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Christianity and the Development of Eco-Justice

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Christianity and the Development of Eco-Justice

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Zayn Kassam
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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	p. 4
Chapter 1: Out of the Wilderness.....	p. 16
Chapter 2: Resistance.....	p. 30
Chapter 3: What Part Can Christianity Play?	p. 47
Conclusion.....	p. 56
Appendix A: Citation for figures.....	p. 59
Appendix B: Guiding Questions for Research Interviews.....	p. 60
Bibliography.....	p. 61

Introduction

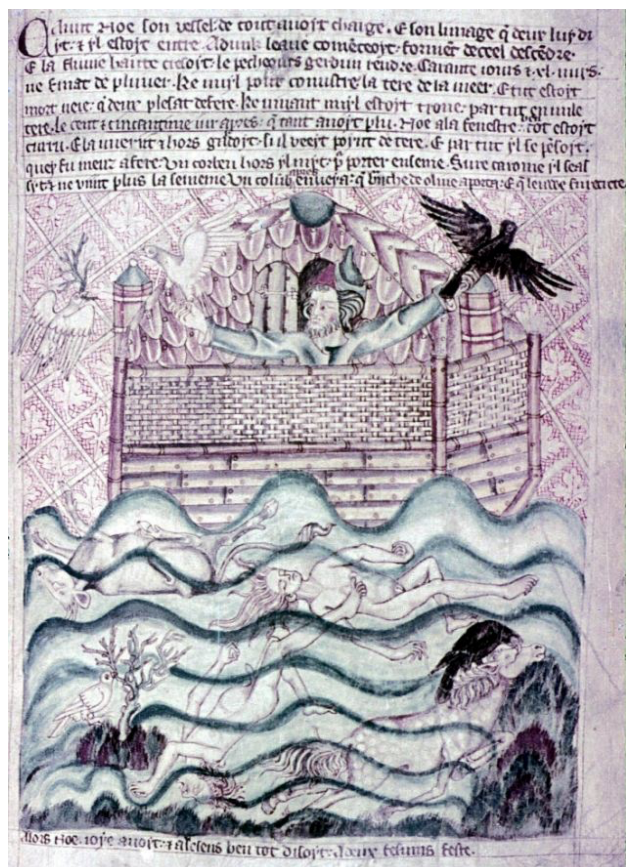


Figure 1: A 14th Century English manuscript showing Noah's ark at the end of the flood

The Biblical story of Noah and his ark is well-known. A wrathful God grows disgusted with the rampant sinfulness of the humans on the Earth below. He decides that the only solution is to wipe the slate clean; he will flood the world, destroying the whole of Creation in punishment for the wrongdoing of one member – humankind. In one last act of mercy, he alerts one man to his plan. Noah is a moral and faithful servant of God's, so God instructs Noah to build a boat – an ark – and orders Noah to bring his family onboard, as well as a male-female pair of every animal on the Earth. Just as Noah finishes this extraordinary

assignment, the rain starts. It rains for 40 days and 40 nights, flooding the entire Earth and exterminating all life, save for those creatures preserved on Noah's ark. The disaster is total, and all are punished for humankind's sins. Once the deluge has finally let up, Noah sends a dove to seek dry land. The dove returns at last with a single olive branch, now a symbol of restoration and renewal. Noah, his family, and their animal entourage alight on the land and set about building a new life, filled with devotion to the God who was both the Earth's destroyer and their personal savior.

The story of Noah's ark is fanciful, no doubt. But it is also deeply frightening, and perhaps feels more real now than ever, as we enter what some geologists call "the Anthropocene era",¹ a time when the many are already paying for the extravagances of the few. Already, the animal, plant, and human inhabitants of Pacific island nations such as Kiribati, Tuvalu, the Marshall Islands, and Maldives can relate intimately to Noah as rising sea levels swallow their homes and make them into climate refugees. In sub-Saharan Africa, farmers are scrambling to adapt ancient agricultural techniques as desertification unfurls its wasted fingers across the north of the continent. Meanwhile, First Nations across North America fiercely protest oil drilling that is fracturing the very bedrock of our shared home. As storm surges breach the walls of New Orleans and Bangladesh and weather patterns we always depended upon become unpredictable, we're starting to realize that the crisis has started and we forgot to build the ark.

In this thesis, I will be writing about these ecological crises, but I will be particularly focusing on the field of eco-justice – the recognition that human and environmental rights are indivisible. Within eco-justice, I will be examining the role that Christian communities have played in developing and perpetuating eco-justice in the United States. To understand this topic with any sort of depth, it is first necessary to consider the historical Christian perspective on nature and how it impacted Western attitudes towards the environment and towards groups of people who were considered "closer" to nature. I also investigate the history of Christian social justice movements and how they influence Christian engagement with environmentalism. Finally, I include interviews with Christian eco-justice groups in the greater Los Angeles area to better understand how the philosophy of eco-justice is enacted. I attempt to address 3 principle questions:

1. How have Christian communities played a part in ecological degradation?
2. How is ecological degradation tied to the oppression of marginalized groups?

¹ The slice of Earth's history during which humans have been the major geologic force. (Nature News)

3. Does the Christian tradition offer hope for furthering eco-justice? In what ways has this happened already?

I argue that there are conflicting ramifications of the Western interpretation of Christianity as a deeply anthropocentric² religion: the faith is responsible for the historical exploitation of marginalized people and the environment, but later Christian thinkers were also an essential part of tying environmentalism in the United States to social justice.

Before beginning the thesis, I contextualize my argument by providing brief background information about different Christian denominations, about the environmental crises we face, and how eco-justice fits into the broad array of current environmental movements. I then discuss my methodologies (how and with whom I conducted interviews), the limits to my research, and my own positionality.

Background

Christianity

It is important to emphasize from the start that “Christians” are not a monolithic group. Nor are “American Christians” or “Christians in Los Angeles” monolithic groups. One of the easiest ways to glimpse the diversity is to look at the wide range of denominations within Christianity. Illustrated clearly in the image below is the split between Eastern and Western churches in 1054 CE, due to disputes about the authority of the Bishop of Rome – now known as the Pope. The Eastern church rejected the Pope’s rule, while the Western church believed that the Pope was the person closest to God, and therefore qualified to lead them. This conviction was questioned within the Western church in the 16th century by the Reformation movement; the challengers became known as

² Regarding humankind as the central or most important element of existence (Oxford Dictionaries)

Protestants. Protestantism has since split into hundreds of different sects, the foremost of which are

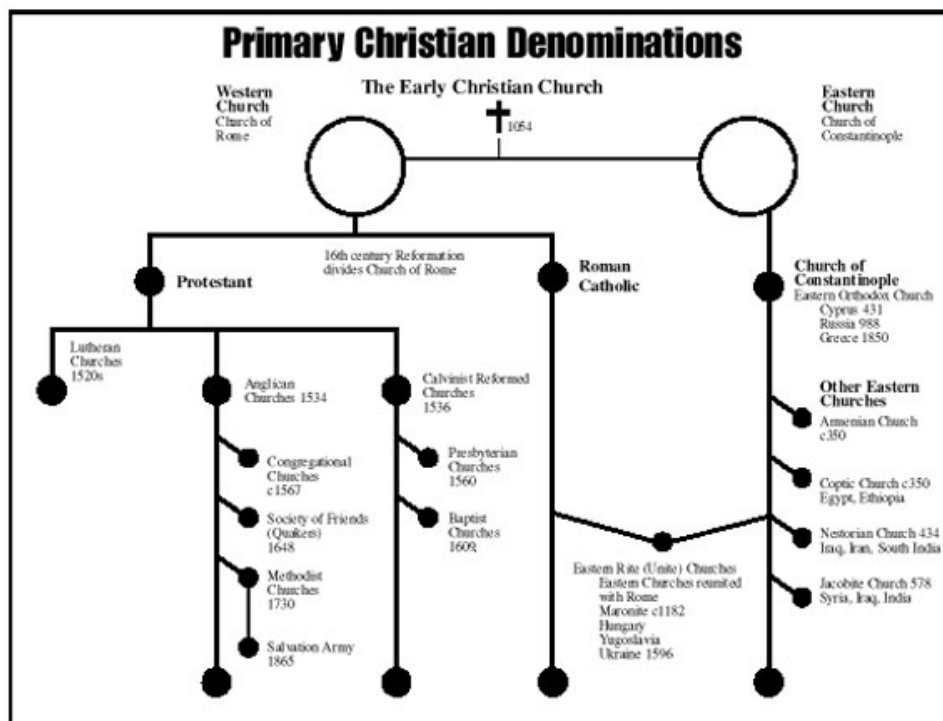


Figure 2: Primary Christian Denominations

on the chart.³ There are also alternate traditions that consider themselves Christian, but have other holy texts in addition to the Bible. Many of these denominations – including the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day Saints, the

Christian Science Church, and Jehovah’s Witnesses – emerged in the United States and still have their largest following here.⁴ In this thesis, I will be focusing on the Western church in the United States; more specifically on the Protestant and Catholic traditions.

It is also helpful to review when the word “Church” is capitalized. Church capitalized refers to “the universal body of believers” or as part of an official name of a church or denomination.⁵ I will frequently refer to the “Church” as if it were a monolithic body when referencing official or very commonly held views. Obviously this does not represent the view of every Christian and it can be

³ Matt Dickhut. “Branches of Christianity.” *Waupun School District*, June 16, 2003.

<http://www.waupun.k12.wi.us/Policy/other/dickhut/religions/20%20Branches%20of%20Christ.html>.

⁴ Conrad Hackett, and Brian J. Grim. “Global Christianity: A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World’s Christian Population.” *Pew Forum*, December 2011. <http://www.pewforum.org/files/2011/12/Christianity-fullreport-web.pdf>, 35

⁵ “Religious Terms.” *Gordon College*. Accessed November 16, 2015. <http://www.gordon.edu/styleguide/religious/terms>.

problematic to assume that a perspective is “mainstream” or held by the majority of any group.

However, I will do my best to indicate when I am making these assumptions and provide a basis for them.

The Climate Crisis

The phrase “environmental problems” encompasses a tremendous and overwhelming range of challenges created by humans that affect the natural world. Perhaps the most challenging environmental problem of our generation is global climate change, brought about by the emission of greenhouse gases created by human activity. However, there are numerous other interconnected

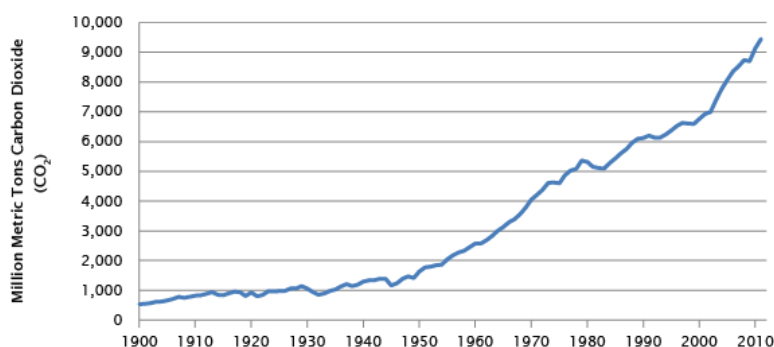


Figure 3: Global Carbon Dioxide (CO₂) emissions from fossil fuels 1900-2011

problems caused by human activity.

Chemical, heavy metal, biological, and nuclear wastes are building up to such an extent that some people have proposed launching them into

space. The loss of topsoil has been

a proven factor in the decline of the epicenters of early civilizations - the Mediterranean, the

Mesopotamian Valley, and the Loessial plateau of China,⁶ and we are currently losing topsoil at an

ever-increasing rate, causing desertification over great swaths of land. Many scientists agree that we

are in the middle of a mass extinction because of widespread decline in biodiversity. Oceans are

becoming increasingly acidic and microplastics are disrupting marine ecosystems. The overextraction

of mineral resources for unprecedented quantities of consumption may soon lead to a deficit of

⁶ “Desertification Effects, Causes, and Examples: Top 10 List.” *Science Heathen*, January 5, 2015. <http://scienceheathen.com/2015/01/05/desertification-effects-causes-examples-top-10-list/>.

minerals and metals. The crisis has come to affect our internal as well as external worlds – causing cancers, disrupting hormones, introducing toxins, and changing our psyches.⁷

All of these problems, whether taken individually or collectively, are overwhelming. It is tempting to say, as many environmentalists do, that we must drop everything to address them, that race, class, or gender matter little in the face of a problem that threatens humankind's ability to survive. Proponents of eco-justice, however, argue that in both a philosophical and a very real, socioeconomic sense, human rights and environmental degradation are linked. The Western philosophical tradition emphasizes human exceptionalism and the distance (certain) humans have from nature – namely white men. This is clearly demonstrated by the Oxford English dictionary's definition of nature:

Nature (n): A state unaffected by human intervention; spec. (with reference to plants or animals) a wild condition that is not the result of cultivation, breeding, or rearing; (with reference to minerals or land) an uncultivated, unworked, or undeveloped state⁸

Meanwhile, marginalized populations – especially indigenous people, people of color, and women – are seen as being “closer” to nature. I will discuss this concept in greater depth in the first chapter, particularly in relation to Western Christian thought.

