

Is Christianity to Blame?
The Ecological Complaint Against Christianity
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Nature, the world, has no value, no interest for Christians.
The Christian thinks only of himself and the salvation of his soul.¹

The epigraph above, from prominent mid-nineteenth century writer Ludwig Feuerbach, indicates one common answer to the question of why we are in eco-crisis: Christianity is to blame. If nature has no value for Christians, who think only about the salvation of their souls, then it is no surprise that the earth is in such sorry shape, given the influence Christianity has had and continues to have around the world. Updated versions of this argument go something like this:

To the extent that man fulfills the command to be fruitful and multiply, his assault on this planet will continue. Religions assume that whatever sacrifices may be necessary to accommodate more of humanity should be made by species other than us.

Having created God in man's own image, Western religion has adopted an anthropocentric mythology that separates God from Creation, soul from body, and man from Earth. It is this dualism that prevents us from relating not only to the natural world, but to ourselves.

These responses--in an issue of *Sierra*, the official publication of the Sierra Club--were given in answer to the question of whether organized religion has benefited or harmed the planet.² Some people blame Christianity (or religion in general) for the present ecological crisis. Directly or indirectly, they argue, the Christian faith is responsible for ecological

¹ Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity* (New York: Harper and Row, 1957), 287.

² *Sierra* (May-June 1993): 112.

degradation since in various ways it encourages the exploitation of the earth. Christianity legitimates ecological degradation. Such, in sum, is the "ecological complaint against Christianity."³

But this begs a number of questions. First, what exactly is the ecological complaint against Christianity? And second, are these various criticisms concerning the contribution of Christianity to ecological degradation well-founded? My contention is that the ecological complaint against Christianity, correctly understood, is not cogent. If I am right, a further question presents itself, namely, what are more credible explanations for our current ecological predicament?

It is important, before we examine the complaint itself, to acknowledge the need for confession. Despite the fact that, as I will argue, the ecological complaint against Christianity is seriously flawed, a satisfactory response to the complaint must include, as James Nash insists, "a forthright confession that at least much of the complaint is essentially true."⁴ Nash's comments on this matter deserve a full hearing:

It will not do to draw a neat distinction between Christianity and Christendom, between the faith itself and perversions of it by its practitioners. That distinction may be formally or logically true, as I agree, but it is facile and unconvincing when applied to history. We cannot so easily distinguish between the faith and the faithful. The fact is that Christianity--*as interpreted and affirmed* by billions of its adherents over the centuries and in official doctrines and theological exegeses--has been ecologically tainted. . . . The bottom line is that Christianity itself cannot escape an indictment for ecological negligence and abuse.⁵

³The title of chapter 3 in James Nash, *Loving Nature: Ecological Integrity and Christian Responsibility* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991).

⁴ *Ibid.*, 72

⁵ *Ibid.* Or as the subtitle of H. Paul Santmire's enlightening historical survey indicates, Christian theology has in the past represented "an ambiguous ecological promise." See *The Travail of Nature: The Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christian Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985).

Nash's point must be taken very seriously. As he quite properly acknowledges, "Christianity has done too little to discourage and too much to encourage the exploitation of nature;" thus "ongoing repentance is warranted."⁶ This bears repeating: ongoing repentance is warranted. The Christian faith as affirmed by many over the centuries has been, to use Nash's words, ecologically tainted. We Christians have been complicit in much ecological woe and thus have much to confess. We cannot escape culpability for our ecological sins of omission and commission, neglect and abuse. A clear call to confession, therefore, is much needed.

Like Wendell Berry, however, I remain persuaded that there is merit in a distinction between authentic Christian faith and misunderstandings or perversions of it by Christians themselves. Berry minces no words when he claims that "the indictment of Christianity by the anti-Christian conservationists is, in many respects, just." He continues:

Christian organizations, to this day, remain largely indifferent to the rape and plunder of the world and its traditional cultures. It is hardly too much to say that most Christian organizations are as happily indifferent to the ecological, cultural, and religious implications of industrial economies as are most industrial organizations.⁷

So, like Nash, Berry rightly calls Christians to confession.

But that is not the end of the matter. Berry argues that "however just it [the indictment of Christianity] may be, it does not come from an adequate understanding of the Bible and the cultural traditions that descend from the Bible." This implies, he continues, "the making of very precise distinctions between biblical instruction and the

⁶ Nash, *Loving Nature*, 72, 74.

⁷ Wendell Berry, *Sex, Economy, Freedom, and Community* (New York: Pantheon, 1993), 94.

behavior of those peoples supposed to have been biblically instructed.” Given that there are “virtually catastrophic discrepancies between biblical instruction and Christian behavior”--and not disreputable behavior but “allegedly respectable Christian behavior”--a distinction between biblical instruction and the behavior of Christians is legitimate and important. Indeed, it is precisely because of this distinction that Berry concludes, “Our predicament now, I believe, requires us to learn to read and understand the Bible in the light of the present fact of Creation.”⁸ We must learn to read the Bible anew precisely because our behavior is out of line with the ecological vision of Scripture.

Thus, it is not only non-Christians who must be convinced that Christianity is not necessarily ecologically bankrupt but many Christians as well. They must be persuaded, put more positively, that their faith calls them to care for the earth. Indeed, the rhetorical task applies as much (or more) to Christians as to non-Christians. We Christians must learn to read the Bible with new eyes--open to its ecological wisdom--and we must come to know and appropriate our own traditions--with their ecological insights. What, then, of the charge that Christianity is the problem?

