

Religious Environmentalism and Environmental Religion in America

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Abstract

This essay aims to offer a rudimentary map of the subfield of religion and ecology by describing three distinct scholarly responses to the challenge leveled by Lynn White's influential 1967 article. It articulates an organizational view of the field by accounting for the three most prevalent perspectives on the antagonism between religion and environmentalism. The first, ecotheological apologism, looks to resuscitate "Judeo-Christian" theology from the critique that it is inherently anti-ecological. The second, sociological operationalization, forgoes normative engagement in favor of descriptive measurement, seeking to describe in empirical terms the environmental beliefs and behaviors of religious individuals in contemporary society. The third, theoretical functionalism, works to soften the very distinction between religious tradition and ecological morality. Examining the sources and outcomes of these scholarly divergences provides a reasonable account of the development of religion and ecology as an area of study and brings to the fore the challenges presently facing the subfield. In conclusion, the essay describes the exchanges among these scholarly threads and suggests how they might be woven together more closely.

Introduction

A retrospective view of Anglo-American environmental literatures reminds any attentive reader that religious rhetoric has long played a role in the way we think about and talk about the natural world. From Gilbert White in the mid-18th century to John Muir in the early 20th century to the present, biblical images have long permeated the pages of popular nature writing. The Garden of Eden, Jesus' sojourn in the Wilderness, and a promised land of milk and honey are but a few chief examples. The widespread presence of religious language in these proto-environmental texts was not, apparently, obvious to scholars during the middle decades of the 20th century.

By the 1950s and 1960s, a handful of scholars had begun to suggest linkages between religion and ecology. The work of historians like Roderick Nash and Lynn White Jr. and anthropologists like Roy Rappaport and Julian Steward opened new lines of inquiry about the interplay of culture and nature (Nash 1966; White 1967; Rappaport 1968; Steward 1955). Their insights undergirded a deepening attention to the role of myth in shaping environmental behaviors, to the bearing of religious thought on the articulation of an environmental ethic, and to the cosmological lenses through which our ideas about the natural world are filtered (Toynbee 1976; Sauer 1947; Wright 1970; Passamore 1974). No publication had more impact in shaping this emerging area of inquiry than Lynn White's (1967) essay "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis."¹ Although no formal professional association was created and only a few university courses existed prior to the early 1990s, the field of religion and ecology was born from these mid-century efforts (Bauman *et al.* 2011). This essay offers a rudimentary map of the subfield by describing three distinct responses to the challenge

leveled by White's influential article. In particular, this essay considers divergent ideas about how to best account for the relationship between religion and environmentalism.

At the zenith of secularization as a paradigm in the study of religion, White took a rather different approach, claiming that the ecologic [*sic*] crisis is a tragic cultural manifestation of theological commitments deeply held in Christian (and post-Christian) societies. Environmentally destructive behaviors, or at least the ecological ignorance of modern societies, were in White's estimation grounded in the "Judeo-Christian" belief that human beings were created *imago dei* and were thus ontologically more like the creator than the creation. He argued that the resultant worldview is predominately characterized by dominion over nature. White further proposed, in rather ambiguous terms, that because the environmental crisis is attributable to religious causes, its solution must also be religious. He maintained that "we [must] find a new religion, or rethink our old one" (White 1967, p. 1206.) "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis" can thus be understood as a polemic essay that asserts an antagonistic relationship between Christian tradition and modern environmental concern.

Although he does not explicitly acknowledge the debt, White was drawing on fellow historians like Karl Löwith and Ernest Becker in his assertion that modern secular cultural formations are fashioned from religious sources (Löwith 1949; Becker 1932). The contention that religious ideas were the chief ingredients of civilizational worldviews and that worldviews were describable as the bases for various patterns of relationships between culture and nature proved to be radically influential. These premises continue to operate in the background of the field of religion and ecology; the field axiomatically accepts that worldviews give rise to patterns of enculturated environmental behavior. White's argument suggested that human relationships with the environment *en toto* are shaped by their cultural contexts in ways not always transparent to individual agents. His view was that mythology and theology are limiting conditions for social possibilities. On this view, the position of the Genesis text is so central in the Western cultural inheritance that it grounds a strong ontological dualism—that radically separates humans from nature—and structures the environmental mentalities of contemporary Christian (and post-Christian) cultures. White had laid down a gauntlet; theological orthodoxy and environmental progress were said to be at odds. His article effectively launched the academic field of religion and ecology, touching off an intellectual firestorm, with critics and supporters writing from diverse disciplinary perspectives.