⁷ Roger S. Gottlieb. “Introduction: Religion and Ecology - What Is the Connection and Why Does It Matter.” In *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology*, edited by Roger S. Gottlieb, 3–24. New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 2006, 6

⁸ “Nature.” *Oxford English Dictionary*. Oxford University Press. Accessed November 19, 2015. http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/nature.

	Oil-Dependence	Mineral-Dependence
Low Human Development Index*	✓	✓
Low Human Development Index		✓
Drop in HDI 1990-98		✓
Population in Poverty*		✓
Low Economic Growth*	✓	✓
High Under-five Mortality*	✓	✓
High Child Malnutrition*	✓	
Low Life expectancy*		✓
Low Health Spending (% of GDP)*	✓	
Low Primary School Enrollment*	✓	
Low Secondary School Enrollment*		
Low Adult Literacy*	✓	
High Income inequality*		✓
Vulnerability to Economic Shocks*	✓	✓
High Corruption*	✓	✓
Authoritarianism*	✓	✓
Lack of Government Effectiveness*	✓	✓
Likelihood of Civil War*	✓	✓
High Military Spending (% of govt spending)	✓	✓
High Military Spending* (% of govt spending)	✓	✓

A check mark indicates a link that is statistically significant. The results for "Low Economic Growth" are taken from Sachs and Warner 1995, Leite and Weidmann 1999 and Gylfason et al. 1999. The results for "High Corruption" are from Leite and Weidmann 1999 and Gylfason 2001. All other results are original findings and explained in greater detail in the appendix and Table 7.

* controlling for the influence of per capita GDP

Figure 4: Summary of Oxfam Findings

The connection between human oppression and environmental degradation is also demonstrably clear on a socioeconomic level. Nations that depend on the extraction of natural resources (such as fossil fuels or minerals) have a negative impact on both human populations and ecosystems. An Oxfam report on "Extractive Sectors and the Poor" opens with the statement "In the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, many economists believed that developing states could prosper by extracting and exporting their oil and mineral wealth. Fifty years of development

experience has refuted this belief."⁹ The report goes on to state: "overall living standards in oil and mineral dependent states are exceptionally low – far lower than they should be given their per capita incomes" and that mineral dependence in particular is "strongly correlated with income inequality."¹⁰ Furthermore, the governments in oil and mineral dependent states tend to suffer from unusually high rates of corruption, authoritarian government, government ineffectiveness, military spending, and civil war.¹¹ Endless resource extraction, which is so often touted as necessary to provide jobs

⁹ Michael Ross. "Extractive Sectors and the Poor." An Oxfam America Report. Los Angeles: Department of Political Science, UCLA, October 2001, 5

¹⁰ Ross, "Extractive Sectors and the Poor", 4

¹¹ Ross, "Extractive Industries and the Poor", 4

and reduce poverty rates, is not only destroying the environment, it is making the situation worse for people as well.

Eco-justice

What, then, is eco-justice? At its most basic, eco-justice is the recognition that human and environmental rights are indivisible – that humans are, in fact, part of nature, and that injustices against either party are mutually reinforcing. In the words of Dieter Hessel, of the Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology,

The concern for ecological soundness and sustainability includes but transcends the concern of humans for themselves...the converse is also true. Those who equate eco-justice with “ecological justice” inadvertently tend to lose sight of major social justice requirements in a world of predatory economic exploitation that widen the rich-poor gap.¹²

Hessel writes that eco-justice has four basic norms:

1. A deep respect for the *diversity* of creation on Earth; this means active solidarity with other people and creatures.
2. Ecologically sustainable lifestyles that utilize “ecologically *and* socially appropriate technology”¹³ (emphasis added) so that life may continue to flourish.
3. Establishing “basic floors and definite ceilings” for consumption, so that there is equitable distribution of resources among humans and all can enjoy sufficient standards of living.
4. Radically more democratic decision making; a recognition that decisions about use of the commons – our communal air, water, and soil – must be made by all segments of society and must further the common good.¹⁴

A large portion of this paper will be delving into the ways in which “traditional” American environmentalism perpetuates white supremacy by failing to acknowledge as legitimate the social

¹² Dieter T. Hessel. “Eco-Justice Ethics.” *The Forum on Religion and Ecology at Yale*, 2007. <http://fore.yale.edu/disciplines/ethics/eco-justice/>.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

justice concerns around race, class, and gender.

Literature Review

The study of ecology and religion has only emerged in the United States in the past few decades. However, there is a growing body of rich literature to which I am indebted. Roger Gottlieb provided an excellent overview of the field, as did the presenters and participants at the Ecology of Community Conference at the Claremont School of Theology in October of 2015. I owe much of my history of early Christianity to John Grim and Mary Evelyn Tucker. William Cronon's "The Trouble with Wilderness" shaped my understanding of the development of American conservationism, as did Ramachandra Guha's critique of "Radical American Environmentalism." Lynn White's article "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis" was an excellent source about the role of anthropocentrism in Christianity's engagement with the environment. In establishing a definition of eco-justice, I turned to Dieter Hessel and Mary Evelyn Tucker at the Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology; however, I used other sources to challenge Hessel's assumptions about environmental justice, including the 17 Principles of Environmental Justice as laid out by the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit. John Hart and Lois Ann Lorentzen, and Leavitt-Alcantara Salvador were helpful in learning about the role of Catholicism in eco-justice activism, and it was immense privilege to read the writing of liberation theologians, including Leonardo Boff, Carolyn Merchant, Rosemary Radford Ruether, and James Cone. Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si'* was also a wonderful and very informative read. John Cobb and H. Paul Santmire were important for understanding a Protestant history, and the reports and project descriptions of the World Council of Churches, the United Church of Christ, the Evangelical Environmental Network, and proponents of the Social Gospel helped expand this view.

Research and Methodology

A large part of my research for this thesis was conducting interviews. I started in the summer

of 2015 with a research project called “Generational Perspectives on Activism”. I conducted interviews with 13 activists¹⁵ either over the age of 60 or under 30 to determine their differing perspectives on current and historical social movements, where they would like to see more intergenerational work, and how they view intersectionality.¹⁶ Many of the people I interviewed brought up faith or spirituality as a source of personal inspiration and strength, and said that communities of faith which they were a part of served as spaces to network and recruit supporters across the divisive lines of race, class, gender, and political beliefs. These interviews gave me the idea to investigate the role faith communities can play in organizing.

I also conducted interviews while I was in the process of writing this thesis with five theologians and Christian activists in the greater L.A. area. Among the questions I asked them were:

- What, if any, connections do you see between abuse of the environment and abuse of people? If you feel there are connections, when did you first start to think about them? How have your thoughts evolved?
- Religious thought and faith can provide personal inspiration for activism. Do you believe communities of faith can be organizing grounds for political and social change? Why or why not?

A full list of the interview questions I used are available in the appendices of this paper. I recruited interview participants via word of mouth starting with those people immediately connected to the Claremont Colleges community. I received full consent to include all of the interviews in this paper, as well as the participants’ real names.

Limits to this Thesis

I made very deliberate choices when starting this thesis that I would focus on Christianity in the United States. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, I was raised as a Christian in the United States, attending Catholic and later Protestant churches. I still identify as a Christian; it is therefore

¹⁵ Eight participants were over 60, 5 were under 30, with an age range between 14 and mid-80s; 8 were female identifying, 5 male identifying; all were residents of the United States

¹⁶ the study of overlapping or *intersecting* social identities and related systems of oppression, domination, or discrimination (Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex”, 139)

the only faith tradition whose faults I must take responsibility for and whose successes I can celebrate without appropriating. Secondly, Christianity has arguably played the largest role of any religion in the ecological crisis we now face. The ecofeminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether wrote,

*This is not because the Christian patterns are theoretically more negative for ecology than other religions, but because, as the religious base of Western civilization that has been a primary agent of creating and spreading the ecological crisis throughout the world, it has had the most influence.*¹⁷

Finally, as a resident of Southern California, I wanted to highlight the eco-justice work being done by organizations in the greater Los Angeles area. Not only is this area an epicenter of environmental justice work, it is where I live and this allowed me to conduct most of the interviews in person. Furthermore, although there are a wide variety of religious communities in L.A. County, Christians still constitute the largest religious group (79.5% of the United States as a whole identifies as Christian¹⁸).

My Positionality

As a straight, cis-gendered, middle class white woman attending a small liberal arts college, I come to this research with a very specific, privileged perspective. Claiming that I will try to set aside my perspective and write without a bias would be presumptuous at best and deceptive at worst. I cannot separate my writing from my personal experience; I can, however, be aware of the limits of my own experience and do my best to learn from and include other experiences. It is for this reason I tried to incorporate many interviews into my research. I feel the great responsibility of conveying the words of others without changing or appropriating them. I did send my proposed writing to those interview participants whose thoughts are included here, so they could correct or cut out when needed. I hope I have been able to do justice to their thoughts and experiences and that this paper

¹⁷ Rosemary Radford Ruether. "Religious Ecofeminism: Healing the Ecological Crisis." In *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology*, edited by Roger S. Gottlieb, 362–75. New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 2006, 362

¹⁸ Hackett and Grim, "Global Christianity", p, 43

will add to the wealth of knowledge and perspectives on Christianity and eco-justice without silencing anyone else.

Roadmap for the Thesis:

Chapter 1 traces the evolution of Christianity as a faith tradition. It begins with a summary of the context in which it emerged and the philosophical traditions drawn upon by Western interpretations of Christianity. The next section expounds upon the impact of Christian thought on Western development, from the Medieval period to the Renaissance to the Reformation and Enlightenment. There is also a discussion of the groups historically excluded from the Christian ruling class, who may have had their voices and their own interpretations of Christian tradition silenced. Finally, it discusses how the concept of “wilderness” impacted American culture and the development of American environmentalism.

Chapter 2 concerns itself those Christians who resisted an exploitive Christianity. These include early Hebrew legislators, St. Hildegard of Bingen, St. Francis, process theologians, liberation theologians, and ecofeminist theologians. It also discusses Christian social justice, particularly in the United States. Forms of such justice include social encyclicals released by the Catholic church, the Social Gospel of American Protestant churches, and the role of Black churches in the Civil Rights movement. It ends with Christian involvement in the field of environmental justice, including the World Council of Churches, the Evangelical Environmental Network, and the current Pope Francis.

Chapter 3 evaluates three of the interviews conducted with Christian activists and theologians in California. I use their stories to present a basis for Christian involvement in eco-justice, focusing on the strengths communities of faith specifically can bring to activism.

Chapter 1

Out of the Wilderness

The earth dries up and withers, the world languishes and withers; the heavens languish together with the earth.⁴

The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant.⁵

Therefore a curse devours the earth, and its inhabitants suffer for their guilt; therefore the inhabitants of the earth dwindle, and few people are left.⁶ (Isaiah 24:4-6, NRSV)

Early Christianity and its influence on Western culture

In order to fully grasp Christian communities' evolving role in social and environmental justice, we must first have a basic idea of the context in which it evolved as a faith tradition and how it relates, as a monotheistic religion, to the beliefs that came before.

The ancient religions of the Middle East – Sumerian, Egyptian, Semitic, and Indo-European – were animist. Followers of an animistic faith believe in “the experience of spiritual forces in nature.”¹⁹ It is important to note that, unlike later traditions that saw the supernatural powers of some divine force manifesting itself as natural forces, animists believed that the deities were themselves natural phenomena²⁰ – that is to say, believing the wind is a spirit rather than the result of a God blowing air. Judaism was the first monotheistic belief to emerge in the Middle East, and it eventually gave rise to the other Abrahamic traditions: Christianity and Islam. In monotheism, a Divine Artisan is said to have created the world,²¹ and therefore to be separate and above nature.²² This is not to say that wilderness was detached from the divine – indeed, nature could be a place where the divine creator's work could be appreciated and encountered; however, God remained transcendent to nature as a father figure.²³

¹⁹ John Grim, and Mary Evelyn Tucker. *Ecology and Religion*. Washington, DC: Island Press, 2014, 45

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 46

²² Ibid., 45

²³ Ibid., 47

The Abrahamic traditions also borrowed heavily from Greek philosophy, which emphasized the order and harmony in nature – in the Judeo-Christian tradition, this is seen as proof of God’s created plan and a reflection of his power.²⁴ The Greek philosophers Aristotle and Plato were particularly important in originating the idea of a hierarchy of man over nature, mind over body, and male over female.²⁵ (Aristotle wrote that “as between male and female, the former is by nature superior and ruler, the later inferior and subject”²⁶). The influence of this philosophic tradition on Judeo-Christian law can be seen in countless places. For instance, Hebrew religious law that made men the head of the family, dominant over women.²⁷ Meanwhile, the Bible is littered with passages that suggest the superiority of man over nature. For my purposes, I will focus on one in particular: Genesis 1:26-29. Its centrality to the subject at hand makes it worth quoting in full.

Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.”²⁶ So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.²⁷ God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.”²⁸ God said, “See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food.”²⁹ (Gen. 1:26-29 NRSV)

²⁴ Ibid., 45-46

²⁵ Ruether, *Religious Ecofeminism*, 364

²⁶ Roger Just. *Women in Athenian Law and Life*. London: Routledge, 1989, 133

²⁷ Ruether, *Religious Ecofeminism*, 364



Figure 5: “Creation of Adam in the Paradise”

In the 2000 years since this passage was written, two dominant interpretations of it have arisen.²⁸ The first claims that man not only has a right, but an obligation to achieve complete mastery over the natural world and to exploit its resources to his fullest advantage. Proponents of this interpretation emphasize

phrases such as “let them [humankind] have dominion” and “fill the earth and subdue it.” The second interpretation highlight’s man’s alienation from nature – humans were created separately and then cast out of Eden, in exile.²⁹

Both interpretations link Eve to Nature, continuing a Greek tradition of viewing Nature as feminine. Eve is the one who communicates with nature via the serpent; Eve is the first to ingest the fruit that represents both knowledge and fertility, and in doing so, herself becomes fertile and bears fruit in the form of children, although she is condemned to suffer childbirth for her sin.³⁰ Throughout Western history, we see “images of Eve as virgin land to be exploited, as fallen nature to be redeemed through reclamation, and as fruitful garden to be harvested.”³¹ When Eve gave in to temptation and accepted the apple of knowledge from Satan, women and nature became linked as the inferiorized “other”, the temptress and the adversary of spiritual men. The 4th century saint

²⁸ Ibid., 364

²⁹ Ibid, 364

³⁰ Carolyn Merchant. *Reinventing Eden*. New York: Routledge, 2003, 101

³¹ Ibid.

Augustine wrote that women were created to be subjugated to men and that the restoration of order required women to accept their proper place.³² The portrayal of nature alternatively as submissive and as a temptress – and the amount of importance given to these interpretations – has shaped the view Christians have of their own place and role in the world. Due to my focus on Western Christianity, I will discuss the development of European perspectives.

During the Medieval period in Europe (ca. 500-1500³³), separation from and conquest of the natural world (such as through the construction of cities, which represented “civilization”) seemed to many Medieval scholars to be the best way to bring humans further up the hierarchical ladder and closer to God.³⁴ The Papal Bulls *Terra Nullius*, issued by Pope Urban II in 1095, granted European royalty the right to “discover”, claim, and exploit land in non-Christian areas.³⁵ *Terra nullius* means “empty land” in Latin, so the clear implication was that non-Christian peoples - and the land they inhabited - were completely passive and had no claim to act as independent members of God’s creation. The later Papal Bull *Romanus Pontifex*, issued by Pope Nicholas V in 1492, expanded on the claim by declaring war on all non-Christians and giving authorization to conquer their territories.³⁶ Here, the civilizing mission had been expanded from conquering nature to also conquering people of other faiths.

With the start of the Renaissance period (ca. 1500-1700³⁷), this divinely appointed mission to fully exploit nature that had driven Christian Europeans on the Crusades now accompanied them on journeys across the sea in greater and greater numbers. The promise of obtaining raw materials and goods from the Far East encouraged sailors to inch around the coast of Africa and to strike out

³² Ruether, *Religious Ecofeminism*, 366

³³ “Western History.” *Essential Humanities*, 2008. <http://www.essential-humanities.net/western-history/>.

³⁴ Grim and Tucker, *Ecology and Religion*, 49

³⁵ “The Doctrine of Discovery and U.S. Expansion”, *Anti-Defamation League*, 2005, http://archive.adl.org/education/curriculum_connections/doctrine_of_discovery.html

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ *Essential Humanities*, “Western History”

across the Atlantic in search of a sea route to Asia. Soon, settlers followed the explorers, driven by the same sense of divine purpose. Most believed that the American continent was being wasted because the indigenous population were not working it “rationally”.³⁸ In 1630, John Winthrop, governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, told his fellow settlers, “We have entered into Covenant with Him [God] for this work [of settling the New World].”³⁹ What followed was genocide of the indigenous population, in the name of properly harnessing the land’s potential and Christianizing the native population. Everywhere the Europeans went, they brought death and devastation – in short order, over half of the population of Native Americans (from North and South America) died due to diseases, wars, famine, and slavery.⁴⁰ The colonizers soon came to depend on the transatlantic slave trade to supply huge numbers of men, women, and children to work the fields of the New World. Over the course of the 16th-19th centuries, up to 25 million people were forcibly taken from the African continent and shipped in deplorable conditions to the Americas.⁴¹ Indigenous people and people of African descent were seen and treated as sub-human by the Europeans; they were “closer to nature”.

The Medieval fascination with the process of “civilizing” and defining that which separated humans from non-human nature continued to intrigue thinkers in Renaissance Europe. The philosopher René Descartes, for instance, distinguished between ensouled and unensouled beings; humans are the only beings who have souls and are capable of consciousness, while animals

³⁸ David Henderson. “American Wilderness Philosophy.” *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, n.d. <http://www.iep.utm.edu/am-wild/#H6>.

³⁹ Donald M. Scott. “The Religious Origins of Manifest Destiny.” *National Humanities Center*. Accessed December 6, 2015. <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/nineteen/nkeyinfo/mandestiny.htm>.

⁴⁰ “How the European Conquest Affected Native Americans.” *European Commission*, January 23, 2012. http://ec.europa.eu/research/infocentre/article_en.cfm?id=/research/headlines/news/article_12_01_23_en.html&item=Infocentre&artid=23573.

⁴¹ Hakim Adi. “Africa and the Transatlantic Slave Trade.” *BBC*, May 10, 2012. http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/abolition/africa_article_01.shtml.

function as machines.⁴² His way of thinking became known as “Cartesian dualism”, and has had a marked influence on the modern world.

While many of these Renaissance thinkers remained deeply Christian, there was also movement across every field – from philosophy to medicine to art – towards secularization. There was a revival of interest in ancient Greek philosophy, which emphasized rationality and the power of reason.⁴³ Some, such as Thomas Hobbes, even suggested that the church should be prevented from meddling in state affairs, as it had been accustomed to doing for centuries.⁴⁴ It would be simplistic, however, to pretend that philosophy can ever make clean breaks from one era to the next. Just as Christianity drew on earlier ideologies, so Enlightenment thinkers “lay claim to certain of the human and cultural consequences of Christianity – above all, its exaltation of the individual human person.”⁴⁵

The Protestant Reformation (1500-1650⁴⁶) also heavily impacted this period. First Martin Luther and then John Calvin strove to reemphasize the Bible as the revelatory word of God.⁴⁷ Many of the early settlers of North America were Protestants fleeing persecution in Catholic Europe. They brought with them Protestant work ethic, in which failing to fully exploit, reengineer, and appropriate nature was slothfulness amounting to sin.⁴⁸ Religion and the rapidly evolving technology of the time were married in the minds of men such as Francis Bacon, a British philosopher, scientist, and statesman who pronounced,

⁴² Gary Hatfield. “René Descartes.” Stanford University. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, December 3, 2008. <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2015/entries/descartes/>.

⁴³ Grim and Tucker, *Ecology and Religion*, 50

⁴⁴ “Developments in Democracy.” *Constitutional Rights Foundation*, Spring 2004. <http://www.crf-usa.org/bill-of-rights-in-action/bria-20-2-c-hobbes-locke-montesquieu-and-rousseau-on-government.html>.

⁴⁵ Kenneth L. Grasso. “Christianity, Enlightenment Liberalism, and the Quest for Freedom.” *Modern Age* 48, no. 4 (Fall 2006): 301–11, 307

⁴⁶ *Essential Humanities*, “Western History”

⁴⁷ Grim and Tucker, *Ecology and Religion*, 48

⁴⁸ Thomas Berry. *The Sacred Universe*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2009, 92

*Man by the Fall, fell at the same time from his state of innocence and from his dominion over creation. Both of these losses, however, can even in this life be in some part repaired, the former by religion and faith, the latter by arts and sciences.*⁴⁹

Thus, an awe of nature that had existed even through the Renaissance began to give way to scientific empiricism;⁵⁰ European scientists now believed the universe operated like clockwork, set into place by God at the beginning of time and destined to continue ticking until Judgment Day. This belief in the Christian tradition is called “Deism”, and it prevailed during the Enlightenment period (ca. 1650-1800⁵¹).

Even as the Enlightenment period’s scientists demolished free will and autonomy in nature, its philosophers struggled to distance humans from this nature by imagining a continuum of human history, along which the Europeans had progressed the furthest, emerging from the wilderness into the light of civilization. Prominent minds such as John Locke, Charles Montesquieu, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau agreed that humanity had started in a “state of nature” in which everyone was equal (although only Rousseau believed that people were happy in this state).⁵² This concept of a “state of nature” was based in the Biblical idea of “wilderness” – “places on the margins of society where it is all too easy to lose oneself in moral confusion and despair.”⁵³ Taming the wilderness was akin to conquering one’s own immorality, but in the course of this conquest, humans entered into society with one another (whether for security, the need for food, or desire to claim property). Civilization required some sort of social contract and governance to avoid being “barbaric”. The philosophers disagreed on what form this contract would take and how property should be distributed. However, none questioned the right of humans to possess land, natural resources, and

⁴⁹ Carolyn Merchant. “Secrets of Nature: The Bacon Debates Revisited.” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 69, no. 1 (January 2008): 147–62, 149

⁵⁰ Grim and Tucker, *Ecology and Religion*, 54

⁵¹ *Essential Humanities*, Western History

⁵² “Developments in Democracy.” *Constitutional Rights Foundation*

⁵³ William Cronon. “The Trouble with Wilderness; Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature.” In *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, edited by William Cronon, 69–90. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1995.

other humans as their own property.⁵⁴ John Locke's labor-theory of property even suggested that nature did not have value until human's labor enriched it.

Resistance to the rational, objectifying Enlightenment worldview arose in the form of the Romantic Movement. The Romantic Movement had its start in the 18th century doctrine of the *sublime*, perpetuated by theorists such as Edmund Burke, Immanuel Kant, William Gilpin, and others.⁵⁵ They returned to the medieval mystic's understanding of wilderness as a place where "one might meet devils and run the risk of losing one's soul...but one might also meet God."⁵⁶ Because of the belief in the sublime, this movement was marked by a distinctive nature-based spirituality that was often dismissed as the sentimental daydreams of artists and poets.⁵⁷ However, the idea of Nature as God's own cathedral secularized Judeo-Christian values⁵⁸ in a way that found special purchase in the United States – an ostensibly secular nation built on a Christian foundation.

The Frontier Myth and the Rise of American Environmentalism:

Romanticism was a transatlantic movement, and some of the most famous Romanticists (Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, John Muir) were American. Initially, authors such as Thoreau viewed spectacular natural sites with the same awe and fear that their European counterparts had; Thoreau described his 1846 climb of Mt. Katahdin in Maine as a "vast, Titanic, and such as man never inhabits."⁵⁹ By the second half of the 19th century, however, on both sides of the Atlantic this pious dread came to be replaced by something akin to sentimentality.

⁵⁴ "Developments in Democracy." *Constitutional Rights Foundation*

⁵⁵ Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness", 73

⁵⁶ Ibid, 73

⁵⁷ Grim and Tucker, *Ecology and Religion*, 55

⁵⁸ Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness", 80

⁵⁹ Ibid, 74

In describing Yosemite Valley in 1911, John Muir wrote “these blessed mountains are so compactly filled with God’s beauty...every movement of limbs is pleasure.”⁶⁰

The romanticization of nature came to take on a special form in the U.S. because of the myth of “the frontier.” Frontier logic combined the *sublime* with the notion of American exceptionalism, which had first been voiced by the early Protestant settlers of New England. American exceptionalism is the belief that the U.S. is a place specially chosen by Providence for a unique destiny. This idea was expanded upon in the 1740s and again in the first half of the 18th century, when leading preachers began claiming that America would be the site of the second coming of Christ.⁶¹ The United States as a secular nation, with the separation of Church and state enshrined in the Constitution, evolved in a deeply religious society. Throughout American history, this belief in God-given American exceptionalism has been used to justify policies of white supremacy.⁶²

The myth of the frontier combined the romanticization of nature with a glorification of primitivism that dates back to Rousseau. The frontier-man (who was almost always masculine) escaped the confines of society and urban-industrial capitalism and lived a more moral life of rugged independence.⁶³ However, in order for the frontier to truly be a place apart, it had to be “virgin” land, uninhabited, unworked, pristine as it had been at the moment of Creation.⁶⁴ Often, “explorers and mapmakers cast the American continent as a naked or partly clothed female to be explored by men and seduced into service for settlers.”⁶⁵ This made the millions of Native Americans inhabiting the continent an inconvenience at best – the first great irony of the frontier myth. The U.S.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 75

⁶¹ Scott, “The Religious Origins of Manifest Destiny.”

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness”, 77-78

⁶⁴ Ibid., 79

⁶⁵ Merchant, “Reinventing Eden”, 101-102; Merchant’s book greatly expands on the metaphor of Nature, and particularly America, as a woman.



