IS A CHRISTIAN ECOLOGICAL THEOLOGY IS POSSIBLE ?

REFLECTIONS ON THE AMBIGUOUS ECOLOGICAL

HERITAGE OF CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

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In December 1966, when the ecology movement was first emerging as a cultural phenomenon, Lynn White, Jr. a University of Calfifornia history professor, delivered to the American Association for the Advancement of Science a lecture entitled "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 enironmental crisis.

White's modest talk, first published in Science [1] three months later, was destined to strike a responsive chord in the minds of thousands. The lecture has been reprinted in numerous volumes and has been ubiquitously cited wherever environmental issues have been discussed. It was welcomed immediately and enthusiastically by 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 Envi r onme n t a l Han dt^o ok of 19 70 . [2] On the other hand, White's lecture was greeted with sharp criticism and even some derision by a number of Christian scholars and popular church writers. [3] "The White Thesis" became, overnight, a cultural event of some magnitude.

More than two decades later, the White thesis still poses a challenge to the Christian community — but one that is larger and deeper than many of its critics and protagonists have yet to acknowledge. The underlying issue seems to be this. Throughout the centuries, Christianity has ad justed with great

creativity to the challenges posed by the ongoing flow of cultural and political history, whether it was Augustine announcing a new order in his City of God during the waning days of the Roman Empire, Luther proclaiming a new liberating subjectivity during the waning days of the Middle Ages, or a contemporary such as Rudolf Bultmann developing a biblical hermeneutic consonant with a scientific worldview.

Now it seems, if the White thesis is correct, that the Christian tradition, in the waning days of modernity, is facing a situation which it is intrinsically unable to address: the global environmental crisis. The White thesis suggests that there are no resources worth considering which would allow the Christian tradition to respond to the environmental crisis, apart from the impressive, but idiosyncratic case of St. Francis. Christianity, in a word, will have nothing of substance to say to what is perhaps the single greatest crisis that has ever faced the human species.

No wonder that the White thesis has drawn, and will undoubtedly continue to draw, such passionate attention. It provides new fuel for an anti-Christian polemic that burst forth from the margins of the culture during the Enlightenment and has been burning, sometimes raging, ever since, in the West and elsewhere. White thus has become the darling of both secular intellectuals and other longstanding critics of Christianity, in particular protagonists of other religions, which have sometimes been forced to exist in the shadows of Christianity, either in the West or elsewhere, under the aegis of Western colonialism. At the same time, all the heat that the White thesis has generated has naturally put the protagonists of the Christian tradition itself on the defensive. One does not comfortably hear the diagnosis of one's own advanced senility.

This is the commanding issue, then, posed by the White thesis: whether or not a Christian ecological theology is intrinsically possible. Is it not the case that Christian faith-claims and Christian norms are simply unecological, by

definition, and therefore that they represent an antithetical, even demonic, spiritual force in a world that is undergoing a radical, global environmental crisis? In whatever container you bring it, in other words, if what you are carrying is gasoline, you had better think twice about trying to put out the fire.

Is a Christian ecological theology possible? That is the question I propose to address in this essay.

I. Finding an Adequate Historical Hermeneutic

As we look at the "ecological resources" of the Christian tradition, much depends on our hermeneutical perspective.

The New Testament historian Henry Cadbury once observed that modern reset ach into the life of Jesus has been like the case of a man who looked down into a well, saw the reflection of a man down at the bottom, and said — "that is Jesus." I propose to stir up the waters at the bottom of the well, so that when we look down into the well we might more easily see the waters, not just our own preconceptions. I also want to call attention to some interpretive lenses that many observers have been wearing, perhaps unconsciously, which have helped them to see the countenance of their own preconceptions reflected in the historical data, with a kind of pristine clarity.

To this end, I want to highlight some characteristic modern theological preconceptions concerning nature.