The earliest rejoinders became the foundational basis of religion and ecology and, for the most part, can be understood as a series of attempts to harmonize the antagonism at the heart of White's essay. The central debate in these formative years—the 1970s and 1980s—focused on whether or not religion generally, and certain religions in particular, can be identified as either "good" or "bad" for the environment.² Authors tended to seek solutions to ecological problems along the same lines as White recommended. Secular scientific elites and countercultural environmental activists tended to affirm his analysis, using his argument to support their policy oriented solutions or their appropriations of religious traditions other than Christianity, especially Taoism and Buddhism (Callicott 1989; Wright 1970). Liberal Jewish and Christian theologians tended either to take up White's challenge to "rethink" religious traditions or to rebut his narrow treatment of Christianity's anthropocentric tendencies. Social scientists tended to respond by scrutinizing the empirical validity of White's claims, most directly by developing sociological measures of the relationship between religious beliefs and environmental behaviors.

As religion and ecology emerged as a field of study during the 1990s, largely under the auspices of the American Academy of Religion, these various perspectives began to cross-pollinate. As the field took shape and developed more robust theoretical perspectives, a third branch of research joined the growing conversation: A handful of social scientists working in the Durkheimian tradition began to assert that environmentalism itself was a "religion resembling phenomenon."

These three prominent perspectives about the antagonism between religion and environmentalism continue as the chief ingredients of religion and ecology.³ The first, ecotheological apologetics, looks to resuscitate Christian theology from the criticism that it is inherently anti-ecological. The second, sociological operationalization, forgoes normative engagement in favor of descriptive measurement. The third, theoretical functionalism, works to soften the very distinction between religion as theological tradition and ecological morality. Examining the sources and outcomes of these divergences provides a reasonable account of the development of religion and ecology as an area of study and brings to the fore the challenges facing the subfield. A careful examination of the exchanges among these scholarly threads helps suggest how those working in different areas of the subfield might stitch these disparate ideas together more tightly.

Although it is primarily focused on the ways that scholars have imagined and described the relationship between Christianity and the environment, the basic argument of this paper holds true for religions more generally. Even though contemporary scholars accept on face that religion and ecology are not opposed, vestiges of the supposed antagonism continue to shape discourse within the field. Media sources and scholars in other fields still hold to the notion that some religions are “good” for the environment and that others are “bad.”

Ecotheological Apologetics

The most immediate impact of White’s article was among theologians. In the decade after “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” theological journals and publishing houses cranked out a steady stream of essays and monographs that took up the gauntlet White had thrown down.⁴ The ensuing scholarly debate very much conformed to his antagonistic framework. White’s broad historical generalization of a tension between Christian tradition and environmentalism had the effect of boxing theological respondents into one of several basic positions.

The primary reply was to accept the premise that the theology of dominion was to be blamed to a significant extent for modern environmental woes and to answer White’s call for theological re-imagining. Efforts of this type took two forms: attempts to resuscitate marginalized or heterodox currents within Christian tradition and attempts to blaze new trails for Christian theology. Although less common, another response to White was the denial of Christianity’s importance in the development of the modern, industrial worldview underlying environmental degradation. Authors working in this area proposed counter-narratives to White’s antagonism, typically placing secularization as the chief object of blame.

Among those who agreed with White’s concern about the theology of dominion, exegetical scholars pointed to countervailing ideas about the natural world in biblical tradition. Walter Brueggemann’s (1977) book *The Land* placed this rebuttal at its heart, even if it was not an explicitly ecotheological treatise. Paul Santmire, perhaps the most well-known ecotheological apologist, championed the subterranean ecological elements of Christian theology in two major works: *Brother Earth* (1970) and *The Travail of Nature* (1985). Broadening from and expanding on White’s reference to Saint Francis as the “patron saint of ecology” (White 1967, p. 1207). Santmire explored voices within the Christian corpus whose message resonated with the environmental anxieties of the 20th century (e.g. Irenaeus, Origen, Bonaventure, etc.).