Figure 6: The Discovery of America portrays an alluring 'America' in a hammock, awakening to welcome Amerigo Vespucci, who represents civilized Europe.

government consequently worked to remove indigenous people from the most desirable land by whatever means possible. In the 1823 United States court case *Johnson v. McIntosh*, the American Supreme Court unanimously supported the “Doctrine of Discovery”, which stated that the North American continent had been completely conquered by European

Christians on a divine mission during the “Age of Discovery”; as such, the indigenous peoples known as American Indians held no claim to the land except as tenants of the American government.⁶⁶ The descendants of the European Christian conquerors, meanwhile, would reap the benefits of the continent’s natural resources and forced indigenous labor.

But it is the concept of *Manifest Destiny* that most fully embodies the concept of divinely granted American exceptionalism. In an article defending U.S. expansionism, John L. O’Sullivan wrote of “...the right of our manifest destiny [is] to spread and to possess the whole of the continent which *Providence* has given us for the development of the great experiment of liberty” (emphasis added).⁶⁷ This God-given right to subdue and harness the land and its (non-Christian) people – in the name of liberty and equality for all – was invoked throughout the 19th and 20th centuries and used to justify the conquest, not only of North America, but of Hawai’i and the

⁶⁶ “The Doctrine of Discovery and U.S. Expansion”, *Anti-Defamation League*

⁶⁷ “The Doctrine of Discovery and U.S. Expansion”, *Anti-Defamation League*

Philippines.⁶⁸ The horrific result of these attitudes was that “by [1891]... 97.5% of the aboriginal land base [of North America] had been expropriated.”⁶⁹

It was mostly well-to-do urban dwellers who were so determined to wrest land from those who actually worked it. Wilderness’ appropriation as a luxury good to be consumed by the wealthy is the second irony of the frontier myth. Only the upper classes had the funds to build elaborate “camps” in the Adirondacks, cattle ranches on the Great Plains, and hunting lodges in the Rockies,⁷⁰ or the leisure time to travel to the newly minted National Parks, now cleared of their native inhabitants and safe for an ever-increasing number of tourists.



Figure 7: "American Progress"

Many of these visitors were contemptuous of modernity and industrialization and turned to the wilderness to maintain the values of the frontier life (rugged individualism, bravery, masculinity).⁷¹ They also

believed in the spiritual healing power of the great outdoors. John Muir, one of the founders of the wilderness conservation movement that emerged from Romanticism, stated “In God’s wildness lies the hope of the world – the great fresh unblighted, unredeemed wilderness. The galling harness of

⁶⁸ Scott, “The Religious Origins of Manifest Destiny”

⁶⁹ Peter Montague. “Columbus Day.” *Rachel’s Environment & Health News*, no. 671 (October 6, 1999). http://www.rachel.org/files/rachel/Rachels_Environment_Health_News_1591.pdf.

⁷⁰ Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness”, 78

⁷¹ Ibid., 77

civilization drops off, and wounds heal ere we are aware.”⁷² Many of the transcendentalists and early conservationists personified “nature as a powerful female to be revered, rather than a virgin land to be plowed and improved.”⁷³ However, the preoccupation with purity persisted when the described nature as being “desecrated” or “ruined” by human development.⁷⁴

Conservationism – the movement to preserve large swaths of land from human interference – helped birth the mainstream American environmental movement. Conservationists made more diverse arguments than simply nostalgia or spiritual values. Morally, they argued that non-human nature has an intrinsic right to exist, and claiming otherwise is anthropocentric. Scientifically, they called upon the ecological value of biological diversity.⁷⁵ I am not claiming that any of these reasons are completely invalid – they are, however, limited in their scope and problematic in whose livelihoods they threaten. Too often, when wilderness protection is enacted, it results in a transfer of land from the poor to the rich⁷⁶ (here, land was taken from Native Americans and rural farmers and made into National Parks whose clientele is largely white and wealthy). The American success of large-scale wilderness preservation is the exception rather than the norm - not only is it a large and relatively unpopulated country, but its economic and political dominance allow it to draw on the natural resources of other nations, so that Americans can enjoy the material benefits of an expanding economy without “spoiling” our own continent.⁷⁷

The conservationists clashed with a more utilitarian approach to nature often attributed to Gifford Pinchot, that sought to develop the nation’s resources efficiently and for the long-term public good.⁷⁸ Both parties, however, ignored “any race, class, or gender analysis about who has and

⁷² Linnie Marsh Wolf. *John of the Mountains: The Unpublished Journals of John Muir*. Madison: Wisconsin Press, 1979, 317

⁷³ Merchant, “Reinventing Eden”, 102

⁷⁴ Merchant, “Reinventing Eden”, 102

⁷⁵ Ramachandra Guha. “Radical American Environmentalism.” *Environmental Ethics* 11 (Spring 1989): 71–83, 73

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 74

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 79

⁷⁸ Henderson, “American Wilderness Philosophy.”

who does not have access to this so-called apolitical and ahistorical ‘nature’.”⁷⁹ The myth of the frontier and the construct of wilderness profoundly shaped environmental ideas in the U.S. and restricted who could be a proper environmentalist. Their legacies remain in what Dr. Robert Bullard, one of the founding forces behind environmental justice, refers to as “environmental elitism.”

Environmental elitism has three root categories: 1. Compositional elitism; 2. Ideological idealism; and 3. Impact elitism.⁸⁰ The first refers to the composition of environmental groups as mainly people from the “privileged class strata”. The second point calls attention to reforms that benefit environmentalists but cost non-environmentalists.⁸¹ Thirdly, impact elitism explores the presumed fundamental division between environmentalists, social justice advocates, and economic boosters, where the latter two see environmental reforms as “creating, exacerbating, and sustaining social inequities”.⁸² This could also be called the “jobs versus environment” argument, such as when environmentalists campaign to close a coal mine, to the displeasure of the mining company’s employees.

American environmentalism is unique because it arose in a historical context unlike any other. The North American continent was part of the European land grab and was thus subject to the accompanying ecological and social damage – the native population massacred, the land brought under the yoke of large-scale, industrialized agriculture. However, the United States has since risen to an economic and political status that allows it to export environmental damage elsewhere, and a myth has risen up around the image of the New World as an untamed place rich with possibility. “Wilderness” has become an integral part of American national identity, and the quest for wild

⁷⁹ Priscilla Pambana Gutto Bassett. “Handcraft and Environmental Knowledge: Mapuche Women Weavers.” Scripps College, 2013. http://scholarship.claremont.edu/scripps_theses/146/, 33

⁸⁰ Robert D. Bullard. *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality*. Boulder, CO: Westview, 1990. <http://www.ciesin.org/docs/010-278/010-278chpt1.html>, 9

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

places has led to the continued erasure of Native Americans and their history. Christianity has been an integral part of this process. From the earliest days of the conquest of the New World, European explorers and settlers framed their journey in religious terms – whether a Covenant with God, an evangelizing mission, or a call to exploit the resources of the vast American continents “rationally”. Slowly, the call to tame the wilderness transformed into the call to preserve it. Wilderness became the cathedral of a secular nation.

Chapter 2: Resistance

The desolate land will be cultivated instead of lying desolate in the sight of all who pass through it.⁸⁵ They will say, ‘This land that was laid waste has become like the garden of Eden; the cities that were lying in ruins, desolate and destroyed, are now fortified and inhabited.’⁸⁶ (Ezekiel 36:35-36)

No histories of oppression have gone unopposed, although these stories of resistance are often left untold. It is easy to say, given this history and the role that Christianity played in justifying the oppression of people and the Earth, that it is a religion of the privileged. But there is a flip side to every coin. Generations of Christians have believed that the most basic tenet of their faith is to practice compassion for every member of God’s family – human and non-human – especially those who are suffering or disenfranchised. This belief has manifested itself in a multiplicity of ways, from actions of social justice to spiritual kinship with non-human nature. The stories in this chapter demonstrate that often Christians were pursuing eco-justice before such a phrase existed – the concept of mutual respect for humans and the Earth is an ancient one.

Early Hebrew legislators drew upon the book of Genesis to formulate laws that emphasized a continuous restoration of relations between humans, animals, and the land. Based upon God’s day of rest following the 6 days of creation, they mandated cyclical patterns of work and rest: “seven days, seven years, and seven times seven years.”⁸³ On the seventh day, all humans (including slaves) and animals should rest. In the seventh year, the land should lie fallow and slaves should be set free – a well deserved break for man *and* the soil structure. In the forty-ninth year (usually rounded up to fifty), there should be a renewal – debts forgiven, captives released, and the reestablishment of equal

⁸³ Ruether, *Religious Ecofeminism*, 370

opportunity for all.⁸⁴ Clearly, these ideas remain hypothetical, although it seems likely that many Americans would greatly benefit from a nationwide redistribution of wealth every 50 years!

Centuries later, during what is now known as the Medieval period in Europe, certain mystics and scholars reemphasized the spiritual kinship between all members of creation. They disagreed with the conviction that nature had Fallen with humans when Adam and Eve were expelled from the garden of Eden; instead, they saw nature as “more perfect”, reflecting the image of God and acting as a scripture for the (mostly illiterate) Christian population.⁸⁵

The 12th century saint Hildegard of Bingen, who lived in what is now Germany, was one such scholar. A maverick living at a time when women were rarely educated, let alone

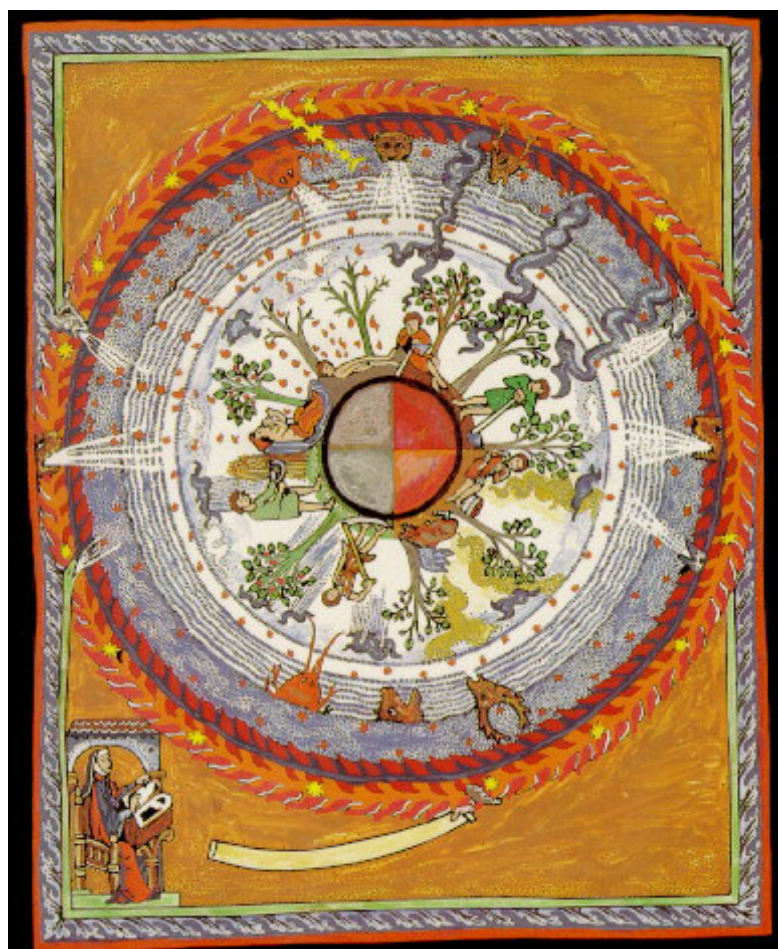


Figure 8: "Tree of Life" illumination from Hildegard's *Liber Divinorum Operum*

respected, she became a healer, composer, theologian, mystic, and abbess.⁸⁶ Her theology was holistic, linking the spiritual and physical,⁸⁷ and rested on metaphors from the natural world. St.

⁸⁴ Ruether, *Religious Ecofeminism*, 370

⁸⁵ Grim and Tucker, *Ecology and Religion*, 48-49

⁸⁶ Jane Caputi. "Feeding Green Fire." *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature, & Culture* 5, no. 4 (December 2011): 410-36, 416

⁸⁷ Deborah Corrigan, Justin Dillon, and Richard F. Gunstone, eds. *The Re-Emergence of Values in Science Education*. Rotterdam, the Netherlands: Sense Publishers, 2007, 103

Hildegard's most famous concept was that of *viriditas* – greenness – that which symbolizes divine power and life force.⁸⁸ “Humankind is called to co-create,” she wrote. “With nature’s help, humankind can set into creation all that is necessary and life-sustaining.”⁸⁹ She also described the Earth as a mother, provider and caregiver for all creation. With visionary foreboding, she wrote, “All of creation God gives to mankind to use. If this privilege is misused, God’s justice permits creation to punish humanity.”⁹⁰ Why St. Hildegard’s beautiful writings are not more well-known among environmentalists is a mystery.

More acclaimed, especially since the current Pope took his name, is St. Francis of Assisi (1182-1226). Famous for his exuberant poems praising nature, the thirteenth century saint expressed a deep, spiritual kinship with all members of creation – living and non-living – calling them “brother” and “sister”. His “Canticle of Creation” represented the sun, moon, stars, wind, water, fire, and earth as siblings and co-worshippers of God.⁹¹ In recent years, both St. Hildegard of Bingen and St. Francis have regained popularity and renown, and there have even been calls for one of the two to be named the patron saint of the environment.