I. The Ecological Complaint

The ecological complaint against Christianity claims, in general, that the Christian faith is at fault for the current ecological crisis. As Nash states, "The ecological complaint is the charge that the Christian faith is the culprit in the crisis. Christianity is the primary or at least a significant cause of ecological degradation."⁹ Christianity, especially Christian theology, is ecologically bankrupt, and given its influence in Western culture, it

⁸ Ibid., 94-95.

⁹Nash, *Loving Nature*, 68. In addition to ch. 3 of Nash, an insightful discussion of “the argument over Christianity” can be found in ch. 4 of Robert Booth Fowler’s *The Greening of Protestant Thought* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1995).

is morally blameworthy with respect to the plight of the earth. The implication usually drawn from this claim is that people today must discard the Christian tradition and look elsewhere for a perspective that provides an adequate response to the ecological challenges before us. There are a variety of different specific arguments given to support this complaint. Here are four of the most common.

1. Monotheism and Genesis 1:26-28

The first is that *monotheism in general, and Christianity in particular, is the primary if not sole cause of the despoilation of the earth.* For example, influential British historian Arnold Toynbee asserts that

some of the major maladies of the present-day world--for instance the recklessly extravagant consumption of nature's irreplaceable treasures, and the pollution of those of them that man has not already devoured--can be traced back in the last analysis to a religious cause, and that this cause is the rise of monotheism.¹⁰

Specifically, Toynbee argues that the Genesis 1:28 command to have dominion over the earth has not only permitted but directed humans to dominate and exploit creation.¹¹

Given this diagnosis, Toynbee claims that the remedy for what ails us "lies in reverting from the *Weltanschauung* of monotheism to the *Weltanschauung* of pantheism."¹² Only by repudiating the worldview of monotheism and adopting a worldview in which God and world are seen as one and the same will we be able to extricate ourselves from our ecological abyss.

American historian Roderick Nash also points to the use of Genesis 1:28 as a decisive sanction for ecological destruction. He argues that given the harsh imagery of

¹⁰Arnold Toynbee, "The Religious Background of the Present Environmental Crisis," in *Ecology and Religion in History*, eds. David and Eileen Spring (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 146.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 147.

¹²*Ibid.*, 148.

“absolute domination” signified by the verbs in that verse, “it followed that the Christian tradition could understand Genesis 1:28 as a divine commandment to conquer every part of nature and make it humankind’s slave.” Such an interpretation served as “intellectual lubrication for the exploitation of nature.”¹³ Genesis 1 in particular, and Christianity more generally, is anti-ecological.

American novelist and essayist Wallace Stegner more than hints at a similar view: “Our sanction to be a weed species living at the expense of every other species and of the Earth itself can be found in the injunction God gave to newly created Adam and Eve in Genesis 1:28: “Be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it.”¹⁴ Stegner contrasts this biblical view with that of Native Americans, who “stressed the web of life, the interconnectedness of land and man and creature.”¹⁵ In sum, this argument asserts that the Bible, especially Genesis 1, sets humanity over against nature and thus encourages humans to conquer and exploit the natural world.

2. Dualisms and devaluation

The second argument is that *the emphasis within the Christian tradition on dualisms of soul and body, spirit and matter, denigrates the earth and sanctions its misuse and exploitation*. More exactly, the claim is that since there is a dualism between spirit and matter, and/or soul and body, such that the former is of greater value than the latter, and since lack of value implies lack of ethical obligation, Christianity fosters a care-less attitude toward matter and the body, and thus is at fault for the plundering of the

¹³ Roderick Nash, *The Rights of Nature* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1989), 90.

¹⁴ Wallace Stegner, *Marking the Sparrow’s Fall*, 121. Many others make this same charge, e.g., Ian McHarg, “The Place of Nature in the City of Man,” in *Western Man and Environmental Ethics*, ed. Ian Barbour (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1973), 174-175.

¹⁵ Stegner, *Marking the Sparrow’s Fall*, 122.

earth. Wendell Berry gives voice to this argument for why Christianity is to blame for the current ecological crisis.

I have been talking, of course, about a dualism that manifests itself in several ways: as a cleavage, a radical discontinuity, between Creator and creature, spirit and matter, religion and nature, religion and economy, worship and work, and so on. This dualism, I think, is the most destructive disease that afflicts us. In its best known, its most dangerous, and perhaps its fundamental version, it is the dualism of body and soul.¹⁶

Philosopher John Passmore likewise points to the presence of various dualisms within the Christian tradition, especially the “dualism between God and nature,” as a major cause of ecological degradation. By means of such a hierarchical view of reality, Passmore claims, “Christianity has encouraged man to think of himself as nature’s absolute master, for whom everything that exists was designed.”¹⁷ A dualism between Creator and creation, in this view, necessarily implies an anthropocentric attitude of domination toward the natural world.

Contemporary feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether lodges a similar criticism when she speaks of “the male ideology of transcendent dualism.”¹⁸ This involves a chain of dualisms--male/female, soul/body, spirit/matter, culture/nature--in which the second half of each pair is seen as subject to the first. The latter is an object for conquest, whether in the case of the domination of women by men, the control of the body by the soul, or the exploitation of the nonhuman world by humans. In short, Christianity harbors a number of world-negating dualisms that have provided intellectual

¹⁶Wendell Berry, *Sex, Economy, Freedom, and Community*, 105.

