The Ecological Crisis: Questioning Christianity’s Contribution

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Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"Introduction

Distinguished academic, Lynn White, claims that the Judeo-Christian religions are to blame for the ecological crisis and uses interpretations from the Bible to support his argument. He believes these religions have a harmful impact on the relationship between humans and nature. In this paper I will examine White’s claims specifically against Christianity, and refute them by providing multiple perspectives from varying scholars to substantiate my argument.”
The Ecological Crisis: Questioning Christianity’s Contribution

Introduction
Distinguished academic, Lynn White, claims that the Judeo-Christian religions are to blame for the ecological crisis and uses interpretations from the Bible to support his argument. He believes these religions have a harmful impact on the relationship between humans and nature. In this paper I will examine White’s claims specifically against Christianity, and refute them by providing multiple perspectives from varying scholars to substantiate my argument.

White’s Testimony
In 1967 Lynn White, Jr., a professor at UCLA, published an essay titled The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis. This essay is one of the most cited pieces of work in the debate over the relationship between theology and the environment. What sparks such controversy is White’s claim that Christianity is responsible for the deterioration of the environment. White lays the foundation for his thesis by first addressing the relationship between humans and the environment. He says changes in human lives make changes in the environment, and he points out specific examples of human actions that have had damaging effects. Some of these actions include the use of hydrogen bombs in warfare, the smog problem that arose as a result of
industrialization, and high combustion rates of fossil fuels. Each of these specific examples have altered life on earth and contributed to the degradation of the environment.

White asserts that “human ecology is deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny—that is, by religion” (1205). In other words, religion defines our relationship with nature and affects the way humans treat the earth. White goes on to declare that the improper treatment of nature truly developed during the Middle Ages, the time period when Christianity was the common belief system in Europe. White believes that during this time, through agricultural developments, man lost unity with nature and began to exploit it. He then draws a direct correlation between the spread of Christianity, growing scientific advancements, and the mistreatment of nature.

White insists that it is no coincidence that these technological advancements that exploit the earth were developed by followers of the Christian religion. In the words of Daniel Deffenbaugh, “the stories that had been recounted over time by untold numbers of Jews, Christians, and Muslims set values that, when acted upon, led finally to the degradation of the nonhuman world” (Myhre 138). According to White, Christian values are what caused the development of exploitive technology and attitudes among humans. Furthermore, he insists that as scientific advancements spread throughout the world through European conquests, so did Christianity, which consequently globalized environmental exploitation.

White says that prior to Christianity, during the period in which pagan animism was popular, it was common belief that every piece of nature had its own spirit. Before man would take something from nature, for example cut down a tree, he would have to make peace with that spirit. But everything changed when Christianity triumphed over paganism and became one of the most common religions in Europe. The idea of nature connecting with spirits quickly
diminished and that led to humans abusing nature without caring for it or feeling a sense of responsibility to it.

But why did Christianity change human views of nature and how could it allow the mistreatment of nature on so many occasions? From his interpretation of Genesis, White alleges that the Bible promotes the exploitation of nature. White has many interpretations from Genesis that he believes prove Christian support for human dominance over the earth. First White argues that the sequence of creation in Genesis demonstrates rule over nature because God first created man, then woman, and then allowed man to name all of the animals. After God creates humankind he states, “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” (Genesis 1:28). From this quote, White has interpreted “dominion” to mean rule and authority and “subdue” to mean conquer and suppress. White concludes this is what proves that Christianity promotes human dominance and control over all nonhuman beings.