At the time that Hildegard and Francis were writing, many churches were continuing a tradition of social ministry that was as old as Christianity itself. For centuries, in the absence of government programs, the Church was responsible for feeding the poor, housing the homeless, and providing education to the lower classes. The degree to which churches engaged in these activities on a local basis obviously varied, but aiding the less fortunate was commonly held to be part of Christian teaching.

⁸⁸ Caputi, “Feeding Green Fire”, 416

⁸⁹ Lucy Reid. *She Changes Everything: Seeking the Divine on a Feminist Path*. New York: T&T Clark, 2005, 119

⁹⁰ Marchiene Vroon Rienstra. *Swallow’s Nest: A Feminine Reading of the Psalms*. Leominster, UK: Gracewing Publishing, 1992, 232

⁹¹ John Hart. “Catholicism.” In *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology*, edited by Roger S. Gottlieb, 65–91. New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 2006, 69-70.

It wasn't until much later that a specific social justice ethos was laid down by the upper echelons of the Church (both Catholic and Protestant). The impetus for social justice movements within the Church almost always came about as a result of the hard work and passion of millions of innovative laymen and women and lower level church officials.

Within the Catholic Church, the first social encyclical⁹² was published in 1891 by Pope Leo XIII. He focused, as generations of Catholics after him would do, on the redress of economic injustices, and he firmly viewed the Earth as being created for man's use.⁹³ Father Edward McGlynn, a late nineteenth century priest in New York City, had a similar perspective, although he used man's domination over the Earth to stress that the resources of the world should belong equally to all men; in his view, poverty was a base affront to God.⁹⁴

In the United States, many Protestant churches first became visibly involved in social justice as part of the abolition movements.⁹⁵ Later, as the Industrial Revolution began to take hold, a group of mainline churches started calling for a Social Gospel; these churches believed the definition of "sin" should focus less on individual action and more on societal sins. One of the Social Gospel's most important proponents, Walter Rauschenbusch, wrote in 1917, "to find the climate of sin we must...put our hands on social groups who have turned the patrimony of a nation into the private property of a small class, or have left the peasant laborers cowed, degraded, demoralized, and without rights in the land."⁹⁶ For Rauschenbusch and his adherents, no teaching was more fundamental to Christianity than the call for justice.⁹⁷ The Social Gospel Movement continued to hold a great deal of importance to movements such as women's suffrage and Prohibition⁹⁸; although

⁹² A papal letter addressed the the bishops of the Roman Catholic Church

⁹³ Hart, *Catholicism*, 71

⁹⁴ Ibid., 73

⁹⁵ John Cobb.

⁹⁶ Walter Rauschenbusch. *A Theology for the Social Gospel*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1917, 50

⁹⁷ John B. Cobb Jr., Interview with the author, September 30, 2015.

⁹⁸ Dr. David H. Davis. "The Social Gospel." *The University of Toledo*, June 26, 2015. <https://www.utoledo.edu/llss/pspa/faculty/DAVIS/gospel.htm>.

it was struck a blow by the pessimism following World War I, it revived in the 1920s and 1930s – Roosevelt’s New Deal embodied many Social Gospel themes⁹⁹ and the Socialist candidate Norman Thomas was a Presbyterian Minister.¹⁰⁰

Throughout the first half of the 20th century, theologians, especially based at the University of Chicago Divinity School, began to combine the Social Gospel’s emphasis on justice with the ideas of philosopher Alfred North Whitehead. This strain of Christianity, which would come to be called “process theology” by the 1950s, understood “relationships as intrinsic to the reality of all things, so that nothing exists in and of itself, but only in its interconnection with other things, including God.”¹⁰¹ Charles Hartshorne and his student John Cobb were particularly important to the development of process theology. They placed significance on the inherent value of all creation (human and non-human)¹⁰² and directly challenged Cartesian dualism. Process theology gained more attention as the century progressed and concern for the environment entered into the mainstream.

Process theology’s emphasis on interrelatedness inspired other thinkers who were writing on the intersectionality of race, class, and gender oppression. One of the most radical theological movements to emerge at this time within the Catholic church is liberation theology. Coming out of rural Latin America in the 1950s, liberation theologians believe God had “a preferential option for the poor” and that social sin and *structural* injustice is greater than individual wrongdoing.¹⁰³ Priests who practiced liberation theology were often involved in supporting the movements against authoritarian governments in Latin America, but they also worked on a more grassroots level,

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ John B. Cobb, Jr., interview with the author

¹⁰¹ H. Paul Santmire, and John B. Cobb Jr. “The World of Nature according to the Protestant Tradition.” In *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology*, edited by Roger S. Gottlieb, 115–46. New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 2006, 138

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Lois Ann Lorentzen, and Salvador Leavitt-Alcantara. “Religion and Environmental Struggles in Latin America.” In *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology*, edited by Roger S. Gottlieb, 510–34. (New York, New York: Oxford University Press) 2006, 518

encouraging the poor and those typically excluded from theology to develop their own interpretations of the Bible.¹⁰⁴

At the same time, other theologies of liberation were emerging across the world. These movements were not necessarily directly inspired by liberation theology, but they did have some dialogue with one another, particularly in the context of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (1976) (which also included theologians from oppressed groups in first world countries).¹⁰⁵

Eco-feminism emerged in the 1970s, propelled by women such as Susan Griffin, Carolyn Merchant, the Colectivo Con-spirando, Vandana Shiva, Sallie McFague, and Rosemary Radford Ruether. These women believed that the oppression of women (and people of color) and the devastation of the planet that has followed are two forms of violence perpetrated by ruling class males that reinforce and feed on one another.¹⁰⁶ Eco-feminism was also a response to the domination of feminist rhetoric by light-skinned, upper-class women at the expense of low income women of color. Consequently, eco-feminism is complex and multi-faceted in the way it reenvisioned a better world; unfortunately, I can only summarize a few of the perspectives here.

Carolyn Merchant proposes recasting nature as a partner. This, she says, “retains the positive features of a personal engagement with nature, as experienced by the romantics and preservationists, but disengages from the negative sexual, acquisitive, and exploitive connotations of the image of nature as female.”¹⁰⁷ The Con-spirando Colectivo is a group of women based in Chile who publish a quarterly review that creates space for women of all faiths to develop their spirituality from the

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Elina Vuola. “Liberation Theology.” *New Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, 2005.
<http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1G2-3424300421.html>.

¹⁰⁶ Mary Judith Rens. “‘Remembering Who We Are’: Reflections on Latin American Ecofeminist Theology.” *Feminist Theology: The Journal of the Britain & Ireland School of Feminist Theology* 16, no. 3 (May 2008): 383–96, 384

¹⁰⁷ Merchant, *Reinventing Eden*, 102

perspective of gender, race, and class.¹⁰⁸ Vandana Shiva believes we must redefine the expectation of feminism. Currently, women's liberation is often tied to our entering the historical domain of men and engaging in work that is considered "productive" (can be measured by GDP). This goal not only devalues labor such as housework or caring for children, which traditionally falls to women, it asks women to join a world that is "destructive, aggressive, and dominating"¹⁰⁹ – not at all sustainable. McFague calls for a re-envisioning of the Earth as God's body – a kind of marriage of the concept of a patriarchal God and that of Mother Earth. This, she says, will not only bring God closer to us and make us view the destruction we wreak on the environment as destruction against God, but it would overcome the dualism between spirit and body that can be traced back to the Greeks.¹¹⁰ Finally, Ruether works to reclaim a Biblical tradition that links ecology and justice and use it to combat the Christian narrative that has encouraged the exploitation of women and people of color.

Another theology of liberation that emerged in the 1960s in the U.S. was black theology; although it is a separate school of thought from liberation and eco-feminist theologies, all three sought liberation from discriminatory structures. On 31 July 1966, 51 black pastors from around the country bought a full page ad in the New York Times in which they took inspiration from the Bible to echo the demands of the black power movement for a more aggressive approach to eradicating racism.¹¹¹ According to Anthony Pinn of Rice University, black theologians shared with liberation theologians the belief that "God's presence in the world is best depicted through God's involvement

¹⁰⁸ Josefina Hurtado, and Ute Siebert. "Con-Spirando: Women 'Breathing Together.'" *Ecumenical Review* 53, no. 1 (January 2001): 90–93.

¹⁰⁹ Vandana Shiva. "Feminist Ecology Is the Answer." *Herizons* 11, no. 4 (1997): 16.

¹¹⁰ Sallie McFague. "The World as God's Body." *The Christian Century*, July 20, 1998, 671–73.

¹¹¹ Terry Gross. "Black Liberation Theology, in Its Founder's Words." *Fresh Air*. Philadelphia: NPR, July 17, 2011. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=89236116>.

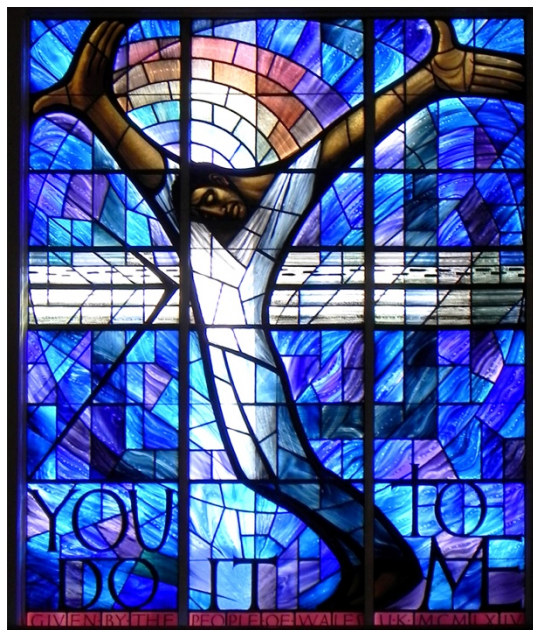


Figure 9: Stained glass window donated by the people of Wales after the 1963 bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Alabama. It depicts a black Christ with his arms outstretched; the right hand symbolizes oppression and the left is asking for forgiveness.

in the struggle for justice.”¹¹² However, they focused more specifically on the experience of American blacks living under white supremacy. According to the chief architect of black liberation theology, James Cone, one of its main tasks is to interpret the gospel of Jesus Christ in light of the experience of oppressed blacks.¹¹³ It is a survival theology that helps blacks navigate the white domination of American culture. Black theologians often portrayed Jesus as a brown-skinned revolutionary who fought against the oppression of “rich white people.”¹¹⁴

Black theology – and black churches in general – was an integral part of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. The famed Dr. Martin Luther King was, of course, a minister, but Christian support went much deeper. Church communities – particularly churches with a majority Black congregation – were the heart and soul of the movement. They recruited new members, provided safe houses to threatened activists, bailed out those who had been jailed, rounded up supporters on short notice for actions, looked after the children of the protestors, and much more.¹¹⁵

¹¹² Terry Gross, “Black Liberation Theology”

¹¹³ Anthony B. Bradley, “The Marxist Roots of Black Liberation.” *The Acton Institute*, April 1, 2008. <http://www.acton.org/pub/commentary/2008/04/02/marxist-roots-black-liberation-theology>.

¹¹⁴ Bradley, “The Marxist Roots of Black Liberation”

¹¹⁵ Martin Luther King, Jr. *The Radical King*. Edited by Cornel West. Boston: Beacon Press, 2015, 13

Although they address different root problems, liberation theologies have not shied away from turning their critical analysis on the church to judge how and to what extent it helps maintain structures of domination. These are theologies rooted in the concrete, philosophies that help “to understand the root causes (and ways of of eradication) of phenomena such as poverty and racism.”¹¹⁶ They are an extremely important cooption of Christian theology by those whom it traditionally oppressed. A similar challenge to environmentalism was emerging among low income communities and communities of color.

