



White Blight and the Legacy of Protestant Ecotheology

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Blight (n): a plant pathology whose symptoms include sudden and severe yellowing, browning, spotting, withering, or dying of leaves, flowers, fruit, stems, or the entire plant. Most blights are caused by bacterial or fungal infestations, which usually attack the shoots and other young, rapidly growing tissues of a plant.

—USDA National Agricultural Library

The year 1968 marks a threshold in North American Protestant ecotheology, not due to the publication of any particular theological work, but rather due to the deluge of responses focused upon an influential secular one. In March of 1967, Dr. Lynn White Jr., a historian of medieval science and technology, published his American Academy of the Advancement of Science Annual Meeting Address, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” setting into motion a responsive, apologetic movement aimed at defending and reclaiming the tenets and traditions of Western Christianity.

Mid-century Protestants such as Lutheran scholar and pastor Joseph Sittler spoke about the importance of creation care well before the publication of White’s watershed article. As early as 1950, Sittler urged Protestants to interpret theological

One of the major developments of the late 1960s was the ecological movement for concern about the environment. An important critique of Christianity in regard to the environment was published in 1968 and has spurred both action and reaction.

concepts like *creatio Imago Dei* as privilege more than entitlement, and interaction with the natural world as responsibility rather than within a framework of utilitarian usefulness. Sittler encouraged the church to take up what he considered the most insistent and delicate task awaiting Christian theology: an articulated theology for the earth. He warned,

If the Church will not have a theology for nature, then irresponsible but sensitive men will act as midwives for nature's un-silence-able meaningfulness and enunciate a theology for nature. For earth . . . unquenchably sings out her violated wholeness, and in groaning and travailing awaits with man the restoration of all things.¹

And indeed, the late 1950s and early 1960s did give way to environmental awakening among North American Protestants, particularly within prophetic communities of ethnic diversity where connections were already being made between the exploitation of the earth and the subjugation of certain peoples. Here again 1968 marks an important year. It dates, of course, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s final, tragic trip to Memphis, Tennessee. The year and place of his assassination are memorable, as they mark the loss of a great pastor and public intellectual; however, little attention is typically given to what brought Dr. King to Memphis in the first place: a protest of 1,300 black sanitation workers forced to labor in environmentally hazardous contexts with unequal pay and benefits. In several public addresses and sermons, including his last, "I've Been to the Mountaintop," King lifted high the prophetic biblical traditions as resources to combat insidious, racialized environmental injustice. Giving voice to such intersectional organizing characterized the emergence of what is today referred to as the Environmental Justice Movement (EJM).²

Regrettably, it wasn't King, Sittler, or any other from within the Christian community who drew the attention of the wider Protestant community when it came to environmental concerns. Their clarion calls to a peaceable fight for holistic justice and renewed dependence upon God's creation proved less compelling than the impulse to protect the church from critics from without. Hence, with five short pages in a scientific journal, Lynn White Jr. brought to the limelight the nexus of ecology and Christianity, devoid of constructive attention to race, shaping conversation for decades to follow up until our present day.

¹ Joseph Sittler, "A Theology for the Earth" in *Environmental Stewardship: Critical Perspectives—Past and Present*, ed. R. J. Berry (New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 52.

² Many scholars mark 1987 as the formal beginning of EJM, wherein Charles Lee and Rev. Benjamin Chavis first used the term "environmental racism" in their draft for the United Church of Christ's Commission for Racial Justice, "Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States." The report was the first national study to correlate waste-facility siting and race. The same commission hosted the first People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in Washington, DC, in October of 1991. The Environmental Protection Agency first opened up an Office of Environmental Justice in 1992. Practically speaking, EJM is less concerned with demographics (or the number of ethnically diverse participants) and more focused on the function of justice and power, which necessarily plumbs the role of race and class. What distinguishes EJM from conservation-like movements is its recognition of ecological relations as political relations.

