

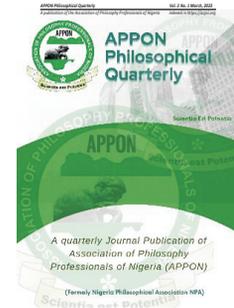
A BIBLICAL APPROACH TO ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY: REFLECTIONS ON LYNN WHITE'S DOMINION DEBATE

Philomena Aku Ojomo, PhD

Department of Philosophy, Lagos State University

Email: philomena.ojomo@lasu.edu.ng

philoojomo63@gmail.com



Copyright: © 2023 by the authors. Submitted for possible open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

Abstract

Tracing the historical roots of ecological crisis in the world, Lynn White claimed that much of the techno-scientific culture that ravenously exploits and depletes the environment was influenced by Judeo-Christian tradition. He specifically recalls the mandate by God in the book of Genesis that man should dominate and subdue the earth as the take-off point. Labelling Christianity as the most anthropocentric religion, he surmises that through ideological influence, Judeo-Christian tradition is a culprit in the environmental degradation that we witness today. However, further musings on the said Genesis account, in the light of other clarifying body of revelation, evinces that the idea of domination that connotes exploitation is an honest misinterpretation of the text. When God made everything, He commented that all He had created was good. Also, man was made in the image and likeness of God. Hence, it is expected that man ought to look at creation with the eyes of God and treat it with awe, reverence, and respect since it is all good. More so, God's chief attribute is love and this love is also extended to all living and non-living things; so it is hardly justifiable to say that God meant man to treat the environment without consideration for the intrinsic value of the environment. As we shall see, the idea of domination mentioned in Genesis is relatable to man's kingly role as a rational creature in the earth. But what is God's perspective of kingship? Two concepts suffice- stewardship and service. This paper therefore intends to reflect on the debate engendered by Lynn White, with the intention of giving an alternative interpretation to the subject matter and showing that if anything, the Judeo-Christian tradition rather contributes positively to environmental sustainability.

Keywords: Environmental sustainability, Judeo-Christian tradition, Lynn White, Bible, Dominion, Stewardship

Introduction

Lynn White's renowned and controversial article from 1967 titled, 'The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis,' has had extensive impact in the fields of philosophy, theology, and history.¹ It is considered to be one of the most cited articles that discuss issues at the intersection of religion and ecology. As such, it serves as a standard point of reference for scholarship that attempts to discern the connection between Judeo-Christian tradition and environmental crisis.

In this article, White's basic thesis is that the Judeo-Christian tradition is to be held responsible for the environmental degradation of the society. However, as we shall see, White's argument upon probing seems to be questionable within the purview of his article. This paper begins with highlighting White's argument and summarizes some responses to his essay. The paper further considers the broader perspective of the Biblical context (Genesis Chapter 1) from which White culled his thesis to blame Christianity for the environmental degradation of the society. In so doing, this paper seeks to show that an alternative interpretation of the text in the broader context of the spirit of the entire scriptures would rather foster a spirit of care, reverence, protection, and stewardship towards the environment. It is to the end of evincing the faithfulness of Christian theology in supporting a rich and balanced care for the well-being of the entire creation.

Lynn White's Thesis on The Impact of Judeo-Christian Tradition On Ecological Crisis

Recounting and analyzing the creation story

in Genesis 1, White argued that Judeo-Christian tradition illegitimately granted humans a cosmologically advantaged position. Putting man separate and superior to the rest of creation, this position placed human beings at the helm of affairs in nature. White noticed that human beings were made in the image and likeness of God. After the creation of humans, the Genesis 1:28 specially records God instructing humans to "...have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth." This dominion mandate given to humans was demonstrated in the naming of everything in nature. Thus, Lynn White lamented that according to this worldview, "no item in the physical creation had any purpose save to serveman's purposes."² He therefore concluded that Christianity is "the most anthropocentric religion the world has ever seen".³

According to White, this dangerous humanistic ideology translated into a destructive force when integrated into the activities of science and technology. Precisely, White posited that the union of science and technology in the Middle Ages- which marked the emergence of ecological crisis occurred in a culture that was strongly influenced by Judeo-Christian anthropocentric assumptions. At face value, the prevalent ecological crisis can be directly traced to the application of science and technology (i.e., resource mining, industrialization, pollution, wastes from industries, effects of atomic and nuclear bombs etc.). However, prevailing Judeo-Christian orientation that molded the scientific and technological culture equally bears a "huge burden of guilt" for the

¹ Attfield, R., "Social History, Religion, and Technology: An Interdisciplinary Investigation into Lynn White, Jr.'s 'Roots,'" *Environmental Ethics* 31 (2009): 31.