When we look back at the dominant theologies of the modern Christian West, at least in the Reformation tradition, we see what surely must be said to be an unecological theological conceptuality. During the nineteenth century, in particular, mainstream Protestant theology generally took for granted a radically anthropocentric approach to nature. Seen through the eyes of many of our nineteenth century theological forebears, nature in itself has little or no theological value. It was

pushed to the periphery of their theologies, if not out of the picture altogether. We can see this happening in a number of ways -

Consider the mechanical view of nature. The mainstream Protestant tradition of the nineteenth century accepted this approach to nature virtually without question. According to this view, championed by Descartes and Newton, nature in itself is analogous to a machine. Nature is composed of hard, irreducible particles which have neither color nor smell nor taste. Such qualities are "secondary." Simply expressed, beauty and value in nature are in the eye of the beholder. Apart from the human creature, nature is without value.

God, moreover, is the supreme initiator of the world-ma ch ine. Put God is little more than that, as far as nature is concerned. For the most part, nature-the-machine runs by itself, by its own intrinsic forces. God, often likened to a watchmaker, remains "back there" at the temporal beginning of the world, or "up there" in a wholly transcendent spiritual heaven. God does not really need to "meddle" with nature now.

Human creatures, likewise, are viewed as being set apart from nature, especially in their spiritual aspects. For them, nature is "out there." Nature is a mere thing, perceived by their minds, which observe nature from a position of objective detachment. Nature in itself is basically a self-sufficient, s elf-enclosed complex of merely physical forces acting on colorless, tasteless, and odorless particlae of hard, dead ma t ter .

That is the mechanical view of nature as it was popularly accepted in the nineteenth century by many Protestant thinkers. They accepted the results of Descartes' philosophy and Newton's physics virtually at face value.

Closely related to the mechanical view of nature, and also prominent in the thought-world of nineteenth century

Protestantism, is what we can call the industrial view of nature. If the champions of the mechanical view were Descartes and Newton, the great exponent of the industrial view was the economist Adam Smith. Following Smith, many in the nineteenth century, not a few of them church people, argued that the ideal social system is one which allows individual entrepreneurs total freedom to develop and exploit their supply of natural resources, guided chiefly by their own self-interest. Accordingly, the industrialists approached nature, as the raw material for their own enterprises. Nature was viewed as the open field God had given humans for the exploitation of resources.

Interestingly enough, the anti-capi talistic philosophy of Karl Marx did not fundamentally take exception to the industrial view of nature. Marx essentially approached nature as the classical protagonists of capitalism did, as a store of goods amassed for the sake of economic production.

How easily, then, the industrial view of nature could coalesce with, and draw impetus from, the mechanical view of nature, and vice versa. lhe common motif is that nature is valueless in itself and is essentially there for the sake of human exploitation. In this context, too, humans were commonly seen as those creatures called forth by God for the sake of "moral faith" or "progress," values which were to be achieved by rising above and mastering the natural world in which they were called forth to live.

But not only did mainstream nineteenth century Protestantism take the mechanical and industrial views of nature for granted, some of its leading theologians offered these views a firm ontological foundation. Call this the instrumental view of nature or, better, the platformic view of nature. Nature, according to this conception, is a platform or a stage posited by God for the sake of God's spiritual communion with the human creature and therefore for the sake of human growth and development. The whole world's a stage! Nature's value inevitably turns out to be purely instrumental, according to this

conceptuality. Ontologically speaking, nature is there for the sake of human being and well-being, and that is all. Nature has no permanent meaning of its own.

No wonder, then, that Protestant thinkers during the nineteenth century looked down into the well of theological history to the Bible, and saw, with perfect confidence, that the biblical teaching about "dominion" is the only notion of import regarding nature that need concern us. No wonder, likewise, that dominion was interpreted frequently, if not always, as domination over nature, as mastery, rather than cooperation with, and respect for, nature. What else could these Protestant thinkers have seen in the Bible, given their preconceptions?

These preconceptions, in turn, have fogged the vision of more than a few students of classical Christian thought about nature and of the biblical theology of nature itself. Lynn White's treatment of Christianity has its own historical sophistication and subtlety, as I have suggested elsewhere.[4] But it would not be unfair to say that the popular reading of White, even by some scholars, has been something less than sophisticated and subtle.