Despite the presence of proto-ecological thought in theological history, White’s rebutters were convinced that the tradition’s core assumptions needed serious rethinking. Attempts to open new lines of theological reflection were manifold throughout the 1970s and 1980s. An emerging coterie of ecofeminist thinkers, including Rosemary Radford Ruether, Sallie McFague, and Katherine Keller, worked to chart a less patriarchal course for Christian theology (Ruether 1975; McFague 1987; Keller 1986). Seeking to overcome the limits of the

“neo-orthodoxy” of the mid-20th century, theologians endeavored to develop theological models grounded in a scientific, evolutionary understanding of the cosmos. These process theologians followed the clarion call that figures like Alfred North Whitehead and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin for a robust, naturalistic vision of Christianity a half-century prior to Lynn White’s critique (Berry, 1988; Cobb 1972).

However, not all Christian respondents accepted the premises of White’s argument. In fact, many of his critics took precisely the opposite position: that it had been the rise of reductionist, scientific, mechanistic, and secular ideas about the natural world that had underwritten the ecological degradations of the modern era (Merchant 1980; McLoughlin 1978). The degree to which ecotheological responses were framed in White’s terms proved formative for scholarship on religion and ecology more generally. Some of the subfield’s most significant publications, like *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology* (2006) and the *Religions of the World and Ecology* book series (1997–2004), are premised on this pattern of critique and rethinking.

After several decades of close scrutiny, White’s antagonistic framework is receding in its influence on theologians. Emerging from the ecotheological milieu that flourished in the 1970s and 1980s, Laurel Kearns has identified three distinct theological strategies for grappling with the complexities of ecological concern: Christian stewardship, eco-justice, and creation spirituality. Each of these areas now represents a thriving field of intellectual engagement and religious praxis that are no longer styled as theological apologetics for an ecological age (Kearns 1996). This development reflects what Willis Jenkins has described as a transition among ecotheologians from a preoccupation with cosmology to a focus on “pastoral strategies” (Jenkins 2009). As religious thinkers have increasingly addressed what White claimed was the hidden influence of theology on the environmental attitudes of modern societies, their efforts have shifted away from his rarified and grandiose claims about cultural legacy and towards more practical and pragmatic attempts to build linkages between particular religious communities and particular ecological concerns (e.g. Hessel & Rasmussen 2001).

Sociological Operationalization

As the scholarly conversation about religion and the environment entered into social scientific circles in the early 1980s, there was scant sociological data that could shed light on the contested claims of historians and theologians. White’s argument was developed in a fairly impressionistic style: Theologically grounded anthropocentrism was foundational to the machinations of Western culture in a generic sense. Where theologians took issue with the absolutism of this claim, scholars with scientific methodologies saw a need to test the validity of the argument from anthropocentrism. Thus, the earliest sociological researches in this area sought to operationalize White’s thesis and to subject it to empirical scrutiny. A great many things, however, might be taken as “tests” of White’s thesis. Given that his theory was more historical conjecture than socio-political observation, it is not necessarily self-evident just how social scientists could either verify or deny his claims. Social scientists working in this vein had to grapple with a longstanding methodological problem, how to define and measure “religion” (or religiosity), as well as an issue that had only begun to emerge in the early 1980s, how to define and measure “environmentalism.”

With respect to the challenge of measuring “environmentalism,” researchers in the late 1970s and early 1980s had begun to model the diversity of environmental perspectives according to the “New Environmental Paradigm” (NEP). In 1978, Riley Dunlap and Kent Van Liere introduced this more robust methodology, attempting to standardize the

measurement of socially inculcated attitudes about the environment. Among their measures, Dunlap and Van Liere asked respondents to rate their agreement with the statements “mankind was created to rule over nature” and “plants and animals exist primarily to be used by humans” (Dunlap & Van Liere 1978). These propositional statements became central to the effort to translate White’s historical notion of culturally embedded environmental attitudes into empirical metrics tangibly connected to contemporary ideas and practices.

Sociologists struggled to render “Judeo-Christian theology” in terms operable for respondent based surveys. Especially for social scientists not trained in the subtleties of theology, this frequently resulted in rather crude metrics:

Indeed, for secondary analysts the choice is often limited by necessity, as ‘religiosity’ is measured infrequently and haphazardly by views of the Bible, religious tradition or denominational affiliation, or religious commitment. . . White’s original thesis about the Judeo-Christian worldview has also misled some scholars into ignoring critical distinctions within religious communities; some otherwise sound studies simply lump Judeo-Christians into a single category (Guth *et al.* 1995, p. 367).