² White, L. Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155 (1967): 1205.

³ White, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," 1205.

development of environmental degradation.⁴

White thus argued that since the roots of our ecological crisis has its origin in religion and culture, resolving the situation will take more than an appeal to better methods and application in science and technology: “Both our present science and our present technology are so tinctured with orthodox Christian arrogance toward nature, that no solution for our ecological crisis can be expected from them alone.”⁵ As a way out, he proposed a return to the basics and a reorientation of Western culture so that a better eco-friendly and inter-related human-nature rapport could be forged.

To give a sample of this much needed reorientation, White, ironically but insightfully turned to and recommended a fringe tradition in Christianity modeled by St. Francis of Assisi, who he identified as a “patron saint for ecologists.”⁶ St. Francis of Assisi was an Italian Catholic Franciscan Monk who caught a deep revelation of God's love and extended that love in an unusual dimension not only to men but to animals, plants and nature in general. He had such reverence for all of nature that he was literally not able to bring himself to kill an ant. By some supernatural grace, animals- and even unfriendly and wild beasts like lions were always tamed and playful around him. For White, St. Francis demonstrated the much needed humility and reverence towards nature

that is needed to entrench the egalitarian spirit and advancement of what he called democracy of all God's creatures. In St. Francis, White, found hope that the same religion that influenced the present ecological crisis has within itself, the ideological seeds that can be harnessed to encourage a less dominating or anthropocentric approach to nature and also steer science and technology towards more nature friendly ends.⁷

Because of the diverse and numerous reactions that White's thesis engendered, some scholars have attempted to analyze and summarize the crux of White's proposition. Just to give examples of such, Paul A. Djupe and Patrick Kieran Hunt surmise White's thesis as positing that “Judeo-Christian religion has an inherently negative effect on environmental concern-environmental concern could only improve if Judeo-Christian religious institutions were rejected and if society converted to a communion with nature's social structure.”⁸

In another reading of White, Bron Taylor, Gretel Van Wieren and Bernard Daley Zaleha recap White's thesis as arguing that “Western scientific and religious ideas, working in concert, precipitated the ecological crisis, and these ideas continue to influence environment-related attitudes and behaviors, even in the increasingly secular world.”⁹ Todd LeVasseur and Anna Peterson identify three composite claims in the thesis of

⁴ White, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” 1206.

⁵ White, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” 1207.

⁶ White, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” 1206.

⁷ Minter, B. & Manning, R., “**An Appraisal of the Critique of Anthropocentrism and Three Lesser Known Themes in Lynn White's 'The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis,'**” *Organization & Environment* 18, no. 2 (2005): 163.

⁸ Djupe, P. & Hunt, P., “Beyond the Lynn White Thesis: Congregational Effects on Environmental Concern,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 48, no. 4 (2009): 670.

⁹ Taylor, B., Van Wieren, G., & Zaleha, B., “Lynn White Jr. and the Greening-of-Religion Hypothesis.” *Conservation Biology* 30, no. 5: 1001.

White,

First, he argues that ideological and cultural factors, especially religion, are the root causes of the 'ecologic crisis' facing contemporary humans. Second, he identifies Western Christianity as particularly influential in creating environmentally destructive attitudes. Third, he suggests that, just as the fundamental causes of ecological destruction are religious, so too must their solution be religious.¹⁰

From the above different renderings of White's position, one can observe that they are incompatible. At best, what this situation reveals is that the complexity of what White espoused cannot be easily captured in a single thesis.

Responses To Lynn White's Thesis

In one reading of White, a sociologist known as Lewis Moncrief criticized White's myopic and limited understanding of ecological crisis along the line of a single cause. He instead advocated a more pluralistic and complex set of factors that have contributed to the current state of environmental degradation. Citing some examples, Moncrief listed other possible factors such as democratization, capitalism, and even the prevailing culture.

Though Moncrief acknowledged the possible influence of Christianity on these other factors, he noted that this influence is at best indirect. More so, he observed that the prevalence of some ecological crisis in some or even worse measures in non-Christian societies reveal the inter-play of other factors beyond the indirect influence of Judeo-Christian tradition.¹¹ It can also be observed that White neglected the role that economic and sociopolitical influences also play in the challenge of ecological crisis.¹²

Another line of response was discontent with White's claim that Christianity has little to offer in terms of engendering environmental sustainability, apart from exceptional cases such as St. Francis's. While John Passmore agreed that Christianity cannot altogether be let off the hook in the blame for influencing the current state of ecological crisis, he further argued that this effect can be credited to the impact of Greek philosophy on Christianity rather than an inherent tendency in Judeo-Christian tradition. Thus, Passmore identified other Christian traditions such as the stewardship tradition that considers human person as a privileged steward or caretaker of God's hallowed creation rather than a harsh task master over life and nature.¹³ Other scholars such as Robin Attfield (1983),¹⁴ Lloyd Steffen (1992),¹⁵ and David Livingstone (1994)¹⁶ also concur to this perspective by offering a less hostile and more benign

¹⁰. LeVasseur, T. & Peterson, A., "Introduction," In *Religion and Ecological Crisis: The 'Lynn White Thesis' at Fifty*, edited by T. LeVasseur, Anna Peterson (New York: Abingdon, 2017), 1.

