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The Anti-Ecological Character of Latin Christianity and the Pro-Ecological Turn of Protestantism

Michael S. Northcott

I was on a kayaking trip with a house party of academics, environmental entrepreneurs, and green party activists in the summer of 2014 in the small islands off the coast of Arisaig in Southwest Scotland. We had been out on a beautiful calm and sunny day floating in clear turquoise seas over kelp forests, past seal colonies, and visiting white sand islands on the wondrous Hebridean shore, with the striking volcanic escarpment of the Isle of Eigg on the horizon. We had enjoyed stimulating discussions through the day on some of the scientific dimensions of the ecological crisis, and in the early evening we were planning to talk about the needed cultural responses, and the continuing obstacles to their realization. As we removed our wet gear I introduced myself to marine biologist Andy Watson and said that I studied religion and the environment: he responded that from his perspective religion, and especially the Christian idea of human dominion over nature, was still a major cause of the ecological crisis.

This conversation was a sharp reminder that Lynn White Jr.'s claim that Christianity is uniquely anthropocentric, and desacralizes the nonhuman more than other religious cultures, has tarnished all Christians, and adherents of other Abrahamic faiths, in the eyes of most scientists and environmentalists, as well as historians and scholars of religion. To give just two influential examples: Bron Taylor's *Dark Green Religion* commences with a searing indictment of the ecological record of Christianity, and of the Abrahamic religions in general (Taylor 2009, 42–74); and in a non-scholarly context, the influential naturalist and broadcaster David Attenborough said in a documentary on Charles Darwin that when Genesis 1 indicated that God said to Adam and Eve that they were to “go forth and multiply,” and that “the natural world is there for you to dominate it,” this was the origin of the belief that “the world is there for us and if it doesn't actually serve our purposes, it's dispensable,” and this “has produced the devastation of vast areas of the land's surface” (Attenborough 2009).

White was a North American scholar of the history of technology, and more especially of the development of medieval technologies and their impact on human practices. His essays on the development of the deep plough, the stirrup, and the mechanical clock, are brilliant accounts of the impact of these inventions on farming practices, feudalism, horse husbandry, and the organization of work and warfare in late medieval Europe (White 1978). White investigated the way Latin Roman Catholic Christianity embraced and took further the scientific discoveries of Islamic scholars, sustaining a culture of craft characterised by growing technological creativity. And he argued that Catholic

theologians were influenced by Islamic beliefs about the human role as vice-regents, or stewards, in a divinely created order. White also investigated the way that new technologies, and related new social practices, played a significant role in the agricultural advances of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries in Europe, which were not replicated in the Byzantine East, nor in China or the Middle East. Latin Europe's success in developing and harnessing scientific information in new technologies fostered population growth, and the growth of medieval cities in which new craft tools and devices were developed, along with social innovations such as craft guilds, apprenticeships, and new approaches to civic organization, commercial organization and accounting, and the law. The origins of the scientific method are also to be found in this period. Frances Bacon's fifteenth-century treatise on scientific method was based on his observation of established medieval workshop practices and technologies.

White's research on the role of religion in technological development in the Middle Ages informed the central claim in his Science article, which was that Christianity, and in particular Latin Christianity, was anti-ecological because it uniquely fostered a post-animist and mechanistic cosmology, and because it was more anthropocentric than all other forms of religion (White 1967). According to White, this was because Latin Christianity had a creation story in which humans are the central actors, invited by God to name and to dominate all other creatures. Furthermore, Latin Christianity sustained a cosmological belief that "no item in the physical creation had any purpose save to serve man's purposes" (White 1967). Hence, medieval Catholics uprooted sacred groves and invented technologies, including the deep plough, the mechanical clock, and wind- and water-powered mills, which asserted human dominance over soils and seasons, and in the early modern era facilitated the destructive ecological footprint of industrial civilization. For White, the historic roots of the ecological crisis were clearly therefore in the medieval Latin West.