¹⁷John Passmore, *Man’s Responsibility for Nature* (New York: Scribner’s, 1974), 12-13.

¹⁸Rosemary Radford Ruether, *New Women/New Earth* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), 195.

justification for the neglect and abuse of the earth and thus contributed to the current ecological crisis.

3. Modern Western Science and Technology

The third argument in the ecological complaint against Christianity is that *Christianity is to blame for much ecological degradation because of its role in the rise of modern Western science and technology.* For example, medieval historian Lynn White, Jr., in his famous and often reprinted 1967 essay, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," argues that by emphasizing both divine and human transcendence over nature, and thus by desacralizing nature, "Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects."¹⁹ In addition, White argues that the Christian doctrine of creation implies that "since God had made nature, nature also (in addition to the Bible) must reveal the divine mentality," thus encouraging empirical investigations of the natural world so that humans could "understand the mind of God by discovering how his creation operates."²⁰ In short, White claims that "modern Western science was cast in a matrix of Christian theology." More precisely, it was the "Judeo-Christian dogma of creation" that gave the impetus to modern Western science.²¹

White, therefore, concludes that since Christianity made possible the growth of modern science and technology, and since science and technology have given us unprecedented and uncontrolled power over nature--power the misuse of which

¹⁹Lynn White, Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," in *Western Man and Environmental Ethics*, 25. Originally published in *Science* 155 (March 10, 1967): 1203-1207.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 26.

²¹*Ibid.*, 27.

Christianity has sanctioned-- Christianity is responsible for the current plight of the earth.

White's own summary of his argument is worth quoting in full:

We would seem to be heading toward conclusions unpalatable to many Christians. Since both *science* and *technology* are blessed words in our contemporary vocabulary, some may be happy at the notions, first, that, viewed historically, modern science is an extrapolation of (Christian) natural theology and, second, that modern technology is at least partly to be explained as an Occidental, voluntarist realization of the Christian dogma of man's transcendence of, and rightful mastery over, nature. But, as we now recognize, somewhat over a century ago science and technology--hitherto quite separate activities--joined to give mankind powers which, to judge by many of the ecologic effects, are out of control. If so, Christianity bears a huge burden of guilt.²²

Christianity is responsible for the current ecological crisis.

The ubiquity of White's essay--found in almost every environmental philosophy, theology, and/or ethics anthology and referred to in virtually every textbook—is matched only by the unquestioned faith in its thesis. For many—in circles both religious and secular—it is (or until recently has been) an unexamined contention. As environmental philosopher Max Oelschlaeger confesses, “The roots of my prejudice against religion...grew out of my reading of Lynn White's famous essay blaming Judeo-Christianity for the environmental crisis.”²³ In sum, Christianity is at fault because of its intellectual support for Western science and technology.

4. Escapist Eschatology and Exploitation

A fourth argument often cited by critics asserts that *Christian eschatology underwrites the exploitation of the earth*. The Christian view of the future negates any rationale for preserving the earth, some argue, since Christians believe the return of Jesus will usher in a completely new earth and utterly different form of existence. The doctrine

²² Ibid.

²³ Max Oelschlaeger, *Caring for Creation* (New Haven: Yale University, 1994), 2.

of the second coming of Jesus thus militates against caring for the earth because it posits that this world is ephemeral and ultimately unimportant. Humans need not care for this present world.

The popularity of books by Hal Lindsey and Tim LaHaye attests to the allure of this eschatology.²⁴ While Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth* sold millions in the 1970's, its popularity is dwarfed by the *Left Behind* series coauthored by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins.²⁵ While this series is technically fiction, the authors are very clear that the fiction is merely a cover for an otherworldly dispensationalist eschatology in which Christians will be raptured from the earth and the world will be destroyed. As Jenkins admitted to an interviewer: "I believe the kind of stuff I'm writing about [all saved Christians dead and alive get snatched into heaven; a seven-year tribulation of plagues ravages the earth] is going to happen some day."²⁶

With books such as those mentioned above, purporting to espouse orthodox Christian theology, it is easy to see why some argue that Christianity is otherworldly and

²⁴ Another (in)famous proponent of this eschatology is James Watt, the first Reagan era Secretary of the Interior. In response to a question during a discussion (on Feb. 5, 1981) with a committee of the House of Representatives, as to why his agency was acting contrary to its expressed mandate, Watt, a devout Christian, said, "I do not know how many future generations we can count on before the Lord returns." In other words, since Jesus is coming back soon, and since when Jesus returns everything will be destroyed, why care about the earth? See Ron Wolf, "God, James Watt, and the Public Lands" *Audubon* vol. 83, no. 3 (May 1981): 58-65. But others argue that Watt was not really an otherworldly apocalypticist but someone who minimized or downplayed the effects of ecological degradation. See, e.g., David Larson, "God's Gardeners: American Protestant Evangelicals Confront Environmentalism, 1967-2000." Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Chicago Divinity School, 2001.

²⁵ Lindsey's famous book, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970), was a blockbuster best-seller, while LaHaye's current co-authored series of fictional works--*The Left Behind* series--has sold tens of millions of copies.

²⁶ Jerry Jenkins, *Chicago Tribune* (13 March 2002), section 5, page 3.

thus anti-ecological. For example, one of Roderick Nash's reasons for criticizing Christianity is its "pervasive otherworldliness."