With the White thesis as one self-consciously employed hermeneutical lens, and with the nineteenth century Protestant approach to nature as another unconsciously employed h ermentztzt ica1 lens, numbers of sophisticated and unsophisticated students of Western culture have looked down the well and discovered that classical Christian thought, and behind it the theology of the Bible, is ecologically bankrupt.

It was enough for them to hear Augustine saying: "God and the soul, that is what I desire to know, nothing more."[5] It was enough for them to discover that modern technology is rooted, historically, in Benedictine monasticism. It was enough for them to connect the spirit of modern capitalism with Calvinism. So, with considerable intellectual haste, the argument was sealed. What else could they have been expected to see, given their

hermeneutical preconceptions[9]

II. The Case of St. Augustine

White himself memorably heralded St. Francis as "the patron saint of ecologists," because Francis, according to White, "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 suggested, 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 modern Western society in general and the historic Christian mind in particular.

But careful historical analysis, now with the lenses provided by post-modern ecological thought, shows a quite different picture at the bottom of the well. This I have tried to illustrate at some length in my volume The Travail of Nature. [6] While modern Protestant thought about nature is by no means without historical antecedents — as the mention of Augustine, Benedictine monasticism, and Calvinism reminds us -- the much more surprising fact, from our post-modern vantagepoint, is that St. Francis is by no means a solitary figure.

This is nowhere more apparent than in the thought of that theologian who is generally regarded as the singlemost important traditional Christian thinker in the West, St. Augustine. That he is known in some academic circles today mainly for his sexual troubles, and perhaps for his introspective conscience, may tell at least as much about those academic circles as it does about Augustine himself.

When we examine Augustine's mature thought, we encounter a vision of the created order that is radically different from the preconceptions of Protestant modernity. Gone are their anthropocentric fixations, their mechanistic assumptions, their views of God and humans as essentially alien creatures in the

material world, and their ethics of domination.!?]

Consider first Augustine's thought about God. In keeping with the tradition Augustine had inherited, he does conceive of God as the timeless, unchanging One, who dwells in unapproachable mystery. But at the same time Augustine takes pains to emphasize that God is no idle deity, like the unmoved mover of Aristotle. Augustine likens God to an ineffable director of a universal symphony, that is, the flow of cosmic history. This is a deity who is ever active in all things, as well as at rest in Himself, according to Augustine.

The creative will of this God, as Augustine envisions it, brings forth a vast and beautiful hierarchy of being, with each being allotted its own rank of perfection. Although Augustine believes that all things, all visible creatures in particular, are created as a blessing for humanity, this by no means exhausts their *ra_* ison _£.2JL£!L» as ^ar as he is concerned. Human utility is not the sole reason for the existence of all visible things in the hierachy, by any means. Rather, the most fundamental purpose of the whole creation is beauty, Augustine says, and the glorification of the God who wills such a magnificent community of being, every part of which has its own divinely validated integrity.

Hence, Augustine writes, when some heretics berate the creation by inquiring about the utility of fire, frost, wild beasts, frogs, and so on, they first of all miss the beauty of the whole, but also the beauty of its individual parts. They also rule out utility that might be hidden from us. He writes:

> They do not consider how admirable these things are in their own places, how excellent in their own natures, how beautifully adjusted to the rest of creation, and how much grace they contribute to the universe by their own contributions, as to a commonwealth, and how serviceable they are even to ourselves, if we use them with a knowledge of their fit adaptations. ..and thus divine providence admonishes

> us not foolishly to vituperate things, but to investigate their utility with care, and where our mental capacity or infirmity is at fault, to believe that there is a utility, though hidden....

Even more, Augustine believes, some things were not created by God with any utf/l ity in mind whatsoever, but solely for the sake of their beauty. We may not realize this, Augustine states, since from our limited perspective we cannot see the whole, "in which fragments that offend us are harmonized with the nost accurate fitness and beauty." In this sense, Augustine believes, all things, in themselves and taken as a whole, are created by God as "very good."

Further, for Augustine, God governs and moves all things from within, in such a way that the whole creation remains "entirely natural, since all things are from Him, through Him, and in Him." God's governance of the world, as Augustine sees it, is not by domination, not by the exercise of heteronomous might, but by a kind of creative shepherding. "He governs all things," says Augustine, "in a way that he allows them to function and behave in ways proper to them." God is like a mother bird, Augustine suggests, brooding over the creation in a n urturi ng way .