White did not, however, paint all Christians with this anthropocentric and domineering mindset. He contrasted Latin with Byzantine Christianity and argued that the former's technological inventiveness reflected not only a doctrine of creation that put humans above all other creatures but a voluntarist mindset that saw action on and in the world as the means of redemption. Orthodox Christians were less likely to invent or embrace technological innovations because they continued to understand and experience nature as a divinely created symbolic order freighted with spiritual meaning, and because they understand the essence of human corruption and sin as blindness of mind and soul rather than immorality. For the Orthodox, illumination through contemplation, and not action, is the means of the redemption of the soul. And the contemplative dimension informs all human life, including human work on the natural world in drawing water, growing food, baking bread, creating shelter, art, and artifacts.

Evidence for the truthfulness of White's claim about Latin Christianity is clearest in the salvation theology of Thomas Aquinas, which was affirmed at the Council of Trent

(1545–1563) as the core of the Catholic faith, and which strongly influenced church teaching, and the formation of priests, from the sixteenth century until now. For Thomas, salvation is concerned with the workings of faith and grace in the redemption of rational, intellectual beings (humans) from the effects of Original Sin, a term first coined by Augustine of Hippo, which, absent salvation, results in the eternal punishment of souls after death. Christ's death was understood by Thomas not so much as the fulfillment of a quasi-feudal debt of honor, as Anselm had described it, but as a morally just penance performed by the sinless Christ for the sins of humanity. Christ's moral righteousness and preparedness to undergo suffering and death supplied what the Catholic Catechism, after Thomas, called the "treasury of the church," which is "the infinite value" of Christ's merits before God (Thomas 1947, 5968–81). These benefits are made available to the souls of believers, living and deceased, through the sacraments of the Church, and through supplemental actions such as the good works and prayers of the saints on earth and in heaven, and through indulgences arising from the sacrament of penance and penitential actions such as masses and prayers said for the dead (Catechism 1476–77). For Thomas, the purpose of creation, and species, is an instrumental one, which is to serve and facilitate the redemption of human souls (Benzoni 2005). Hence, animals and plants are not perfectible and have no place in the state of the renewal of the universe "since they are not capable thereof" (Thomas 1947, 6644).

Thomas is by a long way the most influential theologian in Roman Catholicism from the late medieval period until the present. For Thomas, and for Catholic clerics and laity formed by his teaching, creatures were designed by God for human use: animals do not have what Thomas called 'intellective souls' and their instrumental use by humans is appropriate so long as it is not excessively cruel. Thomas challenged cruelty to animals not because God cares for them, or because they ought to be respected in themselves, but because cruelty to animals misshapes a person's moral character and hence puts them at risk of "bravery in committing sin" (Thomas 1947, 2443). Hence, for the vast majority of Catholics since Thomas, creatures are not implicated in the salvation of the world that the crucified Christ inaugurated: instead the focus of salvation is exclusively the human (intellective) soul. This latter position is a clear departure from the belief in early Catholic Christianity, which persisted in Byzantium, that all of creation, all creatures, were reconciled in Christ, and hence that all creatures were redirected toward their ultimate redemption in God by the Christ events.

White identified the contrast between Eastern and Latin Christianity with their different doctrinal beliefs about sin and salvation. But this does not explain the change between early Christian attitudes and later more anthropocentric Latin tendencies. The conversion of Constantine was a seminal event in the development of Latin Christianity and led to a decline in the influence of the humility, simplicity, and earthiness of the teaching and example of the Jesus of Palestine. Post-Constantinian Latin Christian theologians, and, most influentially, Augustine of Hippo turned from

imagining Paradise as being remade on earth after Christ, and as including all creatures, as the early Christian theologians had envisaged, and as the Orthodox continue so to do (Brock and Parker 2008). Instead, they increasingly focused the action of grace and redemption on the actions, desires, intentions, and will of the individual soul. And the world, instead of being seen as a place in which Paradise had been reinaugurated on earth through the Christ events, was depicted as a vale of tears through which Christian souls passed, via purgatory, towards heaven.