¹¹. Moncrief, L., "The Cultural Basis of our Environmental Crisis," *Science* 170 (1970): 509.

¹². Marangudakis, M., "The Medieval Roots of our Environmental Crisis." *Environmental Ethics* 23 (2001): 245.

¹³. Passmore, J., *Man's Responsibility for Nature: Ecological Problems and Western Traditions*, (New York: Scribner, 1974), 55.

¹⁴. Attfield, R., "Christian Attitudes to Nature," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 44 (1983): 369.

¹⁵. Steffen, L., "In Defense of Dominion," *Environmental Ethics* 14 (1992): 63.

¹⁶. Livingstone, D., "The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis: A Reassessment," *Fides et Historia* 26 (1994): 38.

interpretation of the dominion mandate given to man by God, while also emphasizing that the stewardship tradition is more prevalent and consistent with Judeo-Christian tradition.

A Re-Reading of White's Interpretation of The Dominion Mandate

White's contention against Christianity's role in ecological crisis stems mainly from his interpretation of Gen. 1: 26, "And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have *dominion* over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth," and Gen. 1:28, "And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have *dominion* over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air; and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth."

The key word for White is "dominion." White interpreted this idea of dominion in an aggressive sense which construes man as a harsh taskmaster that is given liberty to exploit the earth's resources to meet his needs in whatever ways he deems fit. White traces the root of the ecological crisis to the influence of this Judeo-Christian dominion bible.

To get a better perspective within the context of the broader message of the scriptures, I want to examine the word "dominion" in its original Hebrew language. The Hebrew rendering of the word "dominion" according to *Strong's Greek/Hebrew* is *radah* which also means "to rule."¹⁷ Sometimes, biblical words can be misconstrued when taken out of their proper context, or when a particular occurrence of a word is explained in isolation of the other instances where the word occurs

in sacred scriptures. Also, where there are ambiguous or vague expressions of a word in a specific context, comparison with other clearer passages where they occur is important for a clearer understanding. To get a clearer idea of biblical dominion, I will further consider how this word is used in other passages of the scriptures. Another passage that uses the same root word *radah* and which captures God's understanding of dominion/ruling is Leviticus 25:43, "Thou shalt not *rule* over him with rigour; but shalt fear thy God." Here, God knowing the human tendency to abuse or misconceive the idea of dominion, set out to clarify how our attitude towards rulership ought to be. So, we see that God's idea of ruling is not one without reverence, care and love. The same word is used with respect to God who "*ruleth* by his power forever" (Ps. 66:7). The question then is, "how does God rule?" It is consistent with scriptures that God's ruling is motivated and expressed through His principal nature- love. This understanding of rulership is not only limited to the Old Testament. Even in the New Testament, Jesus who came to deliver the express will of the God the Father explained that in Mark 10:42 that:

You know that those who are considered rulers over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you shall be your servant... For even the son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve.

In these verses, we see Jesus speaking of dominion in terms of stewardship. It should

¹⁷ Strong, J. *Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible: Together with Dictionaries of the Hebrew and Greek Words of the Original with References to the English Words*, (1890), n.p.

not also be taken for granted that the commission of dominion was given to Adam before the fall. It means then that at this time, all things (man and nature) were in a perfect harmony and convivial relationship that precludes the tyranny of man depicted by White. Besides, when God made all things, He observed that everything was good (Gen. 1:31). So it would be counter-productive for God to now empower man to destroy the good He created. If indeed man is made in the image and likeness of God, then man would share in the same sentiments of God by viewing all things as good and worthy of being treated with respect.

Furthermore, in the same Gen. 1:28 quoted by White, he seems to have missed the clause added by God to explain the context of the dominion mandate, to “*replenish* the earth...” The word *replenish* is rendered in the Hebrew as *mala*, which means “to fill.”¹⁸ Same word is used by God to instruct Noah towards *filling* back the earth with whatever was lost during the flood, “And God blessed Noah and his sons, and said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and *replenish* the earth” (Gen 9:1). The instruction from God for Noah to carry a male and female specimen of created things so that they could multiply and fill earth after the flood reveals God's love and concern for maintaining the balance of nature and the need for man's cooperation in this project.