Christians' aspirations were fixed on heaven, the supposed place of their origins and, they hoped their final resting. The earth was no mother but a kind of halfway house of trial and testing from which one was released at death. ... Indeed Christians expected that the earth would not be around for long. A vengeful God would destroy it, and all unredeemed nature, with floods or drought or fire. Obviously this eschatology was a poor basis from which to argue for environmental ethics in any guise. Why take care of what you expected to be obliterated?"²⁷

Or as Bill Moyers asks, quoting a column from the on-line journal *Grist*: "Why care about the earth when the droughts, floods, famine, and pestilence brought by ecological collapse are signs of the apocalypse foretold in the Bible? Why care about global climate change when you and yours will be rescued in the rapture?"²⁸ In sum, this argument contends that because Christians believe the world will ultimately be destroyed, they feel no need to care for it. All four of these arguments require further examination. To that task we now turn.

II. The Cogency of the Complaint

Problems abound with these arguments. Let's start with the first.

1. Does dominion mean domination?

In Gen. 1:28 does dominion mean domination? Does Genesis 1-2 actually license the exploitation of creation? Is a monotheism informed by the first few chapters of Genesis the problem?

²⁷ Nash, *The Rights of Nature*, 91-92. For more on the "end times" literature and attitudes toward creation, see Fowler, *The Greening of Protestant Thought*, ch. 3.

²⁸ Bill Moyers, Public Address on receiving Harvard Medical School's Global Environmental Citizen Award, published 6 December 2004 by CommonDreams.org

First, chapters 1 and 2 of Genesis each speak about both who humans are and what humans are to do. With respect to who we are as humans, Gen. 1:26 clearly distinguishes between human creatures and nonhuman creatures by speaking only of the former as created *imago Dei*--in the image (*selem*) and likeness (*demût*) of God. Humans are distinct in some important sense--unique among all the creatures to come from God's hand.

The story of the naming of the animals in Gen. 2:19-20, among other things, also points to human uniqueness. The human creature is handed the responsibility of giving names to the other creatures--no small task given the significance of names in the Bible, for names signify identity. Abram becomes Abraham--ancestor of a multitude. Jacob becomes Israel--one who wrestles with God. Saul the persecutor becomes Paul the apostle. To name something well implies knowledge of its essence. To get the name right one must intimately know the creature named. But naming also indicates a kind of authority over. To know a name is to have power, as any substitute teacher quickly learns when attempting to control a class of students. Clearly, according to Genesis 1-2, humans are unique in important ways. We usually state this by saying that only humans are persons.²⁹ We are response-able and responsible creatures. That is an inescapable part of who we are.

But what is often ignored or intentionally overlooked is that humans are not only distinct in some sense but similar to other creatures. We are embedded in creation. For example, the creation of humans does not occur on a day different from the creation of

²⁹ The use of the term *person* invites a larger discussion that we have no room for here. Suffice it say that by that term I mean to denote a unique set of attributes or qualities, usually limited to humans, that make possible responsible action and thus moral culpability.

other animals. There is no separate day for humans. On the sixth day, as Gen. 1:24-31 tells it, all kinds of living creatures came forth: domestic animals and wild animals and creeping things. Humans and the animals of the earth, the text implies, have something in common. And as Gen. 2:7 indicates, the human earth-creature (*'adâm*) is made from the earth (*'adâmâh*). Humans are made of dust. To carry the Hebrew wordplay into Latin, we are humans because we are from the humus. We, too, are earthly and earthy creatures. Other creatures, to take seriously the language of Joseph Sittler, are our sisters and brothers.³⁰ In sum, these texts indicate that we humans are not only different from but significantly similar to our nonhuman neighbors. We are both responsible persons and earthly creatures. That is who we are.

With respect to what we are supposed to do, the Hebrew verbs in Gen. 1:26-28 indicate that one dimension of the human calling is mastery. The earth-creature is called to subdue (*kâbâs*) and have dominion over (*râdâh*) other creatures. We are called to dominion. But what does this mean? Does dominion, as is often assumed, necessarily mean domination? A larger canonical perspective sheds light on this important question. For example, Psalm 72 speaks most clearly of the ideal king—of one who rules and exercises dominion properly. The psalm unequivocally states that such a ruler executes justice for the oppressed, delivers the needy, helps the poor, and embodies righteousness in all he does. In short, the proper exercise of dominion yields shalom—the flourishing of all creation. This is a far cry from dominion as domination. And Jesus, in the Gospel accounts, defines dominion in terms clearly contrary to the way it is usually understood. For Jesus, to rule is to serve. To exercise dominion is to suffer, if necessary for the good

³⁰See, e.g., Joseph Sittler, "Ecological Commitment as Theological Responsibility," *Zygon* 5 (June 1970): 175.

of the other. There is no question of domination, exploitation, misuse. Humans, therefore, are called to rule, but ruling must be understood rightly.

But this is only part of the picture. Yes, we are called to exercise dominion, but we are also called to service. For example, Gen. 2:5 speaks of humans serving the earth ('*adâm* is to '*abâd* the '*adâmâh*). And Gen. 2:15—the last part of which is painted on the door of every Chicago police car—defines the human calling in terms of service: we are to serve ('*abâd*) and protect (*sâmâr*). We are to serve and protect the garden that is creation—literally be a slave to the earth for its own good, as well as for our benefit. Taking these texts seriously implies that dominion must be defined in terms of service. We are called to dominion as service. In short, to focus only on the dominion texts and then to interpret them as necessarily entailing domination, as Toynbee does, is faulty exegesis. It is a selective and tendentious reading of Genesis 1-2.

