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The Liberation of Nature: Lynn White's Challenge Anew

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MARTIN LUTHER'S role in initiating the Reformation has been likened to the experience of a man ascending a bell tower, who at one point stumbles. Desperate to steady himself, lest he go plunging to the bottom, the man reaches out and inadvertently grabs hold of the bell rope. Then the bell rings, for the whole countryside to hear.

In December 1966, when the ecology movement was first emerging as a cultural phenomenon, Lynn White, Jr., a University of California history professor, delivered to the American Association for the Advancement of Science a lecture titled "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis." In that lecture, this relatively unheralded scholar took Christian theology to task for helping to cause and continuing to fuel our global environmental crisis.

While White was no Luther and the ecology movement was no Reformation, White's modest talk, first published in *Science* (March 1967, pp. 1,203-7) three months later, would "ring a bell" for many. The lecture has been reprinted in numerous volumes and has been cited wherever environmental issues have been discussed. It was welcomed immediately and enthusiastically by the popular champions of the then burgeoning ecology movement, in whose eyes it tended to take on a kind of scriptural aura after its publication in the first major manifesto of that movement, the *Environmental Handbook* (Garrett de Bell, editor [Ballantine, 1970]). On the other hand, White's lecture was greeted with sharp criticism and even some derision by a number of scholars and popular church writers (see, for example, Thomas Sieger Derr, "Religion's Responsibility for the Ecological Crisis: An Argument Run Amok," *Worldview* [January 1975]). "The Lynn White thesis" became, overnight, a cultural event of some magnitude.

Almost two decades later, White's thesis still poses a challenge to Christian theology—but one that is larger and deeper than many of its critics and protagonists have yet to acknowledge: it challenges us to ask whether the liberation of nature can be a legitimate theological theme.

White begins his lecture by calling for a clarification of the presuppositions that underlie modern science and technology. These cultural forces, he observes, are profoundly rooted in the values of Western culture, values that have been shaped by the Christian tradition. White believes that exploitative attitudes toward nature surfaced widely during the Middle Ages and were encouraged and supported by the anthropocentric bent of the dominant theology of the time. He also holds that those theologically informed attitudes continue to shape our culture, however much we may have entered an era of self-conscious secularism. "Modern science is an extrapolation of natural theology," he argues, while modern technology "is at least partly to be explained as an Occidental, voluntarist realization of the Christian dogma of man's transcendence of, and rightful mastery over, nature." If, therefore, modern science and technology are the cultural forces that have led us into the environmental crisis, then—and this phrase is repeatedly quoted both by White's protagonists and by his critics—"Christianity bears a huge burden of guilt" for the crisis.

In White's view, it follows that if we are to confront the ecological threats of our time in an effective way, we will have to do something about the religious underpinnings of science and technology. At the end of his

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lecture, White therefore turns to the task of theological reconstruction. He identifies St. Francis as a "patron saint for ecologists," because Francis "tried to depose man from his monarchy over creation and set up a democracy of all God's creatures." Francis's sense of solidarity with the whole creation, White suggests, can help us to discover the new values we need, which will allow us in turn to set aside the sometimes rapacious attitudes toward nature that inform the machinations of modern Western society.

White's thesis is surely open to criticism from a number of vantage points. He presents what sounds like a rather heavy-handed statement of historical causality, at times almost suggesting that religious ideas exercise some kind of monocausal influence in a culture's history. He tends to play down the role of underlying economic forces, for example. On the other hand, he is a sophisticated historian who has written suggestively and in great detail about technology's role in the shaping of Western culture (see *Machina Ex Deo: Essays in the Dynamism of Western Culture* [Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1968]). Further, White's argument focuses almost exclusively on the Western tradition, thus making it vulnerable to the criticism that other societies with different value systems also have exploited nature ruthlessly at times. As a well-tutored scholar, however, he is ready to admit the existence of such differences, as his explicit references to the more contemplative, less domineering attitudes toward nature evident in Eastern Orthodox Christian thought indicate.

In addition, White has overstated his case unnecessarily by viewing St. Francis in isolation, as a heretic. Closer analysis shows that Francis represented a major Christian theological trajectory, which has its roots in the Bible and which surfaced most visibly in Augustine's mature theology, as well as in Francis's life (see my book *The Travail of Nature: The Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christian Theology* [Fortress, 1985], chap. 4). At the same time, the attention White has focused on the saint is surely merited, as a reading of Francis's life in its historical context shows.

