

Is Christianity to Blame? The Ecological Complaint Against Christianity

By Steven Bouma-Prediger

(A response to Lynn White's 1967 essay "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," available online at <https://www.uvm.edu/~gflomenh/ENV-NGO-PA395/articles/Lynn-White.pdf>)

Is Lynn White's thesis plausible? A great deal of ink has been spilt responding to the third argument—the so-called "Lynn White thesis." Wesley Granberg-Michaelson concisely summarizes a number of the conclusions reached since White's article was first published.

"First, White's description of biblical teaching regarding the environment is selective and highly distorted. Second, his argument that Christianity paved the way for the scientific and technological revolutions is very questionable. And third, his assumption that environmental destruction has flowed solely from the mindset of Western culture, and not from others, is historically dubious."

From what has been argued heretofore, it should be obvious that White's description of biblical teaching is, as Granberg-Michaelson claims, distorted. Like Toynbee, White focuses on only certain texts while ignoring others. Thus, his premise that historical Christianity understands dominion only as domination is mistaken.

Also, White's claim that Christian thought was a necessary condition for the rise of modern science in the West is disputed. While this thesis has its able defenders, it also has its compelling critics. The precise role of Christian theology in the rise of modern science is a complex question admitting of no simple answer. And so another of White's premises is, at the very least, questionable.

Finally, as Granberg-Michaelson astutely points out, White's historical claim that ecological degradation is somehow linked uniquely with the modern Western worldview is dubious indeed. As James Nash, among many others, rightly states, "ecological crises are not peculiar to Christian-influenced cultures. Non-Christian cultures have also caused severe or irreparable harm to their ecosystems." Plato describes deforestation in ancient Greece. Augustine laments desertification in fourth-century North Africa. The great Mayan cultures of Meso-America collapsed around the year AD 800 due to deforestation and soil erosion. Ecological degradation is no respecter of religions. It predates Christianity and can be found in places where Christianity has asserted little or no influence. In a number of significant respects, therefore, White's argument is problematic.

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