Additionally, White maintains that God created everything in nature for man’s benefit and for this purpose only. He says Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion in the world and that “[Christianity] not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends” (1205). White is claiming that Christianity created a distinct division between man and nature and in that division, man rose above and became superior to nature. White then states that God approves of and supports this division. White contends that all of the ideas presented above are what have caused society to abuse nature for centuries, which inevitably produced an ecological crisis.
First I would like to provide a broad argument against White’s thesis that is concluded from a study conducted in 1993. Researchers Bernadette C. Hayes and Manussos Marangudakis completed their own analyses of a study conducted by the International Social Survey Program’s Environmental Survey. This was the first cross-national study on religion and ecology which collected data from the United States, Canada, Great Britain, and New Zealand. The researchers of this study surveyed members of Liberal Protestant, Other Protestant, Catholic, Non-Christian, and Independent religious groups. Questions in the study pertained to the current ecological crisis, actions to help or hinder the situation, and views or beliefs about the environment. According to Hayes and Marangudakis the results showed “no uniform or direct link between adherence to a Christian belief and an anti-environmental stance either in terms of attitudes or behavior” (170). While the findings of the study can’t be used as a complete refutation of White’s claims because they didn’t directly address his thesis, the results do reveal that there isn’t much evidence proving his thesis either. In this study, in the four different countries, there was no found correlation between Christianity and negative attitudes or behaviors towards nature. The study also revealed little to no difference in concern for the environment between Christians and Non-Christians. White’s broad conclusion that Christianity is to blame for the ecological crisis doesn’t seem credible when compared to this study because there is no link between this religion and anti-environmentalism.

To narrow my argument against White and his theory, I will now cite the works of multiple scholars who oppose him, while focusing on specific details of White’s Essay. Scholar Desmond A. Gillmor wrote an article entitled *The Ecological Crisis and Judeo-Christian Religion* in which he provides refuting arguments to that of White’s. As discussed above, White interprets the word “dominion” in the Bible to mean domination or power. But White doesn’t
account for the historical definition of this word and his claims can be easily disputed because of this. Gillmor asserts that “dominion implied kingship and in the Bible this was often linked with responsibilities to subjects rather than tyrannical despotism” (263). Presently when we hear dominion we think of ultimate authority or supremacy, but according to Gillmor when used in the Bible it had a very different meaning. Contrary to White’s beliefs, when God tells humans to have dominion over the land, he could’ve meant for humans to look over and protect the land.

To further dismiss White’s thesis, it is important to understand the historical context in which Genesis was written. Gillmor says that to understand this, we must consider the timeframe in which the Bible took place and the context surrounding its words. When God created humans, earth was a cruel and barbarous environment. When analyzing the fact that God directed humans to “subdue” the land, we must take into consideration the condition of their surrounding environment. While God did instruct humans to take control over the land, he meant for them to make the environment into a place where they could live and prosper. The word subdue in this context was not meant to have a negative connotation as it does today. White failed to acknowledge this evidence in his essay because it would have weakened his argument.

Another concept Gillmor calls attention to is one that examines the idea of “environmental retribution” in the Hebrew Bible (265). He claims that there are many instances when nature has divinity and power over humans in the Bible. Every human act of wrongdoing would result in a natural disaster or a crumbling environment. But when humans acted in God’s wishes, they would be rewarded by a rich and fruitful environment. Through punishing humans by means of the natural environment, God assured that humans would never attain absolute authority over the earth.
Along with Gillmor, Pope Francis says that the notion of human dominance over nature is an incorrect interpretation of the Bible. Focusing on that particular wording doesn’t provide the whole picture and it must be put into the context of the entire Bible to be understood correctly. The Bible states that God put man in the Garden of Eden to “till it and keep it” (Genesis 2:15). Pope Francis says that “tilling refers to cultivating, ploughing or working, while ‘keeping’ means caring, protecting, overseeing, and preserving. This implies a relationship of mutual responsibility between human beings and nature” (67). From the Bible Pope Francis draws the idea of stewardship and concludes that, while man must live off the land, he shouldn’t take more than is needed to sustain himself.

Pope Francis further extends his argument to include the relationship between man and nature in the rest of the Bible. He specifically points to the examples of humans helping animals and he also talks about how animals are allowed the same day of rest as humans. Pope Francis continues by saying that after nature was created in the Bible, it’s stated that the existence of nature gives God glory. Because God is pleased with nature, humans need to be kind to it and have reverence for God’s creation. This also shows that God values all of his work and respects all living beings, so we humans should respect all beings as well. These examples drawn from scripture prove that the Bible does not tolerate or in any way support the abuse of nature. Pope Francis then makes a strong and powerful argument to remind us that God is the creator and owner of earth. His powers are supreme to all other beings and we shall not forget this. Humans cannot claim control of the earth as it is already in God’s hands. Those who fail to recognize this are the ones who proclaim sovereignty over the earth and damage or abuse it. Contrary to White’s allegations, true followers of Christianity would not harm the earth because they would not see themselves as superior to it.
Pope Francis also suggests that “Judeo-Christian thought demythologized nature,” meaning that its followers didn’t view nature as divine anymore (78). White may have developed his hypothesis of human dominion from this idea because it seems nature lost its superior god-like feature, but that is not the case. Pope Francis argues that humans have a responsibility to preserve and protect nature as a result of demythologization. This is a major point of divergence for scholars around the world. As mentioned above, White interpreted this to mean the non-divine beings should be subject to human domination, while Pope Francis says this means humans should not dominate nature, but owe respect and conservation to it.