In the light of this, man exercises his dominion as a rational being by being a steward rather than a tyrant. According to David G. Horrell, Cheryl Hunt, and Christopher South gate,

Christianity,
can be a significant source for an ecological ethics: that biblical texts do *not* sanction an exploitative form of human dominion over the earth, *do* inculcate a sense of the goodness of the whole created order, and *do* convey a picture of redemption as encompassing 'allthings' and not just human beings.¹⁹

In similar vein, Francis Schaeffer encouraged Christians to face the challenge of ecological crisis by remaining true and consistent to the biblical tradition of stewardship. He invited all to respect nature since it is God's creation. He even argued for the life of a fungus niching on a tree to be spared, except there were good reasons to kill it.²⁰ Thus, Schaeffer acknowledged the likelihood and even suitability of human intervention in the order of nature-where and when necessary, but concentrated on the Judeo-Christian expectation of restoring all things and the responsibility of both believers and non-believers in achieving this renewal.

Conclusion

From this discourse, it is observable that the dominion mandate of Genesis was not meant to engender a culture that would destroy God's good creation but one that would foster reverence, awe and care for it by man. To think otherwise like White did would be an honest misreading of the text, especially when considered along the entire theme and practice

¹⁸ Strong, J. *Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, n.p.

¹⁹ David, G., Cheryl, H., & Christopher S. “Appeals to the Bible in Ecotheology and Environmental Ethics: A Typology of Hermeneutical Stances,” *Studies in Christian Ethics* 21, no.2 (2008): 163.

²⁰ Schaeffer, F. “Pollution and the Death of Man,” In *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer: A Christian Worldview* 3-7, (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1985), 52.

of the Judeo-Christian tradition that is hinged on love. Even the scriptures attest to the fact that God reveals Himself through nature,

For the truth about God is known to them instinctively. God has put his knowledge in their hearts. From the time the world was created, people have seen the earth and sky and all that God made. They can clearly see his invisible qualities-his eternal power and divine nature. So they have no excuse whatsoever for not knowing God. (Rom 1:19-20, NLT).

Hence, if God manifests His glory through creation, it is not consistent with Judeo-Christian tradition to exploit nature since that would be irreverent to one dimension of God's expression. Instead, this understanding will encourage a reverential attitude and a poise of service in tending and caring for nature.

References

- Attfield, R. "Christian Attitudes to Nature". *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 44 (1983): 369-386.
- Attfield, R. "Social History, Religion, and Technology: An Interdisciplinary Investigation into Lynn White, Jr.'s 'Roots.'" *Environmental Ethics*, 31 (2009): 31-50.
- David, G., Cheryl, H., & Christopher S. "Appeals to the Bible in Ecotheology and Environmental Ethics: A Typology of Hermeneutical Stances." *Studies in Christian Ethics*, 21, no.2 (2008): 163-176.
- Djupe, P. & Hunt, P. "Beyond the Lynn White Thesis: Congregational Effects on Environmental Concern." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 48 no.4 (2009): 670-686.
- LeVasseur, T. & Peterson, A. "Introduction." In *Religion and Ecological Crisis: The 'Lynn White Thesis' at Fifty*, edited by T. LeVasseur, Anna Peterson 1-15, New York: Abingdon, 2017.
- Livingstone, D. "The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis: A Reassessment." *Fides et Historia*, 26 (1994): 38-55.
- Marangudakis, M. "The Medieval Roots of our Environmental Crisis". *Environmental Ethics*, 23 (2001): 243-260.
- Minteer, B. & Manning, R. "An Appraisal of the Critique of Anthropocentrism and Three Lesser Known Themes in Lynn White's 'The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis.'" *Organization & Environment*, 18 no.2 (2005): 163-176.
- Moncrief, L. "The Cultural Basis of our Environmental Crisis." *Science*, 170 (1970): 508-512.
- Passmore, J. *Man's Responsibility for Nature: Ecological Problems and Western Traditions*. New York: Scribner, 1974.
- Schaeffer, F. "Pollution and the Death of Man." *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer: A Christian Worldview* 3-7. Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1985.
- Steffen, L. "In Defense of Dominion." *Environmental Ethics*, 14 (1992): 63-80.
- Taylor, B., Van Wieren, G., & Zaleha, B. "Lynn White Jr. and the Greening-of-Religion Hypothesis." *Conservation Biology*, 30 no. 5 (2010): 1000-1009.
- White, L. Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis." *Science*, 155 (1967): 1203-1207.