Aesthetic and liturgical evidence for the anti-ecological turn of Catholicism abounds in the city of Rome to this day (Bratton 2009). The art and architecture of the earliest churches in Rome, such as the fourth-century church of San Costanza outside the walls of Rome, evidence a rich array of nature imagery and draw on Roman pagan, as well as distinctively Christian, artistic devices. Images of Christ, Mary, and the Saints are embellished with depictions of plants and fruits such as palm leaves and grapes, and animals such as sheep and deer, and the majority of the decoration of the church is of natural imagery arranged in mosaic-like patterns. In the art and liturgical arrangement of this relatively early Christian church building is displayed a Christian imaginary in which the whole cosmos—represented by the circular shape of the building's sanctuary, surrounding gallery, roof, and exterior—and all creatures within the cosmos are implicated in the Christ events and caught up in their effects. Analogously, in early Christian sculptures in the Vatican Museum of Early Christian Art, Christ is depicted as the good shepherd with a rescued lamb on his shoulders (Northcott 2008). But by the fifth century, after the conversion of Constantine, Christian art and church design gradually embrace more of the core imagery and concepts of Roman culture. Christ is increasingly imaged as Pantocrator, ruling the earth from heaven, often in the company of Roman emperors and their wives, as well as the saints and apostles. Depictions of lambs, deer, trees and palms persist in some more Byzantine-like art, such as the magnificent mosaic apse of the church of San Clemente in Rome, and hence some historians believe this Apse and other similar surviving examples are copies of earlier Christian art.

The magnificent painted roof of the seventeenth-century Basilica of Il Jesu in Rome, the mother church of the Jesuit Order, depicts the Triumph of the Holy Name and provides a striking contrast to the mosaic apse of San Clemente. It shows in three dimensions, using a trompe l'oeil of overlapping painting and sculpture, the movement of souls from earth through purgatory to heaven, in which they are always at risk from the devil, demons, and temptations, the latter being depicted at the opposite end to the roof to the lava-like flow of light that pours out of heaven. In this painting, as in most Baroque art, nature serves merely as a backdrop for the fleshly bodies, angelic, divine, saintly, and demonic, which contest over the souls of the righteous as they move from earth to heaven. There are very few trees or animals, grapes or palm branches in Baroque liturgical art. Blue sky is the dominant natural element, symbolizing heaven, but the majority of the imagery is clothed and unclothed human or humanlike bodies.

The action of the liturgy in the post-Tridentine period, 1549–1962, as well as church architecture, increasingly focused the eye and the mind on the transformation of the Eucharistic host from earthly bread to the bloodied flesh of Christ. Bread in the Mass ceased to symbolize the redemption of the whole of creation, as it did still in the Byzantine rite, where real leavened bread was still used. The unleavened wafers of the Catholic Mass are set apart in manufacture and appearance from the normal growing, cooking, and eating of wheaten bread, and they symbolically underwrite the confinement of the sacred in Latin Christianity to the sacraments alone as means of the ascent of the soul from the earth to paradise.

Lynn White provided little textual or cultural evidence for his claim about the uniquely anti-ecological tenor of Latin Christianity, a claim that rested instead in his research on his observation of Catholic Europe's openness to new technologies. But, as the above examples show, there is abundant evidence in Roman Catholic material culture, and in Thomas Aquinas's theology, for White's claim. This still leaves open the question, however, as to whether the same holds true for other kinds of Christianity. White argued that Byzantium was less welcoming to science and technology than Latin Europe because, as in the early Church,

in the Greek East, nature was conceived primarily as a symbolic system through which God speaks to men: the ant is a sermon to sluggards; rising flames are the symbol of the soul's aspiration. The view of nature was essentially artistic rather than scientific. While Byzantium preserved and copied great numbers of ancient Greek scientific texts, science as we conceive it could scarcely flourish in such an ambience.

(White 1967, 4)

From this comment, it would follow that Protestantism would be as instrumental in its environmental imaginary as Catholicism, since Reformed Europe was not only open to science but less inclined to resist scientific findings, even when these appeared to contradict traditional Church teachings.

The Protestant Reformation began as a protest against the corrupt hierarchic power of priests and Popes in their exclusive government of the Church in the late Middle Ages. The principal targets for attack were the promulgation of indulgences and the quasi-magical priestly power indicated in the medieval doctrine of the transubstantiation of bread and wine in the Mass into the body and blood of the crucified Christ. But, for the most part, the Reformers did not repair the disappearance of nature from the story of salvation in Catholic culture and theology. On the contrary, the Reformers continued and, if anything, deepened the confining of the action of grace to the human in their attacks on pilgrimages, sacred places and objects, and in their abandonment of most sacred times and seasons other than the observance of the Lord's Day. In trying to wrest control over the instruments of grace from the priesthood, the Reformers encouraged an individualistic and inward turn in religion towards the action of grace on

the emotions and the mind and will of the believer. Combined with the abandonment of pilgrimages, holy days, and liturgical festivals, and the diminishment of sacramental participation, this resulted in the gradual desacralisation of nature in space and time in Protestant culture (Thomas 1971).