As I will outline in this article, White's essay prompted North American Christians to reflect on the promulgation of harmful anthropocentrism and destructive instrumentalist views of nature. His article led to Christian environmentalism's obsession with reforming thought and worldview over and above behavior. As such, White contributed to what would become a quest for a universal Christian approach to environmental questions and problems. But in raising such axiomatic consciousness, White's inquiry did something more; it also blighted generative theological reflection by imposing such a methodology, an approach that has proven quite "white" indeed. The result has amounted to anemic North American Protestant responses, which lack prophetic vision and action in light of our increasingly complicated environmental realities.

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In an effort to name and explore the devastation of such white blight, this essay undertakes three tasks.³ First, I will offer an overview and appraisal of White's fifty-year-old argument, including its early reception within North American Protestant communities. Second, I will begin to tease out the long-term impact of White's reigning methodology on Protestant ecotheology by examining the religious cosmologies called upon and ignored, and the consequential landscape of ecoethical approaches. And finally, I will briefly look to the rise of new religious environmentalisms, EJM in particular, for insight on how North American Protestant ecotheology might more effectively contribute to the larger task of environmental humanities in the fifty years yet to come.

LYNN WHITE JR.'S INFLUENTIAL ARGUMENT

In "Historical Roots," White outlines three major arguments that together champion a methodology focused on the reformation of thought, axioms, and worldview. First, he asserts that contemporary (1967) ecological problems result from the misuse of science and technology, the combination of which inextricably reflects Western Christian concepts of humankind over and against "nature."

³ As far as I know, the phrase "white blight" is my own, although while returning to Karen Baker-Fletcher's work in the preparation of this article, I came across her use of this agricultural term and have greatly benefited from her insights. "Today the term 'urban' has become popular. Like 'inner city,' the term 'urban' refers to city neighborhoods populated by African Americans, Hispanics, and other people of color. People use it selectively, often accompanied by the word 'blight.' But while blight is a very real problem, there is far more to urban life, and some urban neighborhoods are more 'blighted' than others. I wonder about the spiritual 'blight' in predominately middle-and-upper-class urban neighborhoods, where people have forgotten their connection to folk in other classes." Karen Baker-Fletcher, *Sisters of Dust, Sisters of Spirit: Womanist Wordings on God and Creation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998).

Second, White unapologetically regards Christianity as “the most anthropocentric religion the world has ever seen.” As a religion it must therefore claim “a huge burden of [ecological] guilt.” And third, White suggests that because ecological problems are fundamentally religious rather than technological in scope, a new religious perspective is urgently needed.

As a historian focused on the development of technologies, White begins his essay with broad-brush explanations of why scientific and technological advancements hail from the West.⁴ “One thing is so certain that it seems stupid to verbalize it,” White states at the fore, “both modern technology and modern science are distinctively Occidental. Our technology has absorbed elements from all over the world, notably from China; yet everywhere today, whether in Japan or in Nigeria, successful technology is Western.”⁵ While White pays lip service to the role of the Islamic Renaissance in the curation of ancient texts and in the advancement of math and science, he conveniently siphons the complicated narrative of the late Middle Ages and simplifies sorted colonial histories to suggest that “all significant science is Western in style and method, whatever the pigmentation or language of the scientists.”⁶

As if this nullification of racial and religious-ethnic realities in the telling of the story isn’t itself evidence of white blight, White’s connection of particular representations of the Christian theological tradition to the rise of science and technology is also concerning. One is left wondering what Christian titles were on White’s bookshelf, for despite strains of apophatic, feminist, mystical thought, White typifies the Latin West by arguing that it tilled the soil for Baconian views of human mastery over nature with its essentialist, voluntarist ethical traditions. Whereas Eastern Christendom understood sin as intellectual blindness and salvation as illuminated thinking, Western Christians regarded sin as moral evil, something to be eradicated by right conduct. In White’s pithy terms: “The Greek saint contemplates; the Western saint acts.”⁷ And it was in this acting, he suggests, that a conquest of nature emerged.

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To White, this conquest was inevitable. Key Western theological emphases, such as *creatio Imago Dei* and a gradual shift from a theology of nature to natural

⁴The term “West” here and hereafter is White’s term, which for good reason has come under considerable critique since the late 1960s.

⁵Lynn White Jr., “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” *Science*, n.s., 155, no. 3767 (March 10, 1967): 1204.