With respect to the argument that Gen. 1:28 gives unconditional permission to humans to use and abuse the world, Wendell Berry states:

Such a reading of Genesis 1:28 is contradicted by virtually all the rest of the Bible, as many people by now have pointed out. The ecological teaching of the Bible is simply inescapable: God made the world because he wanted it made. He thinks the world is good, and He loves it. It is His world; He has never relinquished title to it. And He has never revoked the conditions, bearing on His gift to us of the use of it, that oblige us to take excellent care of it. If God loves the world, then how might any person of faith be excused for not loving it or justified in destroying it?³¹

Berry's final question presses the issue pointedly: If God loves the world, then how can any Christian be justified in destroying it? In short, there is scant evidence to support the claim that Genesis 1-2 licenses the exploitation of the earth.

³¹ Wendell Berry, *What Are People For?* (New York: North Point, 1990), 98.

In addition, even if Toynbee's reading of Genesis were correct, is it true that the ecological crisis can be traced back, as he argues, to a single cause? James Nash, among others, rightly cautions against any such historical explanation:

The single cause theory for the emergence of our ecological crisis is pathetically simplistic. Lynn White generally recognized this fact, but he too succumbed finally to oversimplification. And most other complainants have been undeterred by fears of reductionism. They have often structured their complaint on a single, flimsy biblical text (Gen. 1:28) dealing with "dominion," and have ignored the fact that the Christian faith and its cultural influences have been far more complicated and ambiguous than that. Theirs is proof-texting of the worst sort. They have accused Christianity of being the parent of ecologically debilitating forms of industrialization, commercialism, and technology. However, in historical reality, many complex and interwoven causes were involved--and Christian thought was probably not the most prominent one.³²

The historical work of both Carolyn Merchant and Clarence Glacken, among others, also repudiates any theory of single causation with respect to ecological degradation.³³

Ecological decline, past and present, has many causes. As Nash succinctly states, "The ecological complaint against Christianity appears to be a serious historical oversimplification."³⁴ In sum, there are a number of significant problems with this first argument.

2. Does the Bible teach dualism?

The second argument, too, invites a number of questions. For example, are these dualisms (spirit and matter, soul and body) biblical? And even if they are, do they represent the only perspective within the Christian tradition? While this is not the place to engage in an extensive discussion of this issue, a few comments are apposite. First, it is

³²Nash, *Loving Nature*, 74-75.

³³See Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1980), and Clarence Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore* (Berkeley: University of California, 1967).

³⁴Nash, *Loving Nature*, 77.

not at all clear that either the Old or New Testament supports the kind of body/soul dualism assumed by advocates of this argument.³⁵ Widely accepted readings of biblical anthropology affirm either a functional holism or a holistic dualism.³⁶ In neither case is the body devalued. While the body is separate from and inferior to the soul for Plato,³⁷ this is not the case for Scripture. Wendell Berry summarizes the correct biblical view:

The formula given in Genesis 2:7 is not man = body + soul; the formula there is soul = dust + breath. According to this verse, God did not make a body and put a soul into it, like a letter into an envelope. He formed man of dust; then, by breathing his breath into it, He made the dust live. The dust, formed as man and made to live, did not *embody* a soul: it *became* a soul. “Soul” here refers to the whole creature. Humanity is thus presented to us, in Adam, not as a creature of two discrete parts temporarily glued together but as a single mystery.³⁸

The same is true with respect to the supposed dualism between matter and spirit in which matter is devalued. A variety of biblical texts—from Genesis to Revelation--and many basic Christian doctrines derived from the Bible--creation, incarnation, eschatology--affirm that for God, matter matters. Thus, since the initial premise is unacceptable—the claim that the Bible promotes a dualism between soul and body or between spirit and matter--this argument is not sound.

³⁵Backing for this claim can be found in H. W. Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981); G. E. Ladd, *Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), chs. 29, 34; H. Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), chs. 3, 6.

³⁶On the former, see G. C. Berkouwer, *Man: The Image of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), ch. 6. On the latter, see John Cooper, *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989). For one example (among many) of a Christian non-dualist anthropology, see Kevin Corcoran, *Rethinking Human Nature: A Christian Materialist Alternative to the Soul* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006). For more on this larger discussion, see the essays in *Whatever Happened to the Soul?*, eds. Warren Brown, Nancey Murphy, and H. Newton Malony (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998) and in *What About the Soul?: Neuroscience and Christian Anthropology*, ed. Joel Green (Nashville: Abingdon, 2004).

³⁷See, e.g., Plato's *Phaedo* and *Phaedrus*.

³⁸Wendell Berry, *Sex, Economy, Freedom, Community*, 106.

But what about the Christian tradition? While a *contemptus mundi* tradition based on dualisms of this sort does exist within the Christian faith, such a tradition is but one among many. As Nash reminds his readers, "Christianity is no monolith: it has had multiple strains with radically different emphases."³⁹ More precisely, Nash rightly states that this form of the ecological complaint "overlooks the complex, ambiguous, and diversified character of Christian history" and thus misses "the varied voices--albeit minorities--for ecological sensitivity in Christian history."⁴⁰ As Paul Santmire has clearly shown, Christianity has within it creation-affirming as well as creation-negating traditions. In contrast to the "spiritual motif," which adopts certain of these dualisms, the "ecological motif" stands as one of the dominant theological themes in Christian history.⁴¹ This vision of human existence eschews the dualism of spirit and matter by acknowledging human rootedness in the world of nature. This tradition desires to celebrate God's presence in and with the entire natural order. Therefore, the claim that the Bible and Christian tradition necessarily perpetuate creation-denying dualisms, and thus are at fault for the ecological crisis, is simply false.