If the hierarchical religious communities of medieval Catholicism birthed new technologies that have been crucial to the modern human technological domination of nature, the Protestant turn from the hierarchic regulation of external religious observance to the regulation of desire, feeling, and piety was to prove ambiguous for the relationship between ecology and religion (Santmire 1985). The new Protestant culture proved fertile ground for the emergent practices of early modern capitalism, in powerful combination with such new technologies as the deep plough, the water wheel, and the mechanical clock. Hence the first Gentile lending banks were established in the Reformed capitals of Geneva, London, and Edinburgh, while the first secular joint stock holding companies were created as means for deep mining of coal in the Protestant Ruhr and for the exploitation of overseas territories in the Reformed capitals of London and Amsterdam. The Reformed ideals of stewarding time and money—as in Benjamin Franklin’s phrase “time is money” —and of improvement in the fruits of stewardship also took root in the new mechanically driven factories of Lancashire cotton mills, London pin factories, and Ruhr iron manufactories. Therein emerged a new kind of division of labor into discrete repetitive tasks that, although mind-numbing and stultifying for the worker, were more efficient than the workshop form of manufacture in which one craftsman performed a series of processes in turn. The principal concern these new practices raised for Protestant moral philosophers and theorists of capitalism, and notably Adam Smith, was not, however, their impacts on the human-nature relationship, but their likely stultifying effects on the intellect and inventiveness of artisans (Smith 1776, 637).

Protestant individualism, combined with the new belief in progress, and the new sciences of economy, physic, and chemistry, provoked a significant expansion in human changes to natural habitats, including draining of wetlands, cutting of ancient forests, and the imposition of monocrop agriculture on grasslands, both within and beyond Europe. Protestants fervently believed that they were called to expand the human influence across the earth, and to make the earth more fruitful and productive. They believed that in so doing, as John Locke most influentially argued, they were redeeming the creation from the taint of sin (Locke 1960, 294). Hence, there was an industriousness to the Puritan settlements and to their stripping of trees from the landscape as it was turned instead into grazing land and crop land, which radically transformed land around Puritan settlements in the New World and ultimately most of the land surface of North America.

Despite the apparent anti-ecological tendencies of early modern capitalism, colonial settler attitudes, and the spread of industrial technologies and work practices,

Protestantism proved fertile ground for a new “turn to nature” as a subject of post-Reformation art and as a source of moral redemption and spiritual inspiration for the inhabitants of early industrial cities and towns in the New World and in Europe. But the conventional narrative of the relationship between the Romantic turn to nature and the Reformation is that the Reformation did not mark a significant break with the anti-ecological attitudes of Latin Catholicism. Hence, the Romantic movement is said to have involved a repudiation of Christianity with its new aesthetic of the sublime and wilderness, and the turn to nature as source of moral redemption and spiritual inspiration (Nicholson 1955). White’s Science article fitted into this conventional story and did not unsettle it, given that he completely failed to talk about the modern conservation movement, which had its origins in Protestant Romantic resistance, by among others Coleridge and Wordsworth, Muir and Ruskin, to the industrial pollution of air and water, and the destruction of forests and other wild places in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

New historical examination of the religious roots of environmentalism, by, among others, Mark Stoll, Belden Lane, and Evan Berry, demonstrates, however, that American environmentalism is clearly rooted in the Protestant, and more especially Presbyterian, tradition (Berry 2015; Lane 2011; Stoll 2015). All of the key figures in the conservation movement in nineteenth and early twentieth century America were raised Presbyterian, including Emerson, Thoreau, Muir, Pinchot, Marsh, and Roosevelt, and they made frequent use of biblical and Christian discourse in their arguments for the defense of nature (Stoll 2015, 4–5). Muir’s religious language is the best known, and he frequently compared the mountains and forests to cathedrals, talked of their godlike nature, and of the spiritual powers that he found residing in wild places and creatures (Muir 1917). For these environmental pioneers, conservation was a moral issue, and unsullied nature was a source of moral improvement and spiritual inspiration. Most were also raised in New England towns close to the Connecticut River and deeply shaped by Connecticut Puritan values. Hence, the country church, and the New England landscape with its protected forest and water catchments close to each town, were the model for conservation across the United States.