⁶In brief, White (“Historical Roots,” 1204) mentions al-Razi’s contributions in medicine, ibn-al-Haytham’s in optics, and Omar Khayyam’s great feats in mathematics, but gives no explanation for why even they are “Western.”

⁷White, “Historical Roots,” 1206.

theology, placed human beings above nature. Rather than looking to the natural realm to decode God's communication with humankind, as was more common in Eastern theology, nature was rationally useful in the quest to understand God's mind. This, he argues, is why from the thirteenth century to the late eighteenth century, scientists described their motivations in religious terms. Hence, in its Western form, Christianity bears tremendous guilt, for even though mastery over and against nature is no longer explicitly linked to Christian thought, the origins of such destructive axioms were sown within and have yet to be displaced by a more constructive set of values.⁸ Therefore, White predicts the ecologic crisis will only worsen until "we reject the Christian axiom that nature has no reason for existence save to serve man."⁹

At first take, it seems White advocates for the dissolution of religion. And in fact, many taken with White's arguments have suggested just that. Yet, surprisingly, "Historical Roots" articulates the positive role of religion toward the shared aim of environmental responsibility. While White wants nothing to do with Western Christian thought, highlighting how even the patron saint of nature, Saint Francis of Assisi, failed to set forth productive alternative views of Christianity, he concedes, "Since the roots of our trouble are so largely religions, the remedy must also be essentially religious, whether we call it that or not. We must rethink and refeel our nature and destiny."¹⁰

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What was lost on White, and has been whitewashed since, is this: prior to, around, and since 1968, many communities of faith *were* rethinking and refeeling their way through environmental challenges. The thinking and feeling came together as vulnerable communities moved toward action because environmental realities required practical, local responses that in aggregate began to change functional worldviews.¹¹ However, within the larger narrative of the twentieth-century North American environmental movement, these lived stories of relationship to earth community have been overlooked. White's plea to rethink religion has always loomed large and continues to shape Protestant ecotheology today, but at the expense of the emotive and the inclusion of a great many voices.

⁸ White, "Historical Roots," 1207.

⁹ White, "Historical Roots," 1207.

¹⁰ White, "Historical Roots," 1207.

¹¹ A wonderful resource outlining examples of this is Robert D. Bullard, *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1990).

THE SHAPESHIFTING OF IDEOLOGICAL LANDSCAPES

In the early months of 1968, White was excoriated by Christians, known and unknown, for his provocative essay. Reflecting on these responses some five years later he wrote,

I was denounced not only in print but also on scraps of brown paper thrust anonymously into envelopes, as a junior Anti-Christ . . . bent on destroying the true faith. The most common charge was that I had ignorantly misunderstood the nature of man's dominion and that it is not an arbitrary rule but rather a stewardship of our fellow creatures for which mankind is responsible to God.¹²

White's summary of the feedback was accurate, at a time where the Protestant environmental movement was just taking flight. From 1968 up until the late 1980s, majority Protestant views on the topic were decidedly anthropocentric in scope and largely articulated by white male theologians and biblical scholars who were quite removed from environmental realities like those in Memphis, Tennessee. In response to White, they sought to defend the faith and reclaim the Christian's proper, active role in creation. To simplify such anthropocentric views, I'll speak to three particular emphases: godly dominion, stewardship, and priesthood.

Biblical conservatives, prone to working within the confines of certain texts, returned to the priestly creation account articulating the need to subdue (*kabash*) and dominate (*radah*) the earth in "godly" ways (Gen 1:28). Undoubtedly a minority view in today's landscape, this view sees no need to reform texts or thought. Rather, humans must utilize the land for the well-being of humanity with greater responsibility.¹³ Others responding to White's critique chose to more notably heed the impact of sin, acknowledging how difficult it is to live into such responsibility. Electing to focus instead upon the Yahwist creation account, where Adam is commanded to till (*abad*) and keep (*shamar*) the earth, such proponents defended the Christian tradition by lifting high humankind as stewards (Gen 2:15). They argued that in its texts and origins, the Christian tradition has always promoted power to and for creation rather than power over. The need, therefore, is to return to such simple perspectives. Stewardship remains a widespread perspective in contemporary North American Protestant creation theology, although not without

¹² Lynn White Jr., "Continuing the Conversation" in *Western Man and Environmental Ethics: Attitudes Toward Nature and Technology*, ed. Ian G. Barbour, (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1973), 60.