3. Is the Lynn White Thesis plausible?

A great deal of ink has been spilt responding to the third argument—the so-called Lynn White thesis. Wesley Granberg-Michaelson concisely summarizes a number of the conclusions reached since White's article was first published.

First, White's description of biblical teaching regarding the environment is selective and highly distorted. Second, his argument that Christianity paved the way for the scientific and technological revolutions is very questionable. And

³⁹Nash, *Loving Nature*, 79.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*

⁴¹Santmire, *The Travail of Nature*, ch. 2. See also Susan Power Bratton, *Christianity, Wilderness, and Wildlife* (Scranton: University of Scranton, 1993).

third, his assumption that environmental destruction has flowed solely from the mindset of Western culture, and not from others, is historically dubious.⁴²

From what has been argued heretofore, it should be obvious that White's description of biblical teaching is, as Granberg-Michaelson claims, distorted. Like Toynbee, White focuses on only certain texts while ignoring others. Thus, his premise that historical Christianity understands dominion only as domination is mistaken. Also, White's claim that Christian thought was a necessary condition for the rise of modern science in the West is disputed. While this thesis has its able defenders,⁴³ it also has its compelling critics.⁴⁴ The precise role of Christian theology in the rise of modern science is a complex question admitting of no simple answer. And so another of White's premises is, at the very least, questionable.

Finally, as Granberg-Michaelson astutely points out, White's historical claim that ecological degradation is somehow linked uniquely with the modern Western worldview is dubious indeed. As James Nash, among many others, rightly states, "ecological crises are not peculiar to Christian-influenced cultures. Non-Christian cultures have also caused severe or irreparable harm to their ecosystems."⁴⁵ Plato describes deforestation in ancient Greece. Augustine laments desertification in fourth-century North Africa. The great

⁴²Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, *Ecology and Life* (Waco: Word, 1988), 33. For other critical responses to the Lynn White thesis, see, e.g., the essays by Louis Moncrief and Rene Dubos in *Western Man and Environmental Ethics*; Rene Dubos, "Franciscan Conservation versus Benedictine Stewardship," in Spring and Spring, *Ecology and Religion in History*; and Jeremy Cohen, "The Bible, Man, and Nature in the History of Western Thought: A Call for Reassessment" *Journal of Religion* 65:2 (April 1985): 155-172.

⁴³See, e.g., Eugene Klaaren, *Religious Origins of Modern Science* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) and Roger Hooykaas, *Religion and the Rise of Modern Science* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic, 1972).

⁴⁴See, e.g., David Lindberg and Ronald Numbers, *God and Nature* (Berkeley: University of California, 1986).

⁴⁵Nash, *Loving Nature*, 88.

Mayan cultures of Meso-America collapsed around the year AD 800 due to deforestation and soil erosion.⁴⁶ Ecological degradation is no respecter of religions. It predates Christianity and can be found in places where Christianity has asserted little or no influence. In a number of significant respects, therefore, White's argument is problematic.

But let us grant, for the sake of argument, that White is correct about all his claims. Let us assume that his premises are acceptable. Christianity was an essential contributor to the development of modern science and technology. Science and technology have given us great power over nature. The Christian tradition encourages mastery over nature, thereby promoting the "if we can, we must" logic of our technological society. Even if we accept his premises his argument is still problematic, for his conclusion that "Christianity bears a huge burden of guilt" for the ecological crisis does not follow. This is so because the conclusion relies on the questionable historical claim that science and technology are the principal causes of the crisis. While science and technology certainly have played a role in contributing to the current situation, many argue that other factors, especially economic factors, are equally if not more important.⁴⁷ There is, in other words, reason to doubt White's assumption about the dominant causal

⁴⁶ On the Maya, see, e.g., Clive Ponting, *A Green History of the World: The Environment and the Collapse of Great Civilizations* (New York: Penguin, 1991), ch. 5. See also Jared Diamond, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* (New York: Viking, 2005). Augustine's lament can be found in his *City of God*. Plato's observations are in his *Critias*.

⁴⁷ For example, in *Capitalism and Progress* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979) Bob Goudzwaard argues that modern capitalism (and socialism), with its ultimate belief in economic progress, has been a significant contributor to ecological degradation. Brian Walsh and Richard Middleton, in *The Transforming Vision* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1984), also point to a misplaced faith in economic prosperity or economism as one of the leading factors in ecological despoilation. And Alan Miller makes a similar argument in ch. 5 of *Gaia Connections* (Savage, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1991).

role of science and technology. In short, while extremely influential, the Lynn White thesis is not as plausible as many believe. In fact, there are compelling reasons to reject it.

It is interesting to note, in concluding this discussion of White's argument, that most references to White's thesis stop with his declaration that Christianity is at fault. However, in an often ignored section of his influential article, entitled "An Alternative Christian View," White goes on to argue 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." And thus given his diagnosis, White proceeds to offer a prescription: "I propose Francis [of Assisi] as a patron saint for ecologists."⁴⁸ In other words, contrary to many accounts, White's own response to what ails us is not to abandon Christianity but to draw upon earth-affirming aspects of that very tradition. In this way White himself is an admirable model for reappropriating the Christian tradition—a tradition assumed by many to be barren of ecological insight and hence unredeemable.