Thus governed by Divine providence, the material world is for Augustine, as it was for G.M. Hopkins, charged with the grandeur of God. In this sense, everything, rightly seen, is a miracle. Augustine has what might be called an omni-miraculous view of nature. He sees miracles everywhere, in a grain of wheat, for example, not just in the so-called supernatural sphere.

Augustine also attributes to nature its own kind of interior dynamism, carefully nurtured by the Divine. Intrinsic in the creative process, he suggests, are certain "seminal reasons," that is, seeds of future developments, which God sooner or later will nurture to the point of visible expression. "All these things," he writes, referring to the emergence of novelty in

nature, "have indeed originally and primarily already been created in a kind of web of elements; but they make their appearance whey they get opportunity. For just as mothers are pregnant with young, so the world itself is pregnant with things that are to come into being, things that are not created in it." For Augustine, we might say, the world of nature is an ecological whole, not just at this moment, but also through time, begot ton of the creative providence of God.

In addition, Augustine insists that the cosmos as we know it, has not fallen, an idea that had been given currency by a number of Christian theologians before him, as well as by the Manicheans. On the contrary, he teaches, spiritual creatures alone are sinful. The material cosmos has not been infected by sin. It remains, in itself, a beautiful whole, very good, as it was created and as it is constantly renewed by the creative providence of God. Indeed, even with sinful eyes, humans can contemplate in the material cosmos a world of radiant beauty:

> How can I tell you of the rest of creation, with all its beauty and utility, which the divine goodness has given to man to please his eyes and serve his purposes, condemned though he is, and hurled into these labors and miseries[7] Shall I speak of the manifold and various loveliness of sky, and earth, and sea; of the plentiful supply and wonderful qualities of the light; of sun, moon, and stars; of the shade of trees; of the colors and perfume of flowers; of the multitude of birds, all differing in plumage and in song; of the variety of animals, of which the smallest in size are often the most wonderful; of the works of ants and bees astonishing us more than the huge bodies of whales? Shall I speak of the sea, which itself is so grand a spectacle, when it arrays itself as it were in vestures of various colors, now running through every shade of green, and again becoming purple or blue? Is it not delightful to look at in the storm, and experience the soothing complacency which it inspires, by suggesting that we ourselves are not tossed and shipwrecked? What shall I say of the numberless kinds of food to alleviate hunger, and the variety of seasonings to stimulate the appetite which are

> scattered everywhere by nature, and for which we are not indebted to the art of cookery? How many natural appliances are there for preserving and restoring health? How graceful is the alternation of day and night! How pleasant the breezes that cool the air! How abundant the supply of clothing furnished us by trees and animals! Can we enumerate all these blessings we enjoy'

In his mature writings, Augustine even has numerous good things to say about the human body. After a long struggle to free himself from his Manichean past, Augustine comes to think of the body, quite affirmatively, as the spouse of the soul.

In keeping with this ecological view of nature as charged with the glory of God in every part, and as a whole, Augustine sets forward what can be called a contemplative idea of human dominion over nature. Yes, human creatures have their own special place in the providential unfolding of cosmic history. This means that humans can know some of the mysteries of Divine providence, and some of the mysteries of the cosmic whole itself. It does not mean, however, that they are set in a position of domination. Indeed, the "lust to dominate," Augustine suggests, is an expression of human sinfulness. Rather, we humans are set in the midst of a great commonwealth of being, surrounded by infinite glories of innumerable creatures. The human calling in this respect is to know and to understand, as much as is given to us to know and to understand. The human creature is thus called to a relationship of cooperation with and respect for nature, which, when realized, images-forth the Divine relationship of creative care for nature.

Finally, for Augustine, the whole of the cosmos is one day to be born again and to be redeemed, in the day of the new heavens and the new earth. This universal eschatology is consistent with everything else he has to say about nature, and separates him radically from other Christian thinkers, before and after, who have seen the cosmos merely as a temporary stage for human life, which will disintegrate or otherwise disappear, when the final day of salvation occurs in the eternal future.