¹³ The evangelical Francis Schaeffer was one of the first to respond to White in such a fashion. His work with Udo Middelmann, *Pollution and the Death of Man: The Christian View of Ecology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1970) articulates such "godly dominion" perspectives. E. Cal Beisner is a contemporary evangelical endorsing such readings of the Scriptures. His work *Where Garden Meets Wilderness: Evangelical Entry into the Environmental Debate* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) builds upon Schaeffer's with a renewed focus on the Christian imperative to utilize land for the sake of free enterprise.

significant critique.¹⁴ And lastly, some, influenced by the Eastern thought that White so quickly divested from the Western canon, argued that neither godly dominion nor stewardship speaks to the undeniable connection between humans and nature. A more adequate response is that of priesthood, where the focus is upon who to be rather than what to do. These respondents claimed White was correct in granting the special vocation of humans in the biblical texts but incorrect in characterizing such calling as a form of mastery. Instead, humans are to act as priests or mediators who exist to return to God what was God's in the first place.¹⁵

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By the early 1980s, Protestant focus on the reinterpretation of biblical texts and reclamation of human-centric creation theologies began to be eclipsed by reconstructive theological efforts. Still taken with the validity of White's essential argument, Trinitarian theologians tarried to offer more theocentric readings of the tradition. For example, rather than treating *creatio Imago Dei* as grounds for dominion, Trinitarians promoted the reconfiguration of biblical anthropology as *creatio Imago Trinitatis*, wherein the focus is on proper relatedness to God and other-than-human life. Decidedly sacramental views underscored this burgeoning emphasis, giving special attention to the Holy Spirit's role in ongoing creation. From the sacramentalist's point of view, the Spirit sacralizes nature, calling humans to live in concord with God's beloved habitat.¹⁶

Yet, others with a biocentric approach took White's thesis to task by suggesting a complete overhaul of reigning Christian cosmologies. Heavily influenced by process theology and deep ecology, such theologians explained human patterns of harmful domination over nature with misinformed subject/object distinctions.

¹⁴ One of the most comprehensive works outlining critiques of stewardship is R. J. Berry, ed., *Environmental Stewardship: Critical Perspectives—Past and Present* (New York: T&T Clark, 2006). Lutheran readers might especially appreciate Paul Santmire's insightful article, "Partnership with Nature According to the Scriptures: Beyond the Theology of Stewardship," *Christian Scholar's Review* 32, no. 4 (Summer 2003): 381–412. For a contemporary Protestant view endorsing stewardship, see the works of Steven Bouma-Prediger, Calvin DeWitt, and Louke van Wensveen.

¹⁵ For more on the early articulations of priesthood perspectives, see Paulos Gregorios, *The Human Presence: An Orthodox View of Nature* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1978) and more recent work by John Panteleimon Manoussakis, John Chryssavgis, and John Zizioulas.

¹⁶ Jürgen Moltmann's work is a foremost example of such Trinitarian thought. See *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993) and *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993). James A. Nash, *Loving Nature: Ecological Integrity and Christian Responsibility* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991) and Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993) make substantial contributions to sacramentalist perspectives.

The universe is not an object to be studied or even cared for, they argued; rather, it is a subject itself, having a life of its own as a place where God dwells. God, then, isn't a person as much as an unfolding source of life.¹⁷

What all three of these prevailing ecotheological approaches share—anthropocentrism in its various forms, theocentrism, and biocentrism—is White's method, which connects overarching cosmologies (or ways of thinking about the world) to environmental problems. While variant in their proposed solutions, all of these approaches espouse White's implicit thesis—namely, that the Latin West created these ecological problems and should therefore lead in the quest to solve them. And as if contemporary data on the complexity of climate change weren't enough to debunk that conclusion, an honest reckoning of who historically narrated the West's ecological saga should begin to do the job. As Christian ethicist Willis Jenkins articulated so well in a 2009 exposé on White, North American Protestants have swallowed the Lynn White pill, overlooking religious phenomena outside the confines of cosmologies. In so doing, the Protestant environmental movement has undervalued fertile grounds of lived experience and related sites of creative theological production, most notably created by communities of ethnic diversity.¹⁸ What has been mulched over, kept from the air and light, are the practices of those who by nature of their very embodied identities think *from* the world as much or more than *about* it.