In retrospect, then, the Lynn White thesis can be legitimately subjected to a number of qualifications and refinements. Still, in almost every instance White himself has already signaled that he is aware of the need for such adjustments to his argument. Why, then, have his critics been so vehement in denouncing his ideas? At the end of his otherwise thoughtful critique, for example, Thomas Sieger Derr suggests that White, following the way of "paganism, authoritarianism, and brutality," is verging on the edge of proposing some "final solution" for humanity, according to which the numbers of humans on the planet would have to be reduced (killed?) in order to preserve the life of other species ("Religion's Responsibility . . .," p. 45).

As Derr's passionate words suggest, it is not White's descriptions that are most provoking to his critics, but his prescriptions. By taking the side of St. Francis, by becoming the advocate of the whales and the birds, the mountains and the plains, White is in effect lending support to a whole range of relatively unheralded serious thinkers and of popularly celebrated prophets who want to defend the "rights of nature." And that theme, at least on first hearing, can sound profoundly misanthropic. Should we now try to save the whales and forget about the starving children?, White's critics ask.

IN FACT, however, we are facing here what might well be the leading edge of a theological paradigm shift. White is asking whether it is legitimate to think theologically about the liberation of nature. That is a new question for modern Christian thought, indicating the need for a larger, more inclusive paradigm for theological reflection—one comprehending God, humanity *and* nature, not just the first two—than modern Christian theologians have been inclined to assume. Vehement rejection of new paradigms by the defenders of the old is to be expected, as Thomas Kuhn and others have taught us to anticipate.

The significance of White's thesis can be set in clear relief if we read it as an expression of that Western prophetic tradition that has identified and criticized the structures of domination in the social order. These structures can be seen as the social expressions of human sinfulness, as Reinhold Niebuhr interpreted them in *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (Scribner's, 1932). Throughout history they have supported the degradation of the powerless (slavery, child labor), the subtle and not-so-subtle practices of the genocidal mind (anti-Semitism), and the objectification of women (the "rape culture"). They have also undergirded the systematic exploitation of nature—the rape of the earth.

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In every instance, when the structures of domination are challenged, when the master-slave relationship is seen for what it is, the voices of the established theological order cry that no such oppressive relationships really exist, or, if they do, that they do not really make any difference. We have heard the myths of the happy slave, the passive Jew, or the woman who wants to be dominated. Should we expect a different response when the proponents of the theological tradition are first confronted with the thought that nature, too, longs for a day of liberation, as St. Paul said?

In Galatians 3:28, Paul expressed his fundamental faith in human equality in Christ: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free; there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." As Krister Stendahl has pointed out, however, Paul himself devoted most of his own attention to dealing with

the Jews and the gentiles (*The Bible and the Role of Women: A Case Study in Hermeneutics* [Fortress, 1966]). Although his faith in Christ's liberating mission claimed other relationships as well, he never really allowed his basic convictions to shape his articulations in these areas, as he did in dealing with the tensions between Jews and gentiles. Indeed, some of his comments on slaves or women sound rather traditional and do not measure up to the Galatians 3:28 statement of his basic convictions. It was only centuries later that the revolutionary dynamic of his core convictions bore fruit in Christian opposition to slavery, and still more recently, to the systematic exploitation of women.

Paul also envisioned the liberation of all the creatures of nature, along with all human beings: "For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God; . . . because the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God" (Rom. 8:19-21). This utterance, like Galatians 3:28, is one of the linchpins of Paul's theology, as J. Christiaan Beker has demonstrated (*Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* [Fortress, 1980]). Beker holds that the theme of justification by faith, which has so dominated Protestant exegesis of Romans, is in fact central in Paul's theology, but only in the context of Paul's apocalyptic vision of "the triumph of God." That vision is finally theocentric, Beker shows, not anthropocentric. It points us to the final outcome of the work of Christ in terms not unlike those taken for granted by the Book of Revelation: a transfigured world of glory, a New Jerusalem set in the context of new heavens and a new earth. That is to be the day, in Paul's terms, when God will be "all in all" (I Cor. 15:28).

The same motif appears in another distinct but related Pauline context, in the letter to the Colossians. The key text here is Colossians 1:15 ff., whose interpretation has been much debated in recent years. Polemics apart, the words of the text—whether written by Paul, a Pauline redactor, a disciple of Paul or some anonymous hymn writer(s)—undeniably state that Christ reconciles "all things," that his death inaugurates a cosmic peace. This sounds very much like the Hebraic-apocalyptic message of Romans 8:19-21, only now expressed in the non-apocalyptic, syncretistic context of Hellenistic culture.

