

Rethinking Lynn White: Christianity, Creatures, and Democracy.¹

Lynn White Jr.'s infamous 1967 article, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis" has been a source of continuous debate and controversy in the field of Religion and Ecology. In the forty years since its original publication, hundreds of books and articles, most of them by eco-theologians, have been written as a direct response to it.² Whether those of you in this room have read Lynn White's article or not, you've more than likely absorbed his now highly debated and frequently misunderstood thesis that "Christianity bears a huge burden of guilt"³ for the ecological crisis. The field of eco-theology, especially in its earliest stages, has largely shaped itself as a response to the accusations leveled at Christianity by White. These include, but are not limited to, the ecological culpability of a biblically inspired attitude of dominion over nature, the environmental impact of anthropocentrism, and the degree to which Christianity has laid the foundations for the development of exploitative modes of science and technology.

Today, in response to this reductionistic view of White as a mere critic of Christianity, I wish to propose a different approach for understanding his work. In the interest of brevity, I would like to simply share a story with you in the hopes that I can draw out a few key points from my dissertation research regarding White's theological outlook and his thoughts on human-animal relations.

The year was 1926, a full four decades before he would publish his "Historical Roots" article, and a young Lynn White, Jr., just 19 years old at the time, had travelled to Ceylon, India. There, he paused to watch the construction of a road that, once finished, would link the British controlled seaside ports with the tea plantations located deep in the island's interior. The purpose of this road, he learned, was to expedite the

¹ This presentation is excerpted from a longer paper entitled "A Spiritual Democracy of All God's Creatures: Eco-Theology and Lynn White's Animals." For more information, please contact the author at matthew.riley@aya.yale.edu

² Willis Jenkins, "After Lynn White: Religious Ethics and Environmental Problems," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 37 no.2 (2009), 285-6 and Elspeth Whitney, "History, Lynn White, and Ecotheology," *Environmental Ethics* 15 (1993), 158.

³ Lynn White, jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155, no. 3767 (10 March 1967), 1206.

shipping of tea. As the local laborers slashed their way through the dense, green jungles and dug through the heavy, red earth, White observed something unexpected. In the midst of these developing roadways were conspicuous cones of earth that the local, non-British workers had left standing in the otherwise level paths through the thick vegetation.

When White asked what the cones were, he was told that they were snake nests and that the laborers had left them undisturbed out of respect for the animals that lived there. “They were spared not because the workmen were afraid of snakes,” remarked White, “but because of a feeling by the workers that the snake had a right to its house so long as it wanted to stay there.”⁴ This was due, he was surprised to learn, to the fact that the local laborers were Buddhists and that their religious beliefs and values invited them to see animals much differently than their overseers. With his usual measure of acumen and wit, White observed that “[m]any of the officials seemed to be Scots and it occurred to me that if the men with the shovels in their hands likewise had been Presbyterians the snakes would have fared less well.”⁵

Now, I chose to share this narrative because it draws our attention to two important aspects of White’s thought that tend to be downplayed – or worse yet, ignored – in the scholarship that has grown in response to White’s work. The first and perhaps most important point that I would like to highlight concerns White’s own interpretation of these events. He identifies this chance encounter with snakes as the roots from which his own “personal theology of ecology” grew.⁶ What emerges when White’s texts are read closely, I argue, is not the work of an iconoclast, but the attempts of a scholar working across disciplines to apply his ideas constructively to a problem which he cares deeply about: the worsening ecological crisis and the potential of his own faith, Christianity, to help solve the dilemma.

Second, and more specifically, I chose to relate this story about snakes because I want to highlight the significant role that creatures play in White’s thought. In and of itself, the inclusion of snakes in this story might

⁴ Lynn White, jr., “Continuing the Conversation” in *Western Man and Environmental Ethics – Attitudes Toward Nature and Technology*, ed. Ian G. Barbour (Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1973), 55.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

seem insignificant. However, when examined closely, White's texts reveal more than a passing interest in nonhuman animals. For the last twenty years of his life White repeatedly and consistently urged his fellow Christians to move beyond not just the biblical notion of dominion, but also beyond an ethic of stewardship to what he referred to as a "third legitimately biblical position" where humans might begin to think and act as if we are members of what he called a "spiritual democracy of all God's creatures." In this light, he understood all creatures – whether they be living, nonliving, or something altogether different – as linked together in their praise of God and through their mutual compassion and care for one another.

What rethinking and recovering White's legacy in this way accomplishes, I believe, is that it challenges us to move beyond purely adversarial interpretations of White's argument and it brings a new framework for meaningful Christian engagement in human-animal, human-Earth, and human-God relationships to light. While White acknowledged "that many contemporary Americans who are concerned about our ecologic crisis will be neither able or willing to counsel with wolves or exhort birds" as Saint Francis did,⁷ he did insist that any theological answer to the environmental crisis needs to reconsider animal subjectivity and that viewing all creatures as co-worshippers in a great spiritual democracy is a viable, desirable, and necessary ecotheological vision for the future. If humanity is to stem the tide of the ecological crisis, White asserted, Christians must be like Saint Francis who "worshipped a God who was the God both of squirrels and of men."⁸

⁷ White, "Historical Roots," 1207.

⁸ White, "Continuing the Conversation," 61.