The Protestant and Romantic imaginary around the stewardship of nature, and especially the “wild” places, was shaped by Calvin’s view that nature, apart from the works of fallen humanity, retained the potential to be Edenic in its wildness and to reflect unsullied the glory and grandeur of God in a way that the works of fallen humanity in towns and cities could not (Calvin 1843, 57–71). Even more than Augustine in the fifth century, Calvin placed the all-pervasive effects of sin at the heart of his influential statement of Reformed Christian anthropology. But in the Institutes, Calvin set up a striking and misanthropic duality between the effects of corruption, the fall, and sin on humanity and the continuing capacity of nonhuman nature to reflect divine beauty, a duality that re-emerged in post-Christian wilderness religion in the twentieth century. For Calvin, the minds and wills of humans were forever clouded, her

intentions and will corrupted, their desires and actions misdirected by the original sin of Adam and Eve. But the earth after the Fall remained for Calvin the “theater of God’s glory.” And as the “School of Beasts,” the Earth and her creatures are still “able to act as witnesses and messengers of God’s glory” for “the little birds that sing sing of God,” “the fountains and flowing waters cast their glances at him,” and “the grass and flowers laugh before him” (Calvin, Preface, trans. in Lane 2011, 74). For Calvin the church had the pivotal role in this divine and beautiful theater of sustaining the honor and praises of God in creation: ‘If on earth such praise of God does not come to pass, if God does not preserve his church to this end, then the whole order of nature will be thrown into confusion and creation will be annihilated when there is no people to call upon God’ (Calvin, Commentary on Psalm 115 cited Lane, 81). Another key influence on Puritan attitudes towards nature was John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, in which Milton depicted Eden as a place of blissful beauty, harmony, and wonder between God, humans, and other creatures where the passionate desire of Adam and Eve for each other found celebration and resonance in the other creatures of Paradise (Stoll 2015). Paradise was a strong theme in the thought world, texts, and art of the first Christian centuries, but as the Latin Church became an ever more worldly, hierarchical, and ultimately corrupt enterprise, Paradise gradually disappeared from view in the West. Milton’s *Paradise Lost* enabled Reformed people to find Paradise again, in the natural world. Milton’s Eden gave effect to a new Reformed conception of wild nature as a place untouched by human hand, and hence unsullied by human sin. The implication was that God was still to be found in wilderness more than in the city, and that wilderness might be a place where the effects of sin on the conscience, the eye, the mind, and the heart could still be repaired. Milton also depicted Adam and Eve as leading creation’s praise to the creator, and he invited Reformed Christians to join that praise in the words of God’s own hymn book—the Psalms—when he paraphrased Psalm 148 as the song that Adam and Eve sang to greet each morning with the sun as it rose into the heavens, and the birds as they awakened to sing their morning chorus (Stoll 2015, 36).

Paradise Lost was the most widely read book in England in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, after the King James Bible and Fox’s *Book of Martyrs*. Milton’s lyrical descriptions of nature in her original untouched state in Eden powerfully shaped the environmental imaginary of the English people in the early modern period. Milton influenced people to believe that uncultivated or “wild” landscapes were the places in which humans could be morally reformed and spiritually improved—by contemplating them and by walking or riding through them. This new moral imaginary of nature was the inspiration for the rise of informal landscape gardening of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in England of the kind associated with Capability Brown (Turner 1985). It was also this imaginary, translated into a colonial setting, which inspired Muir and Roosevelt to set aside Yosemite as a nature park, a place that Muir had made famous and that was described as Edenic by all those who came to visit it. This moral imaginary of nature was also the inspiration for town parks, including Central Park in

Manhattan, which was designed to include contoured rocky and riverine areas as well as grassy and planted areas in order to create the effects of a natural landscape and so give “to the hundreds of thousands of ‘tired workers’ the same moral and spiritual uplift from encountering ‘a specimen of God’s handiwork’ in the city that the wealthy and leisured classes could have on a month’s sojourn in the mountains”(Olmsted cited in Stoll 2015, 97).