Each of the dimensions of liberation that Paul depicts in Galatians 3:28 had to be identified and defended with great effort against the protagonists of the received theological tradition: Paul against Peter regarding the gentiles, the abolitionists against the slaveowners, the feminists against the defenders of patriarchy. Ours is the day, it seems, when the last extension of the Pauline vision of universal liberation, the inclusion of all the creatures of nature, is coming to the fore. Many voices are finally being raised on behalf of all the voiceless creatures of the earth. Is it any wonder that there should be passionate opposition to these new claims of liberation, as there has been to the other claims for extending the inclusiveness of the Christian gospel over against the structures of domination? Perhaps the Lynn White thesis is more like Luther's Ninety-Five Theses than it might at first appear.

THAT THE MOST vocal proponents of "animal liberation" and the "rights of rocks" (!) are mainly speaking from outside the Christian tradition today (although White himself is a self-conscious Christian) is sobering, but not embarrassing. The causes of abolitionism and feminism were surely bolstered from outside the churches, as well as from within. Why not also the cause of liberating nature?

That there are excesses in the arguments of some of those who, following St. Francis, call for a certain democracy among all creatures is also sobering, but not embarrassing. The first wave of a liberation movement has to make itself heard in a culture's public forums, and that sometimes requires shouting and using less-than-felicitous phrases. At the same time, thoughtful Christian writers—one thinks especially of John Cobb and Charles Birch—who are exploring "the rights of nature" are well aware of the dangers and pitfalls of such explorations (*The Liberation of Life: From Cell to Community* [Cambridge University Press, 1981], especially chapter 5). They know how to make careful distinctions, especially between human rights and animal rights. The fruits of their theological labors are worlds apart from the misanthropic assumptions shaping the public protests of some animal rights groups.

We live in a society that finds it all too easy to focus attention on the slaughter of the seals and to be concerned with providing a balanced diet for well-fed dogs and cats, while ignoring the threats of nuclear annihilation and the millions of hungry children around the world. But the underlying issue must nevertheless be confronted: the unrighteous powers of domination must be challenged, whatever form they take. If we do not do so, we will continue to nurture a divided mind in Western Christiani-

ty, a kind of ethical tribalism, where we primarily limit our love to "our own kind," and thus marginalize others—Jews, the poor, people of color, women, all the creatures of nature. We will continue to deal mainly with the symptoms of human sinfulness and refuse to face up to the underlying theological and ethical issues.

Whether this inclusive direction of ethical thinking will take us to the point of recommending some form of vegetarianism will have to be carefully considered. Christians also must discuss the issue of experimentation on animals. It may well be that some, if not much, of this experimentation could be curtailed if we searched for alternative experimental procedures. Christians must work for the preservation of wilderness areas and of the many plant and animal species now in danger of extinction, not only for prudential environmental reasons (ecological diversity is good for the stability of the biosphere and hence for us) but also for intrinsic theological reasons ("otherkind" has a right to exist and thrive, along with humankind).

The careful consideration of attitudes toward science and technology must also be a part of this inclusive theological paradigm for ethical thinking. Thus one of White's most insightful critics, René Dubos, took issue with his single-minded focus on St. Francis and the related question of the rights of all creatures. Dubos proposed instead an ethic of "creative intervention" in the earth, of sensitive management and care of the earth's resources. This would include the judicious use of science and technology to influence and perhaps even to transform ecological systems for the sake of human betterment and of caring for those natural systems themselves. In this spirit, Dubos suggested that St. Benedict, rather than St. Francis, should be our primary ecological model, given the traditional Benedictine commitment to ecological sensitivity in the management of the earth's resources (*Reason Awake: Science for Man* [Columbia University Press, 1970], pp. 126 ff.).

What Dubos calls his "enlightened anthropocentrism" can and probably should be read as a friendly amendment to the White thesis. White himself has rightly celebrated the rise of laborsaving technologies in the West (laborsaving for both humans and beasts of burden), while Dubos recognizes that "one of the most important consequences of enlightened anthropocentrism is that man cannot effectively manipulate nature without loving nature for her own sake" ("A Theology for Earth," in *Western Man and Environmental Ethics*, edited by Ian Barbour [Addison-Wesley, 1973], p. 55).

Although White has raised a number of sharp historical questions, few of which have been fully blunted by his critics, the deepest significance of his thesis seems to lie not so much in what it describes as in what it prescribes or envisions: the end of the theological legitimization of any structure of domination; the challenging of all master-slave relationships; the final inclusion of all the creatures of nature within the realm of grace; the normative vindication of St. Francis and his life story; and the adoption of the Pauline theology of universal liberation that Francis so compellingly exemplified. Thanks largely to Lynn White, the liberation of nature is now unavoidably before us as a theological theme. ■