4. In God's good future will the earth be destroyed?

The fourth argument in the ecological complaint focuses on Christian eschatology. If the earth will be burned up, why care about it? Why care for something that will (sooner or later) be destroyed? Why care for the earth if the Rapture is imminent? But is this eschatology biblical? Will the earth be destroyed in the eschaton? Does Christian eschatology necessarily entail an ecologically bankrupt ethic?

In responding to these questions, at least two key biblical texts deserve attention here. Other important biblical passages will be discussed in the next chapter. A text often cited or alluded to in support of an anti-ecological eschatology is 2 Peter 3. The question

⁴⁸ White, "Historical Roots," 30.

at issue is what will happen when Jesus comes again, especially what will happen to the earth. After responding to those who ridicule the hope of Christ's coming by arguing that God is not slow but rather patiently forbearing, not wanting any to perish (vs. 9), the author states the "the day of the Lord" will most certainly come, but its coming will be unexpected, like a thief in the night (vs. 10). Furthermore, when Jesus comes again the heavens, with a loud rushing sound, will pass away, and the elements (heavenly bodies? the basic matter of the cosmos?), burning, will be loosened, and "the earth and the works that are upon it will be burned up" (vs. 10 RSV). Almost all English versions translate this last clause in a similar creation-negating manner. For example, "the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up" (KJV); "the earth with everything in it will vanish" (TEV); "the earth and everything in it will be laid bare" (NIV); "the earth and all that is in it will be burned up to nothing" (Phillips).

A survey of translations into languages other than English reveals a similar pattern. The French and Spanish equivalents of the Good News Translation render the last verb "will cease to exist (*cessera d'exister*)" and "will be burned up (*sera quemada*)," respectively. The Afrikaans translation reads, "the earth and all the works on it will burn down (*sal verbrand*)." Swedish, Russian, and Chinese versions read, "the earth and the works upon it will be burned up." The German Bible (*Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft Stuttgart*) comes closer to the correct reading when it translates the last clause as "the earth and the works upon it will find their judgment (*werden ihr Urteil finden*)."

The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) renders this text more accurately: "and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed." But the 1975 Dutch translation (*Nieuwe Vertaling, Het Nederlandsch Bijbelgenootschap Amsterdam*) even

more faithfully captures the meaning of the best Greek text: "and the earth and the works upon it will be found (*en de aarde en de werken daarop zullen gevonden worden*)."

To put it bluntly, this verse represents perhaps the most egregious mistranslation in the entire New Testament. The last clause of verse 10 in Greek is: *kai gê kai ta ev autê erga heurethêsetai*. The Greek verb in question here is *heurethêsetai*, from *heurêskein*, "to find," from which we get the English expression "eureka."⁴⁹ In other words, the text states that after a refiner's fire of purification (v. 7), the new earth will be *found*, not burned up. The earth will be *discovered*, not destroyed.⁵⁰ John Calvin's take on this text is instructive. Summarizing his interpretation, Susan Schreiner states:

Therefore, in Calvin's view, the fires of judgment will not destroy creation but will purify its original and enduring substance. With this argument, Calvin portrayed God as faithful to his original creation. Just as God brought the cosmos into being, closely governs and restrains its natural forces, so too he will renew and transform its original substance.⁵¹

This text does not refer to the Rapture. It is not about the destruction of creation. It refers, rather, to the purification and renewal of creation. As Thomas Finger insists in his careful study of this text, "The main emphasis of the text is that everything will be scrutinized or assessed by God, and not necessarily destroyed."⁵² Thus, 2 Peter 3 rightly rendered

⁴⁹ A discussion of textual criticism is beyond the scope of this project. Suffice it to say that the earliest and best attested manuscripts, reflected in both the United Bible Society and the Nestle-Aland Greek New Testaments, have *heurêthêsetai* here in 2 Peter 3:10. For discussion of this text, see Bruce Metzger's *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, and Richard Bauckham, *Word Biblical Commentary 50: Jude and 2 Peter* (Waco: Word, 1983), 303-322. For excellent background on this entire issue, see Al Wolters, "Worldview and Textual Criticism in 2 Peter 3:10," *Westminster Theological Journal* vol. 49, no. 2 (Fall 1987): 405-413.

⁵⁰ For corroboration of this reading, see Bauckham's commentary on 2 Peter.

⁵¹ Susan Schreiner, *The Theatre of His Glory: Nature and the Natural Order in the Thought of John Calvin* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 99.

⁵² Thomas Finger, "Evangelicals, Eschatology, and the Environment" (Scholars Circle monograph #2, Evangelical Environmental Network, 1998), 5.

speaks of a basic continuity rather than discontinuity of this world with the next. Creation is not ephemeral and unimportant--some second-rate way station until the eschaton--but rather our proper home. Biblical eschatology affirms the redemption and restoration of creation.