At the core of White’s critique is an emphasis that anthropocentric bias stems from the theology of human dominion over nature, but because sociological methods are best suited to empirical phenomena like habitual practices, membership, and affiliation, there were sharp debates as to whether social scientists could meaningfully operationalize White’s thesis. Dunlap and Van Liere’s measures were useful, but needed to be coupled with additional data about the religious position of groups and individuals. For example, Carl Hand and Van Liere, compared levels of environmental concern across denominational affiliations and according to “mastery-over-nature orientations” (Hand & Van Liere 1984).⁵ This first direct empirical engagement with White’s thesis provoked significant response, as it hypothesized that “individuals more committed to the Judeo-Christian tradition will more strongly accept the dominance of nature doctrine and subsequently have lower levels of concern for environmental problems” (Ibid., 556).

The early wave of sociological scholarship on the relation of religion and the environment was organized around two scales of analysis: individual sentiment and denominational collectivities. Although White’s argument had focused on deeply rooted elements of the collective consciousness of Western civilization, and although the church history model was losing ground elsewhere in the academic study of religion, social scientific analysis brought much needed empirical rigor to the study of religion and nature. Among a dozen or so prominent publications from the late 1980s and early 1990s, sociologists of religion tested the utility of belief in biblical literalism (Eckberg & Blocker 1989; Greeley 1993; and Woodrum & Hoban 1994), regularity of church attendance (Kanagy & Nelsen 1995), being born again (Sherkat & Ellison 2007), frequency of prayer, and “personal religiosity” as predictors of environmental concern and commitment (Boyd 1999).

In many of these studies, the discussion regarding what types of religious people and what types of religious ideas are associated with low levels of environmentalism seems a thinly veiled proxy debate about the degree to which religious conservatives can be blamed for environmental degradation. By the mid-1990s, there began to be some widely shared agreement about the limits of quantitative analysis in examining White’s thesis. In nearly two decades of research, sociologists of religion had merely demonstrated that individual religious commitments were but very weakly correlated with environmental concern, and that non-theological factors (e.g. political affiliation, socioeconomic status, etc.) were significantly better predictors of environmental values (e.g. Kanagy & Nelsen 1995; Eckberg & Blocker 1996; and Wolkomir *et al.* 1997). In a 1997 article, Wolkomir went so far as to

suggest that the fixation on the White hypothesis had significantly limited the sociological investigation of religion and environmentalism. Scholarly methods and narrow data sets best suited to differentiate between highly specific facets of religious communities—predictions of electoral outcomes, for example—were leveraged for increasingly particularistic claims. The endurance of the church history model within the sociology of religion spawned unnecessarily narrow research about specific exceptions to White's argument, as when Andrew Greeley argued that Catholics are more likely to support additional federal spending on environmental issues than Protestants or when Hunter and Toney claimed that Mormons are more likely to express higher levels of environmental concern than the national average, even if they are less likely to act on them (Wolkomir *et al.* 1997).⁶ In short, quantitative methods proved only that White's critique of religiously grounded anthropocentrism could not be meaningfully described at the level of individual sentiment.