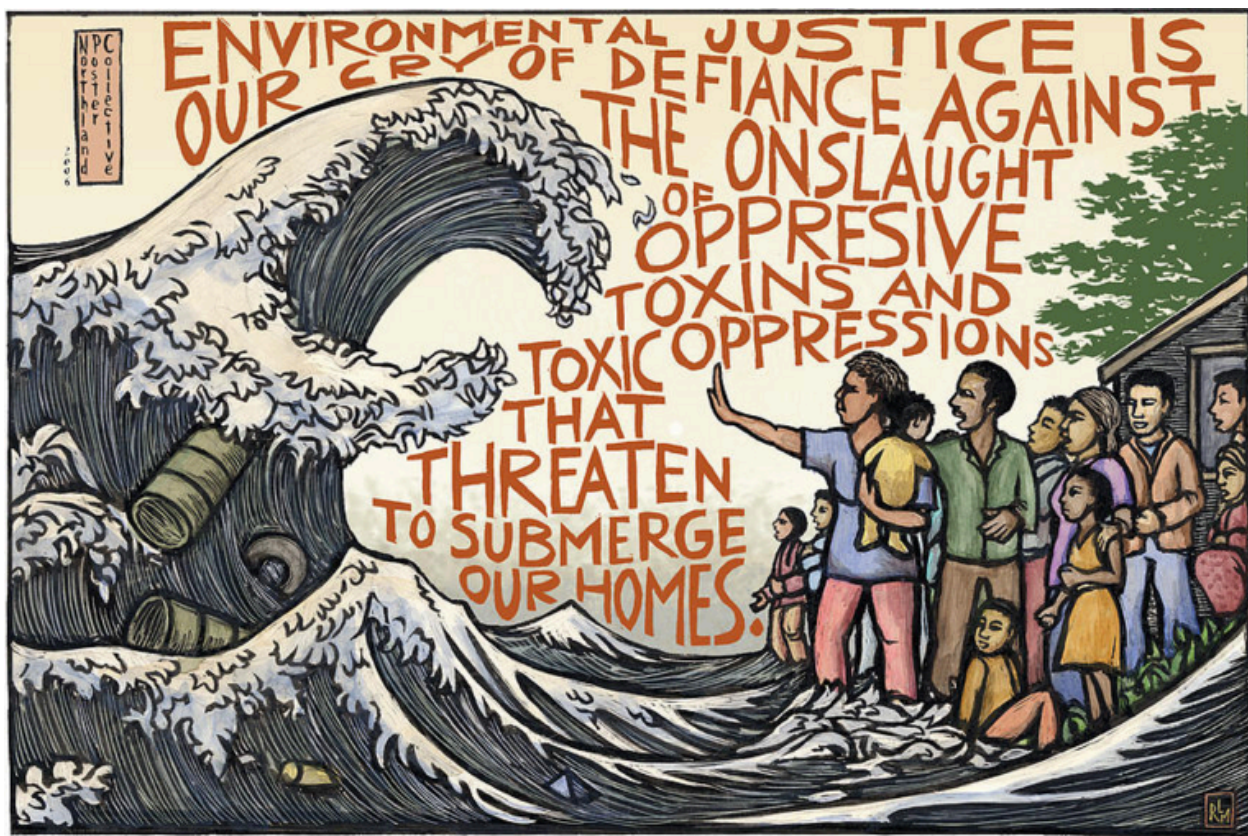


Figure 10: "Environmental Justice"

Following WWII, new frontiers of the environmental movement had begun to open up, and marginalized groups were advocating for protection from the health impacts of pollution and the economic impacts of exploitive industries. In California throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Latino and

¹¹⁶ Elina Vuola. "Liberation Theology."

Filipino farm workers began fighting for worker's rights, including protection from the toxic effects of pesticides.¹¹⁷ The marine biologist Rachel Carson's tremendously successful book *Silent Spring* taught Americans that preserving small patches of wilderness was not enough – human activities were still having an impact on other species and ecosystems, and toxin accumulation in the food chain was impacting human health.¹¹⁸ In 1970, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) was founded to protect *both* humans and the environment from the detrimental effects of pollution and by 1973, the agency had successfully ruled to phase lead out of gasoline.¹¹⁹ In 1978, hundreds of people won a hard-fought legal fight to be evacuated from Love's Canal, NY because of the toxic chemicals that had been buried beneath the neighborhood decades earlier; it would become known as the first widely publicized environmental justice case in the country.¹²⁰ A year later, an African-American community in Houston invoked Title VI from the Civil Rights Act to oppose a proposed landfill in their community.¹²¹ By the 1980s, environmental justice litigation cases were being brought forward on a semi-regular basis – in Warren County, North Carolina; Woburn, Massachusetts; East LA, California; and Morrisonville, Louisiana; among others.¹²²

These separate movements slowly became part of a collective whole often referred to as “environmental justice.” The principles of environmental justice were first laid out in the United States by the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in 1991. Their preamble offers an important overview of the wide variation of narratives that were woven into the environmental justice movement, and is worth quoting in full:

WE, THE PEOPLE OF COLOR, gathered together at this multinational People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, to begin to build a national and international movement of all peoples of color to fight the destruction and taking of our lands and communities, do hereby re-establish our spiritual

¹¹⁷ Renee Skelton, and Vernice Miller. “The Environmental Justice Movement.” *National Resources Defense Council*, October 12, 2006. <http://www.nrdc.org/ej/history/hej.asp>.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid.

*interdependence to the sacredness of our Mother Earth; to respect and celebrate each of our cultures, languages and beliefs about the natural world and our roles in healing ourselves; to ensure environmental justice; to promote economic alternatives which would contribute to the development of environmentally safe livelihoods; and, to secure our political, economic and cultural liberation that has been denied for over 500 years of colonization and oppression, resulting in the poisoning of our communities and land and the genocide of our peoples, do affirm and adopt these Principles of Environmental Justice:*¹²³

In the 17 principles that followed, the authors called for the cessation of production of all toxins, affirmed the right of self-determination of all peoples, and much more.¹²⁴ Environmental justice today has come to encompass a broad array of issues. While Dieter Hessel, of the Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology, claims that environmental justice is solely preoccupied with pursuing justice for those marginalized communities disproportionately impacted by environmental problems,¹²⁵ documents such as these suggest that it is actually akin to eco-justice.

I have not yet discussed the Church's role in environmental justice/eco-justice movements. It is clear that the Christian faith was an important part of the conservationist mindset for those who saw wilderness as a place where they could be closer to God. But were there Christian environmental groups in the United States that resisted the oppressive and ahistorical elements of conservationism?

There were by the 1970s, but before these emerged, Christians needed to examine the role their faith was playing in perpetuating environmental problems. Lynn White, Jr. wrote a widely-read article in 1967, "The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis", which lay much of the blame for hundreds of years of environmental exploitation at the feet of the Western Church. "In its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen,"¹²⁶ White argued. "Our science and technology have grown out of Christian attitudes toward man's relation to nature,"¹²⁷

¹²³ Delegates to the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit. "Principles of Environmental Justice," October 24, 1991. <http://www.ejnet.org/ej/principles.html>.

¹²⁴ "Principles of Environmental Justice"

¹²⁵ Hessel, "Eco-Justice Ethics"

¹²⁶ Lynn White, Jr. "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis." *American Association for the Advancement of Science*, New Series, 155, no. 3767 (March 10, 1967): 1203–7, 1205

¹²⁷ Ibid., 1206

thus, the fundamentally exploitive attitude of Western science was founded on a Christian ambivalence towards nature.

The article provoked debates across the U.S., as theologians scoured their Bibles for passages that challenged the right to “domination” apparently granted by God to Adam and Eve in Genesis, or else emphasized the pluralism of Christian experiences. Others acknowledged Christianity’s role in the crisis but sought to move forward proactively and embrace White’s conclusion: “since the roots of our troubles are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious.”¹²⁸ Within the Catholic Church, regional conferences of Bishops from Appalachia to the Midwest began writing about “stewardship” instead of “domination”, and began challenging the exploitation of natural resources that were stripping both humans and nature of their wealth and health.¹²⁹

Ramachandra Guha argues that White’s focus on an anthropocentric-biocentric dichotomy obscures the two fundamental ecological problems facing the globe today for which only a portion of the globe is responsible – overconsumption by the wealthy and growing militarization.¹³⁰ He says, “If my identification of the major dangers to the integrity of the natural world is correct, invoking the bogey of anthropocentrism is at best irrelevant and at worst a dangerous obfuscation.”¹³¹ I do understand and appreciate Guha’s concern that an overemphasis on anthropocentrism fails to capture the unequal amount of responsibility different nations and groups of people (whether racial, socioeconomic, or gendered) have on the environment. When environmental groups with a “biocentric” perspective call for the removal of indigenous groups from the rainforest or blame climate change on overpopulation in China and India, they are shifting responsibility for environmental problems onto those with less power (and less culpability). However, I believe that

¹²⁸ Ibid., 1207

¹²⁹ Hart, *Catholicism*, 75-76

¹³⁰ Guha, “Radical American Environmentalism”, 74

¹³¹ Ibid.

White's article raised important points about the historical responsibility of Western Christianity as a whole, and called on Christians specifically to reexamine their faith traditions and beliefs. This reexamination has generated very positive results.

Within the Catholic Church, liberation theologians were among the first to respond to the environmental activism of the 1960s and 1970s. In 1976, noted liberation theologian Leonardo Boff began to speak of “integral liberation” - connecting environmental exploitation to the same structural inequalities that spawn economic disparities.¹³² Boff was doubtlessly aware of the widespread concern for Latin American rainforests among American conservationists. Many conservationists suggested that the American national park system ought to be replicated around the world – including the appropriation of indigenous land and the banning of indigenous activities that “interfere” with nature.¹³³ This imperialist outlook was clearly counter to everything liberation theologians stood for (“The most threatened creatures are not whales but the poor, who are condemned to die before their time”¹³⁴). However, the writing of Boff and others began to construct a bridge between the social justice concerns of liberation theology and environmental concerns.

*A minimum of social justice is most urgently sought in order to assure life and the basic dignity that goes along with it. Once this basic level of social justice (social relationship between human beings) has been achieved, it will be possible to propose a possible ecological justice (relationship of human beings with nature)...To hear these two interconnected cries and to see the same root cause that produces them is to carry out integral liberation.*¹³⁵

Unsurprisingly, the manifesto of environmental justice fit well with liberation theology, and many Catholics at the grassroots level supported environmental justice initiatives. It wasn't until 1990 that concern for environmental degradation was finally addressed by the highest level of the Catholic Church when Pope John Paul II titled his World Day of Peace message, “Peace with God the Creator, Peace with All Creation (the Ecological Crisis)”. In this address, the Pope emphasized that

¹³² Lorentzen and Leavitt-Alcantara, *Religion and Environmental Struggles*, 519

¹³³ Guha, “Radical American Environmentalism”, 75-76

¹³⁴ Leonardo Boff. *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1997, 111

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 112

the same structural roots that created ecological problems also led to poverty, and that each could not be addressed independently.¹³⁶ This message has been expanded upon by the current Pope Francis (who took his name, we may note, from the aforementioned St. Francis of Assisi, whom he described as “a man of peace, a man of poverty, a man who loved and protected creation”¹³⁷). Pope Francis’ encyclical *Laudato Si’: On Care for our Common Home* beautifully outlines the principles of eco-justice and is a powerful document to come from such a highly scrutinized public figure.

The Protestant church is less hierarchical, and this enabled Protestant environmental activists to make their views heard on a global forum much earlier. The powerful World Council of Churches (WCC)¹³⁸ has been a particularly prominent voice advocating for eco-justice. In 1972, when the UN held the Conference on the Human Environment, the WCC was initially hesitant to endorse it; some members – particularly those from the Global South – worried that the new concern with the environment and species extinction was a ploy to devote energies to superficial “prettifying” projects that would detract from real work on justice.¹³⁹ By 1975, however, at the WCC General Assembly in Nairobi, member churches had recognized that environmental problems were *already* connected to other social justice issues, and voted to add sustainability to their goals. The slogan of the conference became: “a just, participatory, and *sustainable* society” (emphasis added).

They didn’t stop with words, however; over the next few years, regional member groups of the WCC held meetings and conferences to discuss how the Church could help implement these interconnected goals and what a “sustainable society” might look like in their locale.¹⁴⁰ At the 1983

¹³⁶ Hart, *Catholicism*, 78

¹³⁷ “Pope Francis Reveals Why He Chose His Name.” *Catholic Herald*, March 16, 2013.

<http://www.catholicherald.co.uk/news/2013/03/16/pope-francis-reveals-why-he-chose-name/>.

¹³⁸ “The WCC brings together churches, denominations and church fellowships in more than 110 countries and territories throughout the world, representing over 500 million Christians and including most of the world’s Orthodox churches, scores of Anglican, Baptist, Lutheran, Methodist and Reformed churches, as well as many United and Independent churches.” (WCC website)

¹³⁹ John Cobb, Jr., interview with the author

¹⁴⁰ Santmire and Cobb, *The World of Nature*, 134

WCC conference in Vancouver, the General Assembly revised their goal to “peace, justice, and the *integrity of creation*” (emphasis added), and the work the Protestant Church did in the next few decades was admirable and seriously advanced the nascent field of environmental justice. In 1987 in the U.S., the United Church of Christ’s Commission for Racial Justice released *Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States*.¹⁴¹ It was the first report to decisively show that “race is the most important factor in determining where toxic waste facilities are sited in the United States.”¹⁴² In 1990 at the General Assembly in Seoul, the WCC published 10 principles “linking economy, justice, ecological health, war, and racism” and from 1998-2004, they commissioned a series of reports to investigate the effects of globalization on economy, ecology, and society.¹⁴³ Today, the WCC sponsors the Ecumenical Water Network, which advocates for the recognition and implementation of water as a fundamental human right¹⁴⁴; advocates for justice-based approaches to addressing climate change¹⁴⁵; and uses a case and workshop methodology to challenge nations and groups with wealth to develop a “consumption and greed line” alongside a “poverty line” and to advocate for alternatives to economic globalization.¹⁴⁶

The WCC is comprised primarily of “main-line” or “old-line” Protestant churches. These churches are seeing a decline in attendance in the United States even as evangelical Protestants increase.¹⁴⁷ Although evangelicals are mainly associated with conservative views on social issues – for example, homosexuality and abortion – since the 1980s, environmentalism has become an

¹⁴¹ Skelton and Miller. “The Environmental Justice Movement.”

