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The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis By Lynn White, JR.'s, 1967. Science 155: 1203-1207: A Critical Appraisal

S.M. Aamir Ali*

Abstract

It has been more than 50 years since the publication of Lynn White's article, 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis', but its effects can still be observed. This 5-pages article has remarkably transformed the way in which environmental problems were comprehended by religious ethics. The impact of the article is such that even today no work on religion and environment fails to mention Lynn White. Maybe it was the controversy that it created by declaring the basic foundations of Christianity as anthropocentric and magnanimously responsible for the environmental degradation that gave this article widespread reach. This ultimately lead to the development of many schools of thoughts such as eco-theology, environmental ethics, eco-feminism and environmentalism.¹ The author in this article attempts to mention both the environmental impact of his thesis as well the criticisms faced by it.

Introduction

White's article is considered a watershed movement in the development of environmental ethics not because it was widely accepted but because it was widely debated.² White contended that Christianity has established a dualism between and nature, thus giving humanity, by divine will, the right and duty to exploit nature for human ends. While some have tried to support his assertion, others have refuted it through various surveys. None can be said to be conclusive because factors such as time, place and awareness among the sample affects the results considerably. Though appreciated or criticized, White's impact and the long-term ripple effect that it created with respect to propagating environmental awareness could not be discarded. His article is considered as "one of the most significant articles to appear in environmental studies in the second half of the 20th century" and "a foundational document and a type of holy text of environmental history".

* Assistant Professor of Law, Indian Institute of Legal Studies, Dagapur, Siliguri, PO Salbari, Darjeeling, West Bengal

¹ TODD LE VASSEUR, ANNA PETERSON, RELIGION AND ECOLOGICAL CRISIS: THE "LYNN WHITE THESIS" AT FIFTY, 172-178 (Routledge, 2016)

² Willis Jenkins, *After Lynn White: Religious Ethics and Environmental Problems*, The Journal of Religious Ethics, Vol. 37, No. 2, 283-309 (2009), www.jstor.org/stable/40378046

Although environment was in focus of much of 19th and 20th century, such focus was peripheral in nature. It was after 1970s, that the development of Environmental ethics took place. Works such as Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1963) which explained the concentration of pesticides within the food web,³ Paul R. Ehrlich and Anne Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb* (1968) depicting how the increasing human population is threatening the of planetary life-support systems and Lynn White's *The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis* (1967) acted as catalysers in the evolution of Environmental Ethics.⁴ These literatures led to the birth of contemporary environmental movements and the consequent development in the field of ecology.

Development of Various Schools

White's paper unleashed a plethora of literature which lead to the development of some of the most crucial fields, such as Environmental Ethics, Eco-theology, Eco-feminism and Environmentalism as a neo-pagan religion, to name a few.⁵ The fact that ecological crisis is now a much studied and researched area, can be attributed to White's contribution in literature. It was only after 1960s, that Environmental Ethics came as a field of study. Environmental Ethics in simple words can be defined as a branch of applied philosophy that focus on issues regarding societal attitudes, policies and action which aims at protecting and sustaining ecological system. It studies the conceptual fundamentals of environmental morals instilled in humans. White in his article portrays the approach of human to see himself distinct from the nature.⁶ This was rectified by environmental ethics which promoted the idea that human was not above or beneath the nature but in fact is a part of it.

Next, the genesis of eco-theology can largely be attributed to Lynn White's article. It was basically developed as a response to the accusations made by him regarding the ecology culpability of Christianity which promoted the attitude of men's dominion over nature and led to the expansion of exploitative approaches of science and technology.⁷ Development of eco-theology, a marriage of religion and ecology, has consequently broaden the notions of religion and political and also propounded a relationship between eco-justice (that focuses on all creation of nature) and environmental justice (that focus on human and their communities).⁸

One of the other outcomes of Lynn White's article was the development or say the emergence of the concept of Eco-feminism. This third wave of feminism basically meant a feminist approach in order to understand ecology.⁹ Coined in 1970s, this school of thought drew parallel between the oppression of nature and the oppression of women by the hands of men. While in case of nature, men denoted the humankind as a whole, in case of women, it was the patriarchal society which subjugated their rights. Due to the inherent caring character of women, they are believed to be more connected to the nature. During this Era, men were

³ Mark Stoll, *Review Essay: The Quest for Green Religion*, Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation, Vol. 22, No. 2, (2012), www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/rac.2012.22.2.265

⁴ Willis Jenkins, *supra* note 2 at 284

⁵ Mark Stoll, *Review Essay: The Quest for Green Religion*, Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation, Vol. 22, No. 2, (2012), www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/rac.2012.22.2.265

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ CELIA DEANE DRUMMOND, ECO-THEOLOGY, 25-27 (Saint Mary's Press, 2008)

⁸ Elspeth Whitney, *Lynn White Jr.'s 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis' After 50 Years*, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 13/8 (2015): 396–410, <https://doi.org/10.1111/hic3.12254>.