If contemporary environmental historians have missed the Reformed and Protestant origins of contemporary environmentalism, part of the reason is that in Muir, Thoreau, Emerson, and others this Reformed idea of redemption through encounter with God’s divinity in sublime mountain peaks and verdant forest glades gradually transformed into individual spiritual experiences rather than an institutionally mediated religious relationship to nature. Muir did not cease using theological terms like holiness, divinity, and hope in his descriptions of his nature experiences. But subsequent interpreters, like White himself, have missed the roots of his environmental awareness in his Reformed and Presbyterian upbringing and faith. Presbyterians were above all preachers and sermonizers, and this style of rhetoric has long been associated with environmental discourse, and the defense of nature against industrialism and capitalism. Presbyterians also like moral regulation of the public life of the community and the nation, and, as Stoll argues, this liking was a crucial root of the sponsorship by North American Presbyterians of “the moral regulation of public land and landscape of the common good” (Stoll 2015, 151).

It is not only in America that historians such as White have missed the Protestant origins of environmentalism. The same is true for Europe. European Romantics such as Ruskin, Wordsworth, Herder, Holderlin, and Schelling were from a broader church than the Americans, including as they did Anglicans, Lutherans, and Moravians, as well as Presbyterians. Again, however, there has been a tendency to set this Romantic turn to nature as redemptive at odds with Christian theological precursors of this idea (Nicholson 1955). But in parallel with New England Presbyterians, Anglican and Lutheran Romantics in Europe also held that individual encounters with beauty and the sublime in nature were occasions for moral transformation and spiritual transcendence. One of the ways in which nature was redemptive for the Romantics, though one that is often missed in histories of Romanticism, was the practice of walking (Berry 2015, 49–57). From Kant and Holderlin to Ruskin and Wordsworth, the Romantics walked through the landscape and commended walking as the means through which nature changed, inspired, and moved them. William Morris and John Ruskin also saw walking as a means of social reform, and this inspired the mass trespasses, such as that on Kinder Scout in the Peak District near Sheffield, which pushed the government in England to require landowners to open up wild upland areas to walkers and rambles in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Romantic advocacy of recreational walking as restorative, and as conducive to moral growth, is as Evan Berry notes, “densely entangled with vernacular Christian praxis” (Berry 2015, 53). It is of a piece with the advocacy of a broader emphasis on “muscular Christianity” and a recreational culture where sports and other physical activities were seen as reparative of the ills and vices of city life in the nineteenth century. This moral concern and belief in the moral redemption offered by walking in natural environments gave rise to the now widespread emphasis on the restorative effects of walking in wild nature as an escape from and a repair to industrialism and urbanism even though it was the spread of industrial technologies—including the train and then the motor car—that made possible the growing escape of townspeople into wild areas distant from town. The Christian roots of the modern turn to walking, mountaineering, hiking, climbing, camping, and cycling, and even driving through scenic areas, again link back to the Milton-derived Reformation conception of the soteriological value of Edenic landscapes. Walkers, hikers, climbers, campers, and even day-trippers are in effect seeking to “re-create” themselves through a return to an earlier temporal state in which life is simpler, the trappings of civilization are reduced, and humans put themselves into nature without the defense of permanent dwellings:

As modern societies drift further from Christian hegemony, the vision of Eden is increasingly laced with secular, ecological embellishments, yet pedestrian movement through undeveloped landscapes continues to act as an imaginative exercise in which the walker becomes his or her most primordial self, a bipedal ape aligned with the workings of nature.

(Berry 2015, 57)

Protestants did not finish their environmental pioneering with nineteenth-century muscular Christianity, or the setting aside of wilderness parks as recreational and aesthetic spaces, including, it must be said, from their native human inhabitants as well as from industrial uses. The history of twentieth-century environmentalism is almost exclusively one of leadership by Protestant individuals and majority-Protestant nations. It was in Protestant nations that the first legal efforts were made to protect aesthetically beautiful regions, endangered species, and biodiversity more broadly from agricultural and industrial uses, and to promote animal welfare and resist and outlaw animal cruelty (Dunlap 2004). It was in majority-Protestant nations that environmental and ecological pioneers developed both the environmental philosophy and ecological science that now inform the quest to “redeem” nature from too much human influence. And it was in majority-Protestant nations that there emerged a new and burgeoning literature of “nature writing,” some of which, such as Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*, has been the root of some of the most effective governmental interventions against industrial pollution and development more broadly. *Silent Spring*, and the movement it helped bring to life, eventually led to the Clean Air and Clean Water Acts of the United States, and the establishment, under the Republican administration of

Richard Nixon, of the United States Environmental Protection Agency. It is, however, ironic that environmental conservation in the United States is now seen as a liberal progressive and not a conservative cause. In the history of environmentalism, religious conservatives, Puritans, and Republicans, just as much as Democrats and Progressives, were united by their belief in the redemptive powers of natural places set apart from ordinary uses.

