, or even proceed from religion, because religion was the human endeavor at whose heart lay the language of justice and commitment to the common good that were essential to any genuine solutions. Advocates of this view believe that, if enough believers and congregations will adopt it, the political will can emerge to deal with environmental problems. In 1990, Steven C. Rockefeller and John C. Elder sponsored a symposium of people from different faiths at Middlebury College in Vermont and published addresses from the meeting in *Spirit and Nature: Why the Environment Is a Religious Issue: An Interfaith Dialogue* (1992). Journalist Bill Moyers dedicated an episode of "Journal," his PBS series, to the event. Oehlschaeger converted from his earlier secular perspective to add his promotion of the cause in *Caring for Creation: An Ecumenical Approach to the Environmental Crisis* (1994). In 1997, a scholarly journal, *Worldviews: Environment, Culture, Religion*, was founded to explore the relationship between religion and ecological issues. In 2006, Pulitzer Prize-winning biologist E. O. Wilson published *The Creation: An Appeal to Save Life on Earth*, which he wrote in the form of a letter to a Southern Baptist pastor asking for religious support of the environmental cause. Robert S. Gottlieb's *A Greener Faith: Religious Environmentalism and Our Planet's Future* (2006) also argued for the necessary greening of the world's religions.

In the past two decades, Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim of Yale University and Bron R. Taylor of the University of Florida have emerged as major academic leaders of this movement. Between 1996 and 1998, Tucker and Grim held a series of ten conferences at Harvard University's Center for the Study of World Religions.

Following these conferences, they published a major series of ten edited books, the Religions of the World and Ecology—one volume for each of the world's major religious traditions. Heavily influenced by Passionist priest Thomas Berry and Jesuit Teilhard de Chardin, Tucker and Grim have edited or authored, together or with others, a series of books pursuing the same design of promulgating a new environmental consciousness. The equally active Taylor founded the International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature, and Culture in 2005, edited the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature* (2005), and founded and edits the *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature, and Culture*. In his *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future* (2010), Taylor presented what might be termed the "standard model" of the ecumenical green religion movement: promotion of the notion of a sacred earth; moral and spiritual responsibility for nature; an immanentist theology; and the pantheon of Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, Aldo Leopold, and Rachel Carson.

Some authors have provided examples of how such eco-religious principles might look in practice. Two of the most interesting are by authors who got to know their subjects and used historical and ethnographic methods in their books about their experiences. In *At Home in Nature: Modern Homesteading and Spiritual Practice in America* (2005), Rebecca Kneale Gould recounted her experience living in Helen and Scott Nearing's Forest Farm amid a community of like-minded homesteaders (if such a collection of nonconformists could be called a "community"). Now associate professor of religion and affiliate in environmental studies at Middlebury College, Gould thoughtfully explored the option of withdrawing from materialist, commercial mainstream America to go back to the land. There, in the tradition of Thoreau, John Burroughs, and Helen and Scott Nearing, individuals and families focus on building and maintaining their homes in a rather nostalgic way and becoming more producer than consumer, particularly of food. Gould recognized the complex question of whether what she called "homesteading" was all that eco-friendly and noted that the mostly liberal Protestant (sometimes liberal Jewish) homesteaders of her book were making moral choices that they regarded as more "spiritual" than "religious." At the opposite end of the spectrum from the individualistic Protestant homesteaders are the "green nuns" that Sarah McFarland Taylor discussed in *Green Sisters: A Spiritual Ecology* (2007). The green nun movement began in 1980, when Dominican sisters founded Genesis Farm in New Jersey, and has spread across the United States and Canada and beyond to comprise more than 50 "earth ministries." Inspired, like Tucker and Grim, by Berry and Teilhard, the sisters' activities have included greening religious vows, prayer, and liturgy; making ecologically

sustainable living a spiritual practice; choosing ecological food and “sacred agriculture”; and saving heirloom seeds.

### **Worshipping the Earth**

A third reaction to White’s thesis (or, more accurately, a reaction to the responses to White’s thesis) accused environmentalism itself of constituting a religion or a quasi religion. In the early 1970s, conservative Protestant evangelicals, who initially responded with other Christian groups with support for environmental goals, angrily rejected the belief that Christianity’s responsibility for the environmental crisis meant that Western society had to look to the earth-friendly spiritual beliefs and practices of other religions. The strong moralistic element of American environmentalism, with its historical connection to Calvinism, has convinced others, from scholars to libertarians, that environmentalism does, in fact, constitute a kind of religion.

As the research of Neall Pogue, a graduate student at Texas A&M University, is discovering, conservative Protestants at the time of Earth Day 1970 had joined with the general support of environmental protection. Influential Calvinist thinker Francis A. Schaeffer wrote approvingly of the White thesis in *Pollution and the Death of Man: The Christian View of Ecology* (1970) and asserted the need of devout Christians to show others how to live with nature, as they had failed to do. However, the rising chorus of voices within the environmental movement that criticized Christianity and lauded the putative eco-friendly spirituality of Eastern and animist religions quickly alienated Protestant conservatives. In the words of the Southern Baptist “Resolution on Environmentalism and Evangelicals” (2006), “Some in our culture have completely rejected God the Father in favor of deifying ‘Mother Earth,’ made environmentalism into a neo-pagan religion, and elevated animal and plant life to the place of equal—or greater—value with human life.”