It is not totally anachronistic, therefore, to think, of Augustine as an ecological theologian. For him, nature, in every respect, every creature and the whole, is charged with the glory of the omniactive God, who is working miracles everywhere. Nature is therefore worthy of our profound respect and most intense contemplation. It has its own life with God, apart from the Divine purposes with human beings, and that life with God is reflected in the web of the elements and in the emergence of novelty. God, who broods over the creative process in nature^, like a mother, is concerned with all His creatures, not just with human creatures. And human creatures, in turn, are called by God to acknowledge that Divine intentionality in their relationship with the creatures of nature.

IV. Oonc^us^onToward a New Partnership Between Christian Theology and Ecological Thought

Quod. ££££. demonstrandum*. A Christian ecological theology is possible, historically speaking. Indeed, as I have argued in The T i^avai^lof Na it ure , there is a major theological tradition, stretching from the Hebrew Scriptures through the early Christian writings, on through the thought of the early church father, Ireneaus, to Augustine, thereafter apparent in the life history of St. Francis and then visible in the thought of Luther and Calvin: a theological tradition that provides rich resources for a creative and comprehensive Christian ecological theology.

The roots of the problem Lynn White was trying to diagnose, in this respect, seem to have taken their firmest hold with the birth of modernity itself. When in the modern West the fulness of the Christian tradition was self-consciously r.^1_ect.ed in the name of rational autonomy, moral self-assertion, and institutional domination over nature, then the deepest roots of our ecological crisis were planted.

The White thesis should probably be set on its head, just

the way Karl Marx allegedly set Hegelism on its head. The problem, ecologically speaking, was not really the Christian tradition, in this sense, but what happened when the Western culture as a whole broke away from the moorings of that tradition. The problem was then compounded by Christian theologians, wh ey> they sometimes despartely attempted to adapt their thought to the spirit of modernity, which itself was dominated by its mechanical, industrial, and platformic views of nature .

The enemy, if there is one, is not classical Christian thought, or behind that the theology of the Bible. It is that very modern spirit, which — along with many good things, above all modern science and technology — eventually gave us both state capitalism and state socialism, all in the name of rational autonomy and moral self-assertion, predicated on a vision of nature as a mass of resources just sitting their for the taking.

The challenge today, therefore, would seem to be this, at least for those who wish to continue to take the Christian tradition seriously, as they also honor the insights of post-modern ecological thinking: to bridge the gap between the ecological tradition in premodern Christian theology and the ecological thought of our own time, in order to make common cause against the global environmental crisis, which is the great and possibly the terminal legacy of the spirit of modernity in the West.

1. A£f.cit., March 1967, pp. 1,203-7.
2. Op. cit., Garrett de Bell, editor (Baltimore, 19 70).
3. See, for example, Thomas Sieger Derr, "Religion's Responsibility for the Ecological Crisis: An Argument Run Amok," Worl dvi ew (January 1975)
4. Santmire, H. Paul, "The Liberation of Nature: Lynn White's Challenge Anew," Christian Century (May 22, 1985).
5. Augustine, 8 o lid o q u i e s , I, 2.
6. H. Paul Santmire, The _Tr avai l_ o f Na£u £e : £h e Am b £g u o u £ Ecological Promise of Christian Theology (Philadelphia,

1985).

7. The key note here, however, must be underlined. I am talking here about Augustine's mature thought. Many modern interpreters of Augustine's thought have read it as a single cloth, when in fact it is a coat of many colors, as I have a rgued in the aforementioned historical study [op .cit. , chap. 4], For all the material in my discussion here, the reader is refered to that discussion. Augustine did go through a Manichean period, during which nature for him was interpreted in radically dualistic terms as something evil. He also went through a Neoplatonic period, during which his major interests were indeed God and the human soul. But through the assimilation of the philosophy of a quiet different Neoplatonic thinker, and by struggling with and commenting on the Book of Genesis for many years, his perspective shifted to a kind of rich theocentrism, which found a large space for affirmations of the good earth, and even the human body to some degree.