Similar to Gillmor and Pope Francis, scholar George Rupp does not fall victim to White’s flawed claims and provides his own justification as to why White is inaccurate. Rupp takes a different approach to contest White’s views not by invalidating them, but by highlighting what he excluded from his essay. Rupp declares: “Where White falls short is to notice how other elements in the structure of biblical religion in effect counterbalance the invitation to exercise human sovereignty over nature” (23). Rupp believes there are other parts of religion that offset human power over nature. Two crucial elements that White disregards are the acknowledgement that everything God created is good and humanity’s need for redemption. Because God created nature and all of God’s creations are good, this means nature is good. Therefore, humans must practice stewardship in regard to nature and treat it as God would. The second element is the story of the fall and redemption of humanity. From the story Rupp concludes that humans are “pilgrims” just passing through earth on their way to heaven and must “tread lightly” on their way to redemption (24). Accordingly, Christianity advocates for its followers to treat the earth in a gentle manner as they are journeying through it.
Another scholar who challenges Lynn White’s thesis is Richard Hiers, author of the article *Ecology, Biblical Theology, and Methodology: Biblical Perspectives on the Environment*. Hiers believes that White was right to say human attitudes and beliefs shape our environmental stance, but he wasn’t right to say that Christianity harms human views. He condemns White and says his essay gained considerable popularity because people “find it convenient to blame religion when things go wrong in the world” (44). He then addresses the content of White’s essay and states that “like other critically illiterate readers before him, White blurs together the P and J creation stories, thereby obscuring and omitting significant elements” (45). When Hiers mentions the P and J stories, he is referring to the hypothesized authors and their different stories in Genesis. When White included references to the creation stories in his essay he took different pieces from each of the stories out of their context and blended them together. As a result, this obscured what’s actually presented in the Bible and changed its meaning.

Similar to Pope Francis, Hiers believes that humans were meant to tend to the Garden of Eden and were meant to find their place among nature without disturbing it. Both of these scholars define the connection between humans and nature as a give and take relationship, a contradiction to White’s claim that nature is only there to serve humans’ purposes. Hiers also draws attention to the J story in which humans and creatures are both made from the dirt on the ground. God created all living beings in the same way, so both are valued by him equally. Hiers says that this establishes a co-creature relationship between humans and other living beings in which they live peacefully with one another. Through this relationship, it is clear to see that Christianity does not promote the exploitation of nature. Furthermore, Hiers addresses the controversy over the word dominion in Genesis by taking a different approach than others. Hiers insists that if humans have dominion, then there is a higher dominion, which is God, and he is in
control of the welfare of humans and nature. Because God is in control of nature, humans are not, and do not have established authority over any of God’s creations.

Additionally, Hiers maintains that the New Testament contains examples of God feeding animals and creating flowers over the lands which demonstrates care for nature. He also points out instances in the Bible in which animals are treated with compassion by humans. For example, it states that lost animals must be returned to their owners and injured or fallen animals must be helped. Also, in the Book of Isaiah, killing an ox is compared to killing a human which exhibits human valuation of nature. In regard to the land, Hiers points out that Adam and many other figures in the Bible were tillers of the soil, craftsmen, or herdsmen. They praised farm work and cared for the land, they did not exploit it, or harm it as we humans do today.

Conclusion
All of these examples provide evidence to support the claim that Christianity does in fact promote caring for and protecting nature, contrary to White’s assertions. Therefore, there is no basis to claim that Christianity or the Bible itself promote exploitation of the earth or its creatures. There is nothing in the Bible that advocates for harming the environment or for human domination of it. Each of the scholars above easily disputed White’s claims because he doesn’t have sufficient evidence to prove them to be true. This exploitive behavior that White speaks of does not in fact stem from Christianity, but stems from the corruption of humanity.
Bibliography