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Roger S. Gottlieb. “Religious Environmentalism in Action.” In *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology*, edited by Roger S. Gottlieb, 467–509. (New York, New York: Oxford University Press) 2006, 482

¹⁴⁴ World Council of Churches. “Statement on Water for Life,” February 23, 2006.

<http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/assembly/2006-porto-alegre/1-statements-documents-adopted/international-affairs/report-from-the-public-issues-committee/water-for-life?print=1print%3D1>.

¹⁴⁵ “Care for Creation and Climate Justice.” *World Council of Churches*. Accessed December 9, 2015.

<https://www.oikoumene.org/en/what-we-do/climate-change>.

¹⁴⁶ “Poverty, Wealth, and Ecology.” *World Council of Churches*. Accessed December 9, 2015.

<https://www.oikoumene.org/en/what-we-do/poverty-wealth-and-ecology>.

¹⁴⁷ Hackett and Grim. “Global Christianity”

increasingly divisive issue. Many evangelical leaders, congregations, and institutions are taking more liberal views on the environment. Recent initiatives include the “What Would Jesus Drive?” campaign against vehicles with low gas mileage; the Evangelical Climate Initiative, written in 2006 and signed by 86 prominent evangelical leaders; and the “Green Bible”, which highlights verses that relate to the environment in green.¹⁴⁸ The Evangelical Environmental Network uses Biblical verse to justify creation care. They give four primary reasons why Christians should feel called to care for the Earth:

1. *Christ died to reconcile all of creation to God (Col. 1:20).*
2. *All of creation belongs to Jesus (Col. 1:16; Ps. 24:1).*
3. *It fulfills the Great Commandments to love God and love what God loves. (It's hard to love a child with asthma when you're filling her lungs with pollution.)*
4. *Pollution hurts the poor the most, and Christians are called to care for the poor and the less powerful (Mt. 25:37-40).¹⁴⁹*

All of these actions have been met by opposition from within the evangelical community. In one highly publicized letter, 25 prominent evangelical leaders criticized the National Association of Evangelicals, which had recently teamed up with scientists to release “An Urgent Call to Action” for a response to anthropogenic climate change. These dissidents felt that the NAE’s concern with climate change was dividing the evangelical community and distracting from more important social issues. Others have suggested that any attempt to restore the environment is useless because nature and all of humankind’s creations will be destroyed on Judgment Day anyway. On the Christian website “Rapture Ready”, one contributor wrote “Knowing that the earth will eventually be put back in order [by God], we need to be concerned with the preservation of our eternal souls.”¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁸ Sabrina Danielson. “Fracturing Over Creation Care? Shifting Environmental Beliefs Among Evangelicals, 1984–2010.” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 52, no. 1 (March 2013): 198–215.

¹⁴⁹ “Evangelical Climate Initiative.” *Evangelical Environmental Network*. Accessed September 27, 2015. <http://creationcare.org/climate-realists-energy-optimists/evangelical-climate-initiative/>.

¹⁵⁰ Todd Strandberg. “Bible Prophecy and Environmentalism.” *Rapture Ready*. Accessed October 11, 2015. <https://www.raptureready.com/rr-environmental.html>.

Clearly, opinions from within the evangelical community are much more diverse than people typically assume, and the environment has proved a uniquely divisive issue for evangelicals.

The Church's role in environmentalism has been, and continues to be, significant. Early American conservationism – which birthed the modern mainstream environmental movement – was built upon a Christian foundation, and environmentalism retains its spiritual legacy to this day. It also retains its exclusivity for majority well-to-do white people. Environmental justice has arisen in answer to the needs of people who were left out of environmentalism for too long. Theologies of liberation, the farmworkers' movement, environmental justice litigation cases, and the National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit have all been significant forces in introducing dimensions of race, class, and gender into environmentalism and raising awareness of the disproportionate impact environmental degradation has on marginalized communities. It is important, however, not to romanticize or appropriate the idea of "resistance." Members of the privileged elite must also step up and work to dismantle the systems of domination from which they themselves have benefited. Proponents of the Social Gospel, writers such as Lynn White, Pope Francis, and organizations such as the WCC and the Evangelical Environmental Network are reexamining their own beliefs and faith tradition because they no longer want Christianity to play a part in justifying exploitive socioeconomic systems. They are helping to transform the Christian faith tradition into an active ally of environmental justice.

Chapter 3: Why part can Christianity play?

All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had.³²...

There were no needy persons among them for from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales,³⁴

And put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need.³⁵
(Acts 4:32,34,35 NIV)

I have moved through the historical role various Christian denominations and theologians played in helping or hindering the development of eco-justice. I now turn my consideration towards work being done on the ground now, and towards the future. In what ways do religious thought and faith provide personal inspiration for activism? Can the role of faith move beyond the personal? Can faith communities, specifically Christian ones, be organizing grounds for political and social change? During the course of my research on these questions, I conducted interviews with Christian activists in the Greater L.A. area; in this section I highlight three – Progressive Christians Uniting, Rise Up!, and Pomona Hope. From their answers and from my own review of the literature, I attempt to demonstrate what strengths they believe the Christian faith brings to eco-justice organizing. I should note that many of these strengths are not entirely unique to faith communities; however, I hope to convey that faith communities do collectively have a distinctive view on eco-justice and Christian communities and activists may view their work and their place in the world differently because of their faith.

Resources

John Forney is the Pomona Valley the chapter organizer for Progressive Christians Uniting, one of a growing number of faith-based organizations that are pursuing an environmental agenda. PCU is demonstrating that religious organizations can bring moral, as well as material, resources to the eco-justice fight. Their Eighth Day Project “brings followers of Jesus’ way of compassion and justice into faith-rooted solidarity with communities working for environmental justice, promotes a

sustainable Southern California that is fossil-free, and raises awareness on the intersection of faith and climate change.”¹⁵¹ They also provide an in-depth set of resources for small church groups engaging in environmental justice work. This curriculum for a 5-session workshop is an excellent example of a group using religious language and values to communicate scientific facts. The first session opens with an excerpt from Genesis, followed by an article discussing the problematic aspects of man’s “dominion” over the creatures of the world.¹⁵² Sessions 2-4 dive into the science of climate change, covering “Facts and History of Climate Change”, the economics of consumerism in a growth-dependent system, and personal carbon footprints.¹⁵³ The 5th and final session discusses the uneven impact of climate change on marginalized communities and uses scripture and the example of Martin Luther King to make a case for an ethical obligation to address this problem.¹⁵⁴

This curriculum is an excellent example of the faith community’s response to climate change scientists’ plea for help in communicating the realities of climate change to people’s hearts as well as their minds. In 1990, an “Open Letter to the Religious Community” was signed by 33 prominent scientists from around the world. In it, the scientists wrote:

*“Problems of such magnitude [as climate change], and solutions demanding so broad a perspective, must be recognized from the outset as having a religious as well as a scientific dimension. Mindful of our common responsibility, we scientists, many of us long engaged in combating the environmental crisis, urgently appeal to the world religious community to commit, in word and deed, and as boldly as is required, to preserve the environment of the Earth... We understand that what is regarded as sacred is more likely to be treated with care and respect. Our planetary home should be so regarded. Efforts to safeguard and cherish the environment need to be infused with a vision of the sacred.”*¹⁵⁵

These scientists recognized the need for a translator of sorts, a powerful institution that could pose the conundrum we face around climate change as a moral or ethical issue since, as Jürgen

¹⁵¹ “Programs.” *Progressive Christians Uniting*. Accessed November 7, 2015. <http://www.progressivechristiansuniting.org/PCU/Programs.html>.

¹⁵² “Climate Change and Faith Eco-Ministry Teams Curriculum Overview.” *Progressive Christians Uniting*. Accessed November 8, 2015. <http://www.pcu-la.org/ClimateChangeCurriculum2015.pdf>.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Dr. Carl Sagan et al. “An Open Letter to the Religious Community,” January 1990. http://earthrenewal.org/Open_letter_to_the_religious_.htm.

Habermas noted, “the national appeal to justice, to enlightened self-interest, or even to the well-being of future generations does not alone seem to have had a significant effect or traction.”¹⁵⁶ We remain caught up in an economic system premised on infinite growth, that treats exploitation of natural resources and human labor as though it is without consequence, a value-free choice. We have the technical prowess to address climate change and related environmental and social problems – countless scientists, environmentalists, political theorists, and, in recent years, economists, have proposed solutions. Yet, they remain unimplemented, and in recent years scientists, journalists, and others have started using the phrase “the point of no return.”

What sources of power do religious institutions possess that make them uniquely equipped to help answer this urgent need for a deeper ethical change? According to Gary Gardner in the 2003 “State of the World Report”, religious institutions can “shape people’s worldviews, wield moral authority, have the ear of multitudes of adherents, often possess strong financial and institutional assets, and are strong generators of social capital, as asset in community building.”¹⁵⁷ This community-building capacity encourages motivated individuals to unite their efforts to live individually and communally in an ecologically sustainable way.¹⁵⁸ Religious institutions occupy an unusual place in society – between civic and cultural, public and private, unabashedly occupied with moral values – that provides an unusual perspective and powers.¹⁵⁹ They are far from perfect and have caused tremendous amounts of suffering over the years, but faith communities have an equally long record of fighting for justice and providing support to marginalized people. This gives religious

¹⁵⁶ Grim and Tucker, *Ecology and Religion*.

¹⁵⁷ Gary Gardner. *Invoking the Spirit: Religion and Spirituality in the Quest for a Sustainable World*. Edited by Jane Peterson. World Watch Paper 164. Worldwatch Institute, 2002, p. 6

¹⁵⁸ Rosemary Radford Ruether. *Integrating Ecofeminism, Globalization, and World Religions*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005, 82

¹⁵⁹ Gottlieb, *Religious Environmentalism*, 495

leaders and communities moral authority to put an ethical spin on what is so often portrayed as pure science.

On a more practical level, as Gardner pointed out, religious communities have an enviable range of resources at their disposal. They have large constituencies that are organized into localized communities, which each have their own resources, buildings, money-gathering capacity, and other means of collective power.¹⁶⁰ This is especially true of Christianity, as the largest religion in the world; as of 2010, there were an estimated 2.2 billion Christians in the world, making up nearly a third of the Earth's population.¹⁶¹ Additionally, there are few secular communities with a such broad moral mandate – NGOs, for instance, generally maintain a specific cause and produce measurable results in order to attract donors.¹⁶² Church communities have a flexibility that *can* lead to corruption, but can also generate innovation.

Organized religion is often criticized as being prone to misconduct, but these powers of coordination can also have a great potential for synthesizing systemic, lasting change. Religions can provide the ethical framework for interpreting the overwhelming and frightening scientific facts about climate change and other environmental problems. Religious communities also have tremendous resources at their disposal – both money and people power – with which to effect change. Finally, as the philosopher Roger Gottlieb proposes, dying faith traditions *need* ecological activism as a chance to revive and reinvent their old traditions, injecting their congregations with new energy and drive.¹⁶³

Inclusivity

¹⁶⁰ Ruether, *Integrating Ecofeminism, Globalization, and World Religions*, 82

¹⁶¹ Conrad Hackett, Phillip Connor, Marcin Stonawski, and Vegard Skirbekk. "The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010-2050." Pew Research Center, April 2, 2015. http://www.pewforum.org/files/2015/03/PF_15.04.02_ProjectionsFullReport.pdf, 7

¹⁶² John Cobb, Jr., interview with the author

¹⁶³ Gottlieb, *Introduction*, 7

Tien Le is a senior at Pomona College and a volunteer with Rise Up!, an organization that uses art to engage youth from Los Angeles' Chinatown in social justice.¹⁶⁴ This year, they are creating art about environmental justice. L.A.'s Chinatown faces a wide range of socio-economic problems; according to a 2013 report from UCLA, "residents [of Chinatown] have trouble finding housing that can provide for a safe place to be at, have reduced mobility for commuting to jobs or meeting the household needs, have lower levels of skill and education among working-age adults, and in addition, lower levels of educational achievement among children."¹⁶⁵ In addition, Chinatown's location immediately adjoining the 110 Pasadena Freeway¹⁶⁶ means that the neighborhood suffers from a disproportionate amount of air pollution. Although Rise Up! is not a religious organization, Tien comes from a Christian background, and she believes that the Church can provide a community for marginalized people to work towards environmental and socioeconomic justice: "Heaven isn't just something to look forward to; heaven is happening now. It's a transformative process."¹⁶⁷

Rise Up! is fulfilling an important component of eco-justice work – raising awareness of the disproportionate effect environmental degradation has always had on low income communities and communities of color. Eco-justice insists that any environmental reform must work for *all* people, not just those in power; thus, it makes the concept of environmentalism relevant for people beyond the privileged elite. But eco-justice must do more than expand the scope of what constitutes "environmentalism"; it must provide a deliberate space for collaboration across racial, socioeconomic, and gendered lines. At its best, eco-justice can act as "a potentially unifying force of

¹⁶⁴ "How We Rise Up!" *Southeast Asian Community Alliance*. Accessed November 8, 2015. <http://www.seaca-la.org/programs/rise-up/>.