Majority-Protestant nations have taken the lead, as compared to Asian, Catholic European, and Latin American nations, in the last century and a half in advancing nature as the modern sublime, and in founding scientific and charitable societies for the study and protection of species and habitats (Dunlap 2004). Protestants led in founding conservation and wilderness movements and charitable associations, and campaigned for governmental laws promoting animal welfare, and protecting birds, waterways, coastlines, forests, endangered species, and most recently the atmosphere, from industrial pollution and destruction (Stoll 1997). But the distinctive role of Protestantism in birthing the environmental movement has gone almost unremarked in the ecology-religion debate, and in environmental history, until very recently. This is because most scholars, both in the sciences and the humanities, have received White's article as an indictment of all mainstream versions of Christianity. They have missed that White specifically singled out the tendency of Latin Christianity to underwrite human technological control over nature, and distinguished Latin from other kinds of Christianity, such as Byzantium, in this regard. But this misreading is in part at least because White himself failed to observe Protestantism's environmental legacy, and hence the article is read as an indictment of all Christian traditions despite their diverse environmental records. In the fields of both environmental and religious studies, as well as in the popular culture and literature of environmentalism, the effect of White's article has been to obscure the religious origins of Western environmentalism and to advance the idea that Eastern religions, or indigenous animism, and not Christianity, are the most fertile spiritual traditions for an environmental ethic. And White himself misidentified these origins when he argued that Franciscanism, not Protestantism, would be the religious culture most likely to birth a new, less anthropocentric, and more life-centered regard for other creatures.

White was a medievalist, and not a historian of the Reformation, the Industrial Revolution, or the Enlightenment. As I have argued elsewhere, White was right that there were tendencies in late medieval Latin Catholic theology towards a harsher and more domineering use of nature which played out in the growing capitalistic and technological domination of nature by humans in the course of Europe's colonial expansion and the industrial revolution (Northcott 1996). Even the Vatican acknowledges this tendency in Latin Christianity, in the first Papal Encyclical on the environment:

(I)f a mistaken understanding of our own principles has at times led us to justify mistreating nature, to exercise tyranny over creation, to engage in war, injustice and acts of violence, we believers should acknowledge that by so doing we were not faithful to the treasures of wisdom which we have been called to protect and preserve. Cultural limitations in different eras often affected the perception of these ethical and spiritual treasures, yet by constantly returning to their sources, religions will be better equipped to respond to today's needs.

(Pope Francis 2015, 200)

If the Pope is prepared to acknowledge that Latin Christianity tended to be tyrannical towards nature in past centuries, it is harder for Catholic and other theologians to continue to argue that Thomas Aquinas, and the Catholic tradition so deeply influenced by him, did not advocate the instrumental use of animals, and did not acknowledge an intrinsic goodness to creatures apart from their uses to rational beings, and that there was a connection between the late medieval Catholic tradition and the rise of domineering and controlling attitudes to nature. Cultural evidence of this connection remains, as indicated for example in the active resistance of Catholic countries, such as Spain and Portugal, to regulatory changes to cruel practices in animal factories that are required of all nations in the European union (European Commission 2011). What neither Pope Francis nor Lynn White acknowledge, however, is that Western Protestant Christianity had within it the seeds of a different trajectory. This trajectory is evident in the close linkages traced by Lane, Stoll, Berry and others between growing up Protestant, particularly in the nineteenth century, when Protestant influence on the formation of young adults was at its height, and being a pioneer in nature conservation. The relative silence of scholars in the last fifty years on the exceptional contributions of Protestants, and majority-Protestant nations, to modern nature conservation and to the legal protection of animals and habitats from cruelty and destruction is hard to explain other than by reference to White's signal failure to notice it.

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