Indeed, the spiritualization of environmentalism, the rise of “deep ecology” in the 1980s with its preference for “ecocentrism” above “anthropocentrism,” and the nearly religious veneration of the “gospels” of Thoreau, Muir, Leopold, and Carson have given some observers good cause to characterize environmentalism as either a quasi religion or, in essence, a true religion. An example of the former is environmental historian Thomas Dunlap’s *Faith in Nature: Environmentalism as Religious Quest* (2004), in which Dunlap describes mainstream environmentalism as a kind of transcendental fundamentalism, where “wilderness” takes the place of the Bible and salvation comes through a personal quest for redemption through contact with

nature. Dunlap can make a good case, particularly given the reverent treatment that many environmental writers, especially those dealing with nature writing or involved in the new field of "ecocriticism," have given the "holy" Thoreau-Muir-Leopold-Carson pantheon. Prominent among these scholarly writers has been Lawrence Buell, whose hugely influential *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (1995) traces the environmental literary tradition as a quest to imagine a more "ecocentric" mode of living. John Gatta has contributed recently to this same line of thinking in his *Making Nature Sacred: Literature, Religion, and Environment in America from the Puritans to the Present* (2004). A practicing Catholic, Dunlap recommended that, rather than making a religion of environmentalism, environmentalists ought to return to the churches and do their work from there.

Not surprisingly, characterization of environmentalism as a kind of religion can feed a pejorative image of the movement as emotional and credulous rather than scientific and rational. Libertarian Robert H. Nelson of the Independent Institute drew on Dunlap and others (including a disconcerting number of my own publications) to interpret the age-old tension between economy and environment as a new "holy war" between two essentially religious beliefs. Nelson's *The New Holy Wars: Economic Religion vs. Environmental Religion in Contemporary America* (2010) views mainstream economics as a religious faith in its assumptions and tenets, particularly its belief that economic growth will automatically solve all social and environmental problems. "Economic religion" wars with "environmental religion," which Nelson (with a weak grasp of theology and little knowledge of environmental history) grounded in faith in nature and "pseudoscience"—a libertarian code-word for science that supports government intervention. Nelson concluded with a call for a kind of libertarian environmentalism that would solve the environmental crisis through less government regulation and greater individual liberty—a belief that strikes one as requiring more magical thinking than economic religion and environmental religion combined.

### **"Green" Religion: The Lessons of History**

The assumptions behind White's analysis were fundamentally Christian. Much more than other religions, Christianity focuses on conversion, belief, and states of the heart. Christian salvation depends on grace more than obedience to codes of religious law or correct performance of ritual alone. Similarly, White located the "historical roots of our ecologic crisis" in mentality, a way of looking at the world, which



implied that "conversion" to a "right belief" ("ortho-doxy"), the change of consciousness that Berry and his followers have advocated, would lead society to a renewed Eden. The Thoreau-Muir-Leopold-Carson environmentalism favored of Protestants relies on individuals to make the right decision in their living and live in ecological righteousness. Such an approach excludes non-Protestants from the pantheon. It often acknowledges the works of such Jewish environmentalists as Paul Ehrlich, Barry Commoner, and Michael Pollan, but they tend to have other ethical emphases. Muslim environmental thought is even more difficult to integrate into the environmentalism of raised conscience and is almost always ignored.

Logical difficulties also arise in the push for a new ecological consciousness in religion. The utterly secular tone of Leopold's and Carson's works undermines any claim for a religious or spiritual consciousness. Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac* proposed an ethical approach that rested on no moral or religious foundation, while Carson's *Silent Spring* simply urged a prudent caution in use of environmental chemicals, with reliance more on biological than chemical science. Furthermore, the moral and transcendentalistic religious framework of the works of Thoreau and Muir almost completely lacks implications for social reform or government policy. Historically, major advances in environmental history rarely ensued from any noticeable religious or moral influence. None of the founders of the Wilderness Society in 1935, for instance, were inspired to preserve wilderness for religious or spiritual reasons. The conservatives of the Richard Nixon administration who proposed and organized the Environmental Protection Agency and proposed or supported succeeding environmental legislation also did not do so from any sort of earth consciousness but rather from old-fashioned anthropocentric motives of conservation. Finally, there is the undeniable fact that influence has flowed from the environmental movement to the churches far more often than in the other direction.

History does show, however, a deep connection of religion with the rise of conservation and environmentalism, but not as usually depicted. As I have elsewhere shown ("'Sagacious' Bernard Palissy: Pinchot, Marsh, and the Connecticut Origins of Conservation," *Environmental History* 16 [January 2011]: 4–37), Congregationalists from the Connecticut Valley of New England fashioned early environmentalism out of the communal ideals and experience of the Puritan town. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Congregationalists promoted forest conservation; dominated the rise of agricultural improvement; established and developed the first

local, state, and national parks; and led the vogue of vacationing in nature—the cornerstones of American environmentalism. Ralph Waldo Emerson, Thoreau, and the principles of transcendentalism had virtually no impact on them. Earth-centered spirituality or consciousness did not figure in their motivation. If history has any lessons here, it is that, to save nature, one must first work to save society. The mystic gaze on nature or the personal land ethic, as inspiring as they may be, have few policy implications. Regulation of private action for the benefit of the community emphatically does point to political solutions for environmental problems—from anthropocentrism emerges ecocentrism. More important, this community ideal is explicitly present in the teachings of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. One might conclude that history suggests that the religious goal of the common good would go much further toward solving the environmental crisis than a spiritual love of or respect for nature by itself could do. In other words, at its moral and ethical core, the “ecological crisis” is essentially a social crisis, and a religious solution to one entails a solution to the other.

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