During the 1990s, social scientific analyses of religion became increasingly attentive to two new developments in American religious life. The first of these was the rising prominence of "extra-ecclesiastical" forms of religion and spirituality.⁷ As sociologists began to describe the eclectic variety of forms of spirituality that emerged from the reverberations of 1960s counter-culturalism, many noted the significance of "eco-spirituality" as a religious style. A central question for sociologists of American religion during the closing decades of the 20th century concerned the waning role of formal religious structures and the rise of more dynamic, fluid modes of religious life. Working to address this shifting social landscape, prominent sociologists including Robert Bellah, Wade Clark Roof, and Robert Wuthnow each note the importance of ecological awareness as one such stream of religious dynamism (Bellah *et al.* 1985, 284; Roof 1999, pp. 281–284; & Wuthnow 1985, p. 295). The second development focused on the advent of a number of environmentalist organizations with explicitly religious aims and affiliations, like the Au Sable Institute, the National Religious Partnership for the Environment, and the Evangelical Environmental Network. These organizations represented the maturation and political results of two decades of efforts by "theological apologists" working to promote environmental virtues within religious communities. Observant of the way that ecotheological positions were being increasingly enacted in congregations and denominational infrastructures, scholars like Robert Booth Fowler and Laurel Kearns began in earnest to map the variations of Christian environmentalism in the United States (Fowler 1995; Kearns 1996). Throughout the 1990s, religious environmental groups were increasingly visible and well organized, perhaps most notably the National Religious Partnership for the Environment (Shibley & Wiggins 1997). Religion, for scholars focused on the emergence of religious environmentalism, is not a collection of fixed doctrinal propositions, as sociologists from an earlier generation would have it; rather, the social scientific story to be told concerned the shifting religious landscape and the development of new forms of religious concern (Djupe & Gwiasda 2010). The 2000s saw several in-depth book length analyses of American religious environmentalism (e.g. Foltz 2003; Tomalin 2009; Taylor 2009; Gottlieb 2009).

Theoretical Functionalism

By the mid-1990s, social scientific analyses of the interface between institutionalized religious forms and environmentalism had exhausted the primary research possibilities set forth by Lynn White's antagonistic thesis and had begun to map the main features of an emerging religious environmental movement. Since work in this area began in the 1970s, new theoretical orientations had gained prominence among scholars of religion, and the early 1990s saw a flourishing trade in scholarship about "implicit" religion (Jindra 1994; Lemert 1975; Greil & Ruby 1990; eds. Robbins & Anthony 1990). Retrospectively, the real

insight of White's essay was its assertion that modern environmental attitudes reflect an underlying religiosity. Rather than begin with a fixed set of conventions about where religion was to be found and what it was to look like, scholars of religion and ecology began to increasingly consider the interactions of religion and environmentalism outside the confines of institutional religiosity.

This shift in focus developed concurrently in two methodological arenas. The first was launched by Catherine Albanese's groundbreaking *Nature Religion in America* (1991), which traced ideas about the morally and physically salubrious characteristics of nature through American religious history. Albanese articulated "nature religion" as the historical designation for "the cluster of beliefs, behaviors, and values" that place nature at their symbolic center (Albanese 1991, p. 9). This term proved amply useful and flexible, and quickly entered the scholarly conversation about religion and ecology both as a way to designate the religiously infused enthusiasm for nature that characterized American religious history and as a category of cross-cultural comparison (Taylor 2005). In this sense, "nature religion" is a term derived from the history of religions, analogous to "civil religion," which had been an object of scholarly consideration since the late 1960s.

In parallel to such historical analysis, extra-ecclesial concepts like "civil religion" gained traction among sociologists, who, following Durkheim, described the essence of religion in terms of the maintenance of a social moral order. The functionalist approach to modern societies asserted that the construction of an objective worldview—predicated in their century on scientific certainty, a discrete self, and economic production—was necessarily religious in nature. Luckmann's (1967) *The Invisible Religion* helped launch a new field of study in "non-church religion" and "quasi-religion." Scholars began to take serious interest in the religious characteristics of secular phenomena (e.g. Star Trek fandom, baseball, etc.). The earliest assertion that the American environmental movement was *functionally* religious is Brinkerhoff and Jacob's (1987) "Quasi-Religious Meaning Systems, Official Religion, and Quality of Life in an Alternative Lifestyle: A Survey from the Back-to-the-Land Movement" (Brinkerhoff & Jacob 1987).⁸ Their work was a precedent for a sustained attention to the religious characteristics of environmentalism throughout the 1990s and 2000s. Foremost among this approach is Bron Taylor, whose early work concentrated on the religious dimensions (both explicit and implicit) of radical environmental groups like EarthFirst! (Taylor 1991; Taylor 1994; Taylor 1995).