⁹ *Ibid.*

seen as the curator of patriarchal culture, women were seen as curator of nature.¹⁰ This feminist approach highlighted the man's character to objectify both nature and women as his property.

Another major outbreaks, which can be considered as the outcome of Lynn White's article was the treatment of Environmentalism as a neo-pagan religion. In other words, environmentalism which was construed as a branch of social science was not being treated as a modern-day religion, which rejected God, The Father of all creatures, in favour of deifying 'Mother Earth'.¹¹ The animal and the plant lives were elevated to the status which was either equal or greater than human life. There was spiritualization of environmentalism, which led to the advent of 'deep ecology' where eco-centricism was preferred over anthropocentrism. An example of this is environmental historian Thomas Dunlap's *Faith in Nature: Environmentalism as Religious Quest* (2004), in which Dunlap describes mainstream environmentalism as "*a kind of transcendental fundamentalism, where "wilderness" takes the place of the Bible and salvation comes through a personal quest for redemption through contact with nature*".¹²

Vulnerability to Criticisms

White claimed that the environment extreme to which we are exposed now can undoubtedly be attributed to the development of science and technology; however the "*original deep-seated drive to unlimited exploitation of nature*" was something whose foundations were laid in Judeo-Christianity long back.¹³ His article had two components, namely historical and theological and so were the nature of his criticisms. His critiques were divided into two categories, historical and hermeneutics. The idea that capitalism and the consequent exploitation of nature can be attributed to religion was opposed by historians.¹⁴ In contrast to White's contention that religion was solely responsible for over-exploitation of nature, it was asserted that religion was one of the *many* factors, such as capitalism, democracy, urbanization, apathy towards conservation, that influenced the mind-set of people with respect to their natural environment.¹⁵ While historians never denied that religion too was responsible, defenders of Christianity out-rightly dismissed White's interpretation and the idea of Christianity's involvement in degrading the status of nature.

Flawed Interpretation

White's interpretation of various religions, be it criticising Christianity for the ecological damage caused by its propagation or the appraisal of Eastern tradition for their

¹⁰ Carol J. Adams, Lori Gruen, *Ecofeminism: Feminist Intersections with Other Animals and the Earth*, 24-29 (Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2014)

¹¹ Mark Stoll, *supra* note 5

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Laurel Kearns, *Saving the Creation: Christian Environmentalism in the United States*, *Sociology of Religion*, Vol. 57, No. 1, 55-70 (1996), www.jstor.org/stable/3712004.

¹⁴ Elspeth Whitney, *supra* note 8, at 396

¹⁵ Emily Warde, *Christianity And The Environment: The Lynn White Controversy* https://history.sfsu.edu/sites/default/files/EPF/2015/2011_Emily%20Warde.pdf (last visited January 12, 2021)

pro-environment approach, was not accepted as authoritative as he was a historian and not a theologian or an ecologist. The author considered Western ideas and belief such as Christianity and Judaism as anthropocentric; religions that propagates man's dominion over the nature, and Eastern beliefs as eco-centric. But this connotation is not true in its entirety for two reasons. Firstly, the author misinterprets the underlying notion of Christianity. There is no such thing as a perfect or imperfect religion. Every religion in their true sense attempts to propagate only and only good virtues. It is not the black letters of the religion, which creates dismay but rather their erroneous interpretation and propagation of such interpretation. White's interpretation of the Bible have been objected by biblical scholars such as John MacQuarrie and James Barr who conceded that White's interpretation portrays an anthropocentric universe along with the element of separateness.¹⁶ They further say that certain portion of the Bible, such as Genesis 9, which speaks of a covenant established by God, aimed at protecting both men and all creatures of the Earth was neglected by White in order to substantiate his arguments.¹⁷ He presented the theological half-truth by excluding to mention Genesis 9 which counteracted the "man's dominion" as declared by Genesis 1.