¹⁶⁵ Randy Mai, and Bonnie Chen. "The State of Chinatown Los Angeles." Department of Urban Planning, Luskin School of Public Affairs, University of California, Los Angeles, May 2013. <http://www.aasc.ucla.edu/research/pdfs/statect.pdf>, 10

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 7

¹⁶⁷ Tien Le. Interview with the author, October 9, 2015.

political action”¹⁶⁸ between people concerned with a broad array of environmental and social issues. The journalist Naomi Klein goes as far as to suggest that climate change could be an “opportunity” to advance radical social reforms.¹⁶⁹ But in order to pursue this just environmentalism, we need more spaces that are truly inclusive. Tien’s experience is that the communities of faith can be these diverse and inclusive spaces:

*“God unites people of all stations in life; Christian communities can be multiracial, multiethnic, people of all classes...the power of that to affect change from people of all different stations and all different positionalities is a lot.”*¹⁷⁰

To provide this space means consciously spotlighting the voices of marginalized communities. We saw in the previous chapter how the WCC was reluctant to endorse environmentalism until they had found a way to integrate it with their socioeconomic goals; this only happened at the urging of member countries from the Global South, whose voices were *not* silenced by more privileged members. Liberation theologians (including eco-feminist and black theology) call for a new theology based on the experiences of the poor, women, and people of color. It is important to acknowledge that this work is not easy; it is difficult for a completely heterogeneous group to work together – or even to trust one another – without some shared foundational values and experiences. Church communities generally have a basic shared set of assumptions and beliefs that draw them together; this can help transgress political or other divisive lines and unite people who might traditionally be opponents; after all, the Latin root of religion is *religio*, meaning “to bind together.”¹⁷¹

Hope

In 2011, Nathan Robinson helped the organization Pomona Hope to start the Center Street Community garden in a vacant lot in the city of Pomona, CA. The city, which is the largest in

¹⁶⁸ Gottlieb, *Religious Environmentalism*, 491

¹⁶⁹ Naomi Klein. *This Changes Everything*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, Inc, 2014, 10

¹⁷⁰ Tien Le, interview with the author

¹⁷¹ Grim and Tucker, *Ecology and Religion*, 39

eastern Los Angeles County, struggles with a range of socioeconomic stresses and educational hurdles. Unemployment is at 14.4% and 17.7% of residents are below the poverty line – this number is higher for children. Twenty-six percent of residents lack healthcare coverage. It is difficult for many to break this cycle of poverty because over one-third of residents are foreign-born and limited English proficiency can lead to difficulty in school. Forty-six percent of students have limited English proficiency, and 37.5% of residents 25+ have less than a high school education.¹⁷² These statistics illustrate a seemingly insurmountable problem – opportunity for change is limited, and the system is set against many of Pomona’s residents.

The people at Pomona Hope believe they can help break this cycle; it is a Christian organization based out of a local Presbyterian Church that is “dedicated to working in partnership with people of all backgrounds to strengthen Pomona’s children, families, and neighborhoods.”¹⁷³ When asked how he sees the garden contributing to this goal, Nathan responded,

“I see it as community building, I see it as a restoration of a fractured community, a place that is a common ground of beauty and health and vitality, something that is not degraded but being built; and it transforms the way residents recognize their own neighborhood...redefining my community to be a place of growth and hope.”¹⁷⁴

Nathan has maintained this dream despite setbacks in the past four years. Even as the garden has flourished and has brought both socioeconomic and environmental benefits to the community, it has been a slow process and has hit bumps along the way. Faith, Nathan says, has helped him maintain hope that his vision for the garden and the broader community of Pomona will one day be realized.

This was a recurring theme in almost every interview I conducted – faith in a higher power gave these visionaries the patience and conviction they needed to persevere. It also served as an

¹⁷² “Why Pomona?: Statistics.” *Pomona Hope*, 2010. <http://www.pomonahope.org/why-pomona/statistics/>.

¹⁷³ “Who We Are: Mission.” *Pomona Hope*. Accessed November 10, 2015. <http://www.pomonahope.org/who-we-are/mission/>.

¹⁷⁴ Nathan Robinson. interview with the author, October 12, 2015

antidote to anger, which most people said lent zeal to a movement but burnt activists out quickly. Faith is by no means the only way to feel hopeful – there are countless secular activists who do amazing work and sustain themselves with love and passion. But there’s also no denying the power that religious faith played in the lives of the people I interviewed. Certainly, this may be because the belief in a higher power – one that responds to prayers and may be interfering on humans’ behalf – is reassuring. Unfortunately, this way of thinking *can* lead to apathy. The scholar Mary Evelyn Tucker suggests that faith traditions do not simply provide a passive hope – a blind faith in a better future, guaranteed for us by a higher power; they also practice institutionalized rituals that help people mourn and repent past mistakes, process overwhelming feelings of hopelessness and fear, and, out of this, to find hope.¹⁷⁵ This is an active hope, one that comes out of repentance and transformation. In the words of Pope Francis, “A healthy relationship with creation is one dimension of overall personal conversion, which entails the recognition of our errors, sins, faults and failures, and leads to heartfelt repentance and desire to change.”¹⁷⁶

People often refer to “Catholic guilt” because of the practice of attending weekly confession. Repentance and reconciliation are integral parts of the Christian faith – the Bible teaches that, after the Fall and Adam and Eve’s subsequent expulsion from the Garden of Eden, humankind was destined to be born in sin. Jesus’ death atoned for humanity’s sins and reconciled humans with God, giving them the potential for redemption. There are many problems with these traditions when they are used to shame and control people; however, rituals that require acknowledgement of past wrongdoing and a commitment to change can be powerful tools for reconciliation if wielded sparingly and without coercion.

¹⁷⁵ Mary Evelyn Tucker. “Challenges of Religion and Ecology Post Laudato Si’.” Presentation presented at the Ecology of Community Conference, Claremont School of Theology, October 24, 2015.

¹⁷⁶ Pope Francis. “Laudato Si’: On Care for Our Common Home.” *The Holy See*, May 24, 2015. http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html, Paragraph 218

John Grim and Mary Evelyn Tucker write that religious traditions from across the world provide ways of “*orienting* humans to the universe, *grounding* them in the community of nature and humans, *nurturing* them in Earth’s fecund processes, and *transforming* them into their deeper cosmological selves.”¹⁷⁷ The active hope and deeper self-awareness that religious or spiritual traditions can cultivate is immensely important for sustaining activists and encouraging a societal change that reaches deeper than a few superficial changes to our energy system.

¹⁷⁷ Grim and Tucker, *Ecology and Religion*, 39

Conclusion

In recent years, environmentalists have seen vindication as a broader range of people – many of whom were traditionally indifferent to or opposed to discussions about environmental problems – have begun discussing its application to their fields.¹⁷⁸ Analysts at the Pentagon, business insurance companies, and economists have embarked on analyses of the security threats climate change poses to our current systems – in the form of climate refugees, flooding of coastal cities, widespread post-fossil fuel economic collapse, and more. All of a sudden, people at the highest strata of privilege are catching a glimpse of what climate change may mean for their own lives, and they are alarmed. It can no longer be relegated to a problem for future generations, something only experienced by residents of a flooded island in the Pacific or farmers in the Sahel facing desertification.

They have begun to demand reforms that “green” our current system – replacing oil fields with wind farms and gasoline-powered cars with electric vehicles; these demands are often followed by the ominous phrase “before it’s too late. They are meant to be implemented across the board, and developing countries are chided for pursuing industrialization with the same reckless abandon the developed countries did two centuries ago. Other businesses are already planning how they may benefit from climate change – by planting new crops in regions that were previously too cold, or, more cynically, by offering climate insurance. These proposals arise from a fierce determination to hold on to the current power structures and to an economic system based on infinite growth. While the scale and complexity of the problems we face certainly require as many minds as possible, it

¹⁷⁸ This is particularly the case for climate change.

would be a mistake to pursue greening the current system as an alternative to deeper environmental and social change. Renewable energy sources still require raw materials – there would still be mines for rare Earth minerals, impoverishing people and destroying eco-systems. There would still be waste dumps, leaching toxins into the soil and poisons into the water table.

I am reminded of the story of Noah from the start of the thesis. Perhaps Noah's story doesn't offer much in the way of comfort, but it does offer a kind of metaphysical blueprint. Yes, Noah needed technology to survive the flood – certainly, building an ark to hold all of creation was no mean feat – but he needed to do more. He needed to make sure his boat could, in fact, carry everybody. God did not instruct him to only bring along those animals who served some purpose for Noah and his family, nor only those people who could pay a fare.

As governments and citizens of all nations struggle to adapt to climate change and mitigate disaster as best we can, Christianity and other faiths can help us keep this requirement of total inclusivity at the forefront of our minds. We are all connected in intangible but unignorable ways. As Pope Francis wrote in his encyclical *Laudato Si'*

*Ecological culture cannot be reduced to a series of urgent and partial responses to the immediate problems of pollution, environmental decay, and the depletion of natural resources. There needs to be a distinctive way of looking at things, a way of thinking, policies, an educational programme, a lifestyle and a spirituality...to seek only a technical remedy to each environmental problem which comes up is to separate what is in reality interconnected and to mask the true and deepest problems of the global system.*¹⁷⁹

The transformations that must be enacted in our society go deeper than driving Priuses and changing light bulbs – they go beyond technical into the realm of moral and spiritual. The environmental movement in the U.S. has always had a spiritual dimension, emerging as it did from the Romantic Period. But it was an inaccessible spirituality for most people, a spirituality you needed money to afford, because it could only be attained by driving great distances to visit remote National Parks to commune with pristine nature. This exclusive spirituality is being directly contested by

¹⁷⁹ Pope Francis. "Laudato Si'", pp. 83-84

religious organizations in nationally, ethnically, racially, and socioeconomically diverse forums such as the WCC. It is being challenged by theologies of liberation and evangelists. It is being challenged by the Pope himself.

Christian organizations and activists are helping to make environmentalism holistic, a call to reach beyond a few superficial, personal changes in our lives to a deeper, ethical change,¹⁸⁰ a transformation that involves justice as an integral part. Churches have the resources to pursue systemic change and the language to frame scientific facts ethically. They can also act as a forum for broader inclusivity and diversity in environmental debates. Finally, religious traditions can be retrieved, reevaluated, and reconstructed¹⁸¹ in order to provide the framework and rituals for transformation and active hope. Yes, Christians must acknowledge and make restitutions for the problematic history of our religious tradition. However, Christian communities possess the potential for transformative, provocative hope in the pursuit of eco-justice.

¹⁸⁰ Ruether, *Religious Ecofeminism*, 373

¹⁸¹ Grim and Tucker, *Ecology and Religion*, p. 86

Appendix A: Citations for figures

- Figure 1: *A 14th Century English Manuscript Showing Noah's Ark at the End of the Flood*, n.d.
<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-2246550/Archaeologist-Titanic-claims-Biblical-flood-DID-happen-12-000-years-ago.html>.
- Figure 2: Matt Dickhut. "Branches of Christianity." *Waupun School District*, June 16, 2003.
<http://www.waupun.k12.wi.us/Policy/other/dickhut/religions/20%20Branches%20of%20Christ.html>.
- Figure 3: Source: Boden, T.A., Marland, G., and Andres R.J. (2015). Global, Regional, and National Fossil-Fuel CO₂Emissions. Carbon Dioxide Information Analysis Center, Oak Ridge National Laboratory, U.S. Department of Energy, doi 10.3334/CDIAC/00001_V2015.
- Figure 4: Michael Ross. "Extractive Sectors and the Poor." An Oxfam America Report. Los Angeles: Department of Political Science, UCLA, October 2001.
- Figure 5: Jan Brueghel the Younger. *Creation of Adam in the Paradise*. Oil on copper, 17th century. Stedelijk-Museum.
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jan_Brueghel_the_Younger_Creation_of_Adam.jpg.
- Figure 6: Straet, Jan van der. *Discovery of America: Vespucci Landing in America*. Engraving, 1612 (c 1588).
<http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/romance/spanish/219/07colonial/america.html>.
- Figure 7: John Gast. *American Progress*. Oil, 1872. Prints and Photographs Division. Library of Congress.
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- Figure 8: Hildegard of Bingen. *The Tree of Life*, 12th century. Biblioteca Statale di Lucca.
https://www.heiligenlexikon.de/BiographienH/Hildegard_von_Bingen.html.
- Figure 9: John Petts. *Alabama Window*. Stained glass, 1965. <https://www.llgc.org.uk/blog/?p=7152>.
- Figure 10: Ricardo Levins Morales. *Environmental Justice*. Mixed Media - Scratchboard, Ink and Watercolor, n.d. <http://fineartamerica.com/featured/environmental-justice-ricardo-levins-morales.html>.

Appendix B: Guiding Questions for Research Interviews

- What is your religious identification and have you been involved in religious institutions throughout your life?
- When did you first become involved in social justice and/or environmentalism work?
- What, if any, connections do you see between abuse of the environment and abuse of people? If you feel there are connections, when did you first start to think about them? How have your thoughts evolved?
- Religious thought and faith can provide personal inspiration for activism. Do you believe communities of faith can be organizing grounds for political and social change? Why or why not?

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