In the late 1990s, scholars of religion and ecology offered a variety of examinations of the "implicitly religious character of environmentalism" (Bartowski & Swearingen 1997). Arguing that analyses of religiosity as a predictor of environmental concern had been non-starters, ethnographers looked to contemporary cultural formations rather than historically grounded traditions in the effort to better understand the interface between religion and environmentalism. By explicitly distancing themselves from previous social scientific work in this area, a variety of novel practices could be understood in greater depth through the lens of religious studies. New age spirituality significantly overlapped with environmental practices (Bloch 1998). The framework afforded by theories of sacred space and "transcendent experience" helped geographers, sociologists, and anthropologists contextualize the depth with which Americans pursued recreational pastimes like hiking and camping (Chidester 1996; Bartowski & Swearingen 1997; Hall 1997; Williams & Harvey 2001). Working under the rubric of "lived religion," the early years of this century saw a more systematic analysis of the religiosity of ecological and outdoor recreational practices. Close examinations of the homesteading movement, of restoration ecology, of surfing, and of fly-fishing exemplify this trend (Gould 2005; Van Wieren 2008; Taylor 2007b; Sanford 2007; Snyder 2007).

The notion that environmental movements were akin to religion made a noticeable impact outside the academic study of religion. Environmental historians found it helpful to narrate the rise of environmentalism using the terminology of religion: The distinction between priestly and prophetic roles served to distinguish between regulatory and visionary figures, and the movement's ceremonial aspects (Earth Day, etc.) made sense through the lens of ritual theory. For example, Thomas Dunlap offered a "re-imagining" of the history of environmentalism by treating his subject "as if" it were a religion, and Holmes Rolston III used religion as a narrative frame to situate the moral depth of the evolutionary worldview of scientists and activists (Dunlap 2005). The act of labeling environmentalism as a form of religion, however, also flourished where it served polemical purposes, as when Deepak Lal drew from the analogy of religious fundamentalism to critique environmentalism's imposition of Western morals on post-colonial societies. Michael Crichton mounted a similar attack, describing the environmental movement as oriented by an ideology where "facts aren't necessary, because the tenets...are all about belief" (Crichton 2003, p. 15).⁹ Claims that environmentalism has religion-resembling characteristics are descriptive, but appear to require some second-order theoretical reflection about the validity of the term "religion" (Author 2011).

The theoretical maneuver to research the religious qualities of seemingly secular forms of environmental practice can thus be seen as at least in part an attempt to break free from the stranglehold that the more antagonistic elements of White's thesis had on the academic study of religion and ecology. If environmental perspectives were as likely to lend themselves to religiosity as (institutional) religions were likely to shape the environmental views of their adherents, then perhaps the interface of religion and ecology was a more dynamic site of cultural production than White had anticipated. As it becomes increasingly clear that there is no fixed boundary between secular ecological and religious theological beliefs or practices, the last two decades of scholarship on religion and ecology can also be seen as consolidating two decades of theory about implicit religion. Recent work in this area necessarily accords a central position to the theoretical question, "where does religion end, and where do social phenomena that are not religious begin?"¹⁰

Conclusion

The nature of the relationship between religion and environmentalism is largely a product of the theory of religion used in various scholarly discourses. Conceptualizing religion in substantive terms brings to the fore questions about the environmental beliefs and behaviors of religious institutions and individuals. Conceptualizing religion in functionalist terms emphasizes the religious characteristics of the environmental beliefs and behaviors.¹¹ Given that theologians and sociologists working in religion and ecology have tended to conceptualize religion in conventional terms—namely, adhering to the conceptual framework of "world religions"—scholarship in these areas has tended to be mutually reinforcing. During the 1980s, such reinforcement worked to generate a widespread skepticism about the environmental possibilities of mainstream American religious tradition. Adherence to religious tradition was never convincingly correlated with environmental concern, and thus liberal appeals for theological change seemed sensible responses to the limits posed by the maintenance of orthodoxy.

Observers of American religious culture saw a dramatic proliferation of explicitly religious engagements with environmental issues during the 1990s, both at the organizational level and in terms of individual affections. This shift included a broad spectrum of American religions, involving Jews, Muslims, mainline Protestants, Catholics, as well as many Evangelicals. The three major strands of religion and ecology scholarship, however, do not understand these

changes in the same way. Ecotheological apologists characterize the rise of explicitly religious environmentalism as the fruition of a decades long effort to “green” American religions (e.g. Tucker 2003). Sociologists of religion are investigating the degree to which traditional theological premises have been displaced in favor of newer ones (Djupe & Gwiasda 2010). These two interpretations are not necessarily at odds, but the functionalist approach to ecology asserts a conflicting claim. The functionalist assertion is that environmental concern is something imposed on religions from without, according to the dictates of modern society, not something sought or initiated by religious agents. That is, the ecological dimension of contemporary religious environmental movements is a product of quite novel forms of cultural innovation, rather than an internal reworking of tradition.¹²