THE RISE OF RELIGIOUS ENVIRONMENTALISMS AND THE NEXT FIFTY YEARS

Ecowomanist Karen Baker-Fletcher calls this thinking-feeling “organic intellectual work.” Too much theology, she asserts, “appears to be written from the head but not from the heart, for other scholars but not for everyday living. If theology continues in this direction, it will not survive, because it fails to meet the needs of the people.”¹⁹ Now twenty years later, we might add that such theology also fails to meet the needs of our perilous planet.

For decades, faith communities predominately comprised of ethnically diverse persons have advocated for localized, practical solutions to environmental challenges. Beyond Memphis, they include the black women of Warren County, North Carolina, with ties to the United Church of Christ who successfully fought off the dumping of contaminated soil in the late 1970s, the predominately black

¹⁷ Examples of such Protestant thought are John B. Cobb Jr., *Sustainability: Economics, Ecology and Justice* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992); and Charles Birch and John B. Cobb Jr., *The Liberation of Life: From the Cell to the Community* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

¹⁸ Willis Jenkins, “After Lynn White: Religions Ethics and Environmental Problems,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 37, no. 2 (2009): 289. As Jenkins states (*Ecologies of Grace* [New York: Oxford Press, 2008], 11), “White's critique of Christianity operated with three assumptions about religious worldviews: that they generate social practices, that they should be measured by the criteria of intrinsic value and anthropocentrism, and that salvation stories threaten environmentally benign worldviews.”

¹⁹ Baker-Fletcher, *Sisters of Dust*, 8.

and Hispanic members of First New Christian Fellowship Missionary Baptist in LA who have been holding local developers and oil-refinery industries accountable for over thirty years, and the ethnically diverse interfaith community of Morrisonville, Louisiana, who convinced the giant Dow Chemical to pay for relocation away from the toxic vinyl-chloride plant. These communities, and many more like them, have moved out of a head-heart kind of love toward the pragmatic needs of the community. They've diversified the scope of Protestant ecotheology not only by way of race, class, and oftentimes gender but also in their precipitation of pluralist approaches to Christian environmental thought and action. These communities have led the way in advocating for a pragmatic, multivalent approach to ecological challenges despite the ways their budding influence has been blighted time and again. In looking to the next fifty years, Protestantism would do well to more intentionally include their narratives in the telling of North American Protestant ecotheology and reckon with their localized approaches for a model capable of addressing what has long ailed the church's environmental efforts.

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It is fitting, therefore, to conclude with some pressing questions emergent within these environmentalisms:

- How might environmental histories be told outside of the biases of power and privilege, including the power and privilege of established environmental groups?
- What can transform discourse on human alienation from nature to more authentically include the alienation of certain persons and cultures from the land?
- How might ethnically diverse communities be lifted up as models of resistance in the quest to abandon individualist, promethean anthropologies?
- Is it possible for contemporary Protestantism to embrace more holistic cosmologies by paying closer attention to the voices of ethnically diverse women in particular, through the words of ancient texts and contemporary leaders alike? If so, how?
- What steps must the church take to grow in consciousness? How might Protestants become more adept at recognizing concrete injuries of injustice and repent in action vis-à-vis incremental remedies?

Based on the rapid changes of today's global climate and fragile biosphere, the next fifty years promise to bring challenges beyond our current scope of imagination. And given that reality, a question Lynn White asked in 1967 will undoubtedly ring

true in 2068: is religion relevant? If Protestantism wishes to be so, it will need to reform in light of the above questions. It will, in a sense, require the turning over of richer and more resilient soil in ecotheology. So, may we, together in our differences, get to work and dig. ⊕

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