The other biblical text that deserves some attention here is 1 Thessalonians 4. Often cited as the proof text for “the Rapture,” this chapter from the Apostle Paul’s earliest letter actually teaches the exact opposite of what the *Left Behind* folks say it does. In the latter part of this chapter Paul is answering questions about what will happen when Jesus returns. Paul states that those who have died in Christ will go first to meet the risen Jesus, followed by those who are alive (vs. 15). When Jesus the coming King descends from heaven, the dead in Christ will rise first (vs. 16). Then, Paul writes, “we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them [the dead] to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will be with the Lord forever” (vs. 17). The English expression “will be caught up” is from the Greek word *harpagêsometha*, which is the future middle/passive indicative first person plural from *harpazô*, which means to seize or take away or catch up. So “we will be caught up” is a good translation. Where did the word rapture come from? In the Vulgate, the early fifth century Latin translation of the Bible, the Greek verb was translated using the Latin verb *rapere*, or to rapture; hence the English noun rapture is from the Latin *raptus*.

What is most crucial, however, is not the translation of the first verb in verse 17, but the translation of the second verb. The Greek expression is *eis apantêsin tou kuriou*—rendered “to meet the Lord” in the NRSV. The verb used is *apantaw*, which means to go out to meet a visiting dignitary, in the final stage of his journey, in order to escort him

back to your city. For example, Cicero writes of people who went out “to meet” Julius Caesar and Octavian.⁵³ In a parable Jesus speaks of five wise bridesmaids who went out “to meet” the bridegroom so they could escort him back to the wedding banquet (Matthew 25:6). Luke tells how believers from Rome went as far as the Forum of Appius (43 miles from Rome) and Three Taverns (33 miles from Rome) in order “to meet” the Apostle Paul so they could be part of his entourage as he entered the capital city (Acts 28:15). So when Paul writes in 1 Thessalonians 4 that we—the living and the dead--will meet the Lord in the air, this does *not* refer to some rapture. It refers, rather, to those in Christ joining the royal procession of Jesus the King coming to reign on a renewed and rennovated earth. We are not whisked off the earth; rather we join Christ as he comes to the earth. N.T. Wright clearly captures Paul’s meaning:

When Paul speaks of “meeting” the Lord “in the air,” the point is precisely not—as in the popular rapture theology—that the saved believers would then stay up in the air somewhere, away from earth. The point is that, having gone out to meet their returning Lord, they will escort him royally into his domain, that is, back to the place they have come from.⁵⁴

In no uncertain terms Barbara Rossing draws the proper conclusion from these (and other) texts: “This [Rapture] theology is not biblical. We are not Raptured off the earth, nor is God. No, God has come to live in the world through Jesus. God created the world, God loves the world, and God will never leave the world behind!”⁵⁵

⁵³ *Letters to Atticus* 8.16.2 and 16.11.6.

⁵⁴ N. T. Wright, *Surprised By Hope* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), 133.

⁵⁵ Barbara Rossing, *The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2004), 2. This book offers a thorough and trenchant critique of the Rapture and *Left Behind* eschatology. See also “Not Left Behind,” the appendix in Craig Hill’s fine book *In God’s Time: The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002) in which he offers a compelling critique of *Left Behind* biblical interpretation, concluding that “contemporary America’s most popular Christian eschatology is unscriptural.” (p. 207)

Christian eschatology, properly understood, is not creation-negating. As Thomas Finger concludes after surveying all four major eschatological schemes-- postmillennialism, dispensationalism, historic premillennialism, and amillennialism:

All evangelical eschatologies anticipate significant degrees of continuity between our present earth and the future world. To be sure, this contrasts greatly with what seems to be believed in some evangelical churches: that our ultimate destiny is an immaterial, spaceless heaven, and that our present earth will be wholly destroyed. Wherever these views may come from, they have no sound foundation is either evangelical theology or Scripture.⁵⁶

He goes on to argue that “the general environmental implications of this affirmation would be that since God will transform the earth we now have, this earth must be precious to God, and that proper stewardship of nonhuman nature is a task with eternal consequences.”⁵⁷ The claim that Christian eschatology is essentially anti-ecological is badly mistaken.

Finally, with respect to this fourth argument, even if LaHaye and Jenkins are correct about the eventual destruction of the earth at the eschaton, why does it necessarily follow that we should not care for creation now? It is a non sequitur to argue that because the earth will be destroyed in the future, humans should exploit it in the present. To use an analogy, is it permissible for me to plunder your house just because some time in the future it will be torn down? The fact that something will eventually be destroyed gives no license to abuse or neglect it. So this last argument, too, has significant problems. At least one of the central premises is unacceptable, and even if one grants this premise, the logic is fallacious, for the conclusion does not follow. The argument that we should not care for creation because it will one day be destroyed should be rejected.

⁵⁶ Finger, “Evangelicals, Eschatology, and the Environment,” 27.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

5. Summary

In my judgment the ecological complaint against Christianity is seriously flawed.

In providing a succinct summary of the problems, James Nash states that the complaint tends

to reduce the explanation of the complex ecological crisis to a single cause, to exaggerate the authority of Christianity in cultures, to minimize the fact that non-Christian cultures also have been environmental despoilers, to overlook the number of dissenting opinions in Christian history, and to underestimate the potential for ecological reform in Christianity.⁵⁸

The ecological complaint thus fails to substantiate the assertion that Christianity is the cause of the ecological crisis. As a result, the implication that Christianity itself must be rejected is likewise unjustified. But having said all this, we Christians need to be (again) reminded that we have not always been good keepers of the earth. We need to begin (and end) with confession and repentance, for while the Christian faith is not necessarily anti-ecological, we have all too often acted as if it were. Many of our beliefs, habits, and practices have in fact not served the earth but rather despoiled it.

⁵⁸Nash, *Loving Nature*, 74.

Outline

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