Should theological developments or the spiritual appeal of otherwise secular environmentalism be taken as the primary cause of this “greening of religion”? In simpler terms, are religious environmentalism and environmental religiosity members of the same class of things, or are the distinct cultural phenomena? Current scholarship in religion and ecology is effectively organized around this question. In a narrow sense, these phenomena certainly are akin in that they both indicated the spiritual depth with which modern societies are grappling with the challenges of their own potential for self-ruination. Numerous ideas and practices that might be counted as “religious” are shared by religious environmentalists and the religiously environmental. Green burial affords an excellent example of a cultural practice shared by both streams.

In a broader sense, however, it remains unclear how scholars should account for the relationship between religious environmentalism and what Taylor has called “dark green religion.” Charting the contours of this relationship represents one of the primary challenges of the field going forward, which seems to indicate the need for theoretical consolidation. Ironically, White’s essay may point a way forward. His assertion rested on the idea that religious ideas were deeply embedded in culture and shaped our social behaviors in subtle, yet profound ways. His implicit claim was that religious ideas deeply interpenetrate secular culture. White’s invocation of a theory of religious transformation (borrowed from Löwith, Becker, and others) suggests that we might adjudicate the claims of theological apologists and theoretical functionalists according to a similar model. Löwith and Becker each claimed that the conceptual problems voiced by secular philosophers were, more or less, translations of theological problems. Perhaps the same is true for religion and ecology today; perhaps White’s real insight was not that Christianity was ecologically problematic, but that ecology was a theological problematic. Questions about the proper place of human beings in the ecological order are fundamentally religious questions. Whether responses to these questions emerge from traditionally religious loci or from secular sectors of society, they are not just merely structurally connected, they are historically connected. A primary task of scholars of religion and ecology should be to develop more robust histories that adequately situate the variety of religious responses to ecological crises as genealogically related phenomena.

Short Biography

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Notes

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¹ White (1967). Already by 1970, Wright referred to White's essay as "widely quoted" and comments on the number of times it had been reprinted. See also, Willis Jenkins's (2009) article, "After Lynn White: Religious Ethics and Environmental Problems."

² In their 2004 article, Authors argued that most social scientific research in religion and ecology could be identified as falling "somewhere between the two poles of attributing either outright guilt or utter innocence to religion."

³ A similar tripartite exploration of the field was articulated in Jenkins and Chapple (2011); see in particular, pp. 443–444.

⁴ See Laurel Kearns, "The Context for Ecotheology" in *The Blackwell Companion to Modern Theology*. Gareth Jones, ed. (Blackwell) 2004, pp. 466–468. For the purposes of concision, this essay primarily treats environmental theologies from mainstream Christian journals and publishing houses in the two decades following White's essay. Even though working within such narrow parameters researchers could easily identify more than 100 texts, the number grew much more rapidly starting in the late 1980s. John Cobb, one of the prominent ecotheologians of this era, has published a fairly comprehensive bibliography of ecotheological scholarship in the years 1967–1991. See <http://www.cep.unt.edu/ecotheo.html>

⁵ Hand and Van Liere (1984). This study attempts to develop a multidimensional measure of "dominion belief" by triangulating Dunlap and Van Liere's NEP model with a variety of existing measures of theological conservatism.

⁶ See also, Greeley (1993) and Hunter and Toney (2005).

⁷ This term is drawn primarily from Peter Williams's *Popular Religion in America*, originally published in 1980, but a number of landmark publications during the 1980s established a new area of study focused on persons and groups that could be labeled as "spiritual, but not religious" (e.g. Robert Bellah's 1984, *Habits of the Heart*).

⁸ Brinkerhoff and Jacob published a second article on this topic in 1999.

⁹ Crichton, Remarks to the Commonwealth Club, San Francisco, September 15, 2003; published online in 2009 by the Science & Public Policy Institute.

¹⁰ Taylor 2007, 11; see also, Taylor 2001; and Guthrie (2007).

¹¹ Author 2011.

¹² See especially the conclusion of Bron Taylor's *Dark Green Religion* 2010.

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