Further, in every religion there is an underlying principle; a *grundnorm*, which must be used in interpreting the various verses or scripture. In Christianity, that *grundnorm* is not that of dominion, but rather is the principle of *stewardship*.¹⁸ The Genesis begins with stating that God has created everything, and He has put Adam in the Garden of Eden, to work and take care of it, like a gardener, and not as an owner. It is clearly stated that man was to work and that work is the stewardship. It is not man who owns everything and has dominion, but rather God, and human beings are simply His administrators or managers, acting on his behalf.¹⁹

It has been propounded that 'dominion' in Genesis 1:28 must not be interpreted as 'ownership' but rather as 'stewardship'. It was after the publication of this article that the underlying message of Genesis 1:28 was reinterpreted and circulated as a 'divine charge' that has be instilled in humans to be good stewards and to protect and take care of the God's Creations. Stewardship was pointed out as one of the first commandments given by God to humans. Calvin DeWitt, a Professor of Environmental Studies, describes the notion of Christian stewardship as "*a caring keeping of the Earth that works to preserve and restore the integrity of the created order, doing the will of the Creator, and seeking for the Creator's kingdom of integrity and peace a kingdom devoid of human arrogance, ignorance, and greed.*"²⁰

Secondly, author's connotation that Eastern beliefs such as Buddhism, Hinduism and Jainism are eco-centric, that keeps the needs of the environment over that of human, is also not true. These religions are undoubtedly environment-inclined and promote the message of saving the environment, but this is done taking into account the spiritual needs of a man.

As per Hinduism, life exists in all living being and human have no dominion over the other beings. Exploitation of nature in any form is forbidden and to promote this message, all creatures, such as rivers, Sun, trees, animals, etc, were associated with Gods and Goddess.²¹ Earlier, this attitude of protection of environment was inherent in human nature and nature

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Mark Stoll, *supra* note 3

²⁰ Laurel Kearns, *supra* note 13

²¹ NANDITHA KRISHNA, HINDUISM AND NATURE, 35-24 (Penguin Random House, 2017)

was worshipped for providing sustenance to human being. But with the passage of time, this worship became a means to please God and fulfil the spiritual needs of a man. As per the basic tenet of Hindu philosophy, the doctrine of Karma, Hindus were prohibited from harming nature. This gradually transcended into the notion of non-violence, not for the sake of environment but because of the idea that the harm inflicted upon others by us, will eventually result in us being the sufferer. Similar is the case with other Asian religions as suggested by White.

Religion in Today's Context

White was attacked by historians on one hand and by followers of Christianity on other hand. Bert Hall, one of the White's students describes the situation as "*tide of protest from church men flowed across his desk*".²² Some believe that by criticizing Christianity to such an extent, White has potentially undermined the future role of Church of restoring environment and reforming science. White's article has created this presumption that Christianity has no environmental thoughts to offer and there is a need to pursue Asian, Non-Christian or Native American cultures. White has been condemned for his notion that the burden of this ecological crisis solely lies upon religion. But one cannot dismiss the effect that religion has in developing the ethics of a person which also results in the way he treats the environment. Religion, without any doubt plays a vital role in shaping the life of a person and also the community as a whole, in terms of the approach to reality. A particular example could be the case of an island off the coast of Tanzania, where dynamite was used by fishermen as an easy and quick method of bringing the day's catch.²³ This method perceptibly resulted in damage to aquatic animals and destruction of coral. The local conservationists' efforts of educating the fishermen and the step undertaken by the government of banning the practice proved to be a failure. Then the Alliance for Religions and Conservation (ARC), a secular body believing in the promotion of environmental ethics using religion, stepped in who took the religious approach. They cited the verses from Quran that promoted pro-environmental behaviour to the fishermen who were all Muslims.²⁴ They established how the use of dynamite fishing is against the principles of Quran. The conservation technique hence arose not from the letters of law but rather from the letters of religion.

²² Elspeth Whitney, *supra* note 8

²³ Niki Rust, Religion can make us more environmentally friendly – or not, BBC Earth, <http://www.bbc.com/earth/story/20170206-religion-can-make-us-more-environmentally-friendly-or-not> (last visited 13 January, 2021)

²⁴ *Ibid.*

Conclusion

One cannot undermine the ripple-effect of Lynn White's article. It proved to be paramount in not only developing various many schools of thoughts of Environmental Law such as eco-theology, environmental ethics, eco-feminism and environmentalism but also brought a change in attitude of people and propelled a clarification in interpretation of Christian Scriptures that ensured the nature is not exploited and not treated as subservient to man.

In concluding his analysis White urged that the solution to our ecological problems lay not in abandonment of religion, but rather in abandonment of anthropocentrism. It can be said that just like Bible was misinterpreted by White, White's thesis was too misinterpreted by the mass. For the sake of argument, if we accept that White was correct with respect to his interpretation of Christianity as an extreme anthropocentric religion, then also he never propounded atheism or conversion to Eastern religion. Instead he wanted a revolutionized form of Christianity which was influenced by Asian religions which according to him were eco-centric in their teachings. Thus his article was never religion-driven and was written only with the purpose of raising awareness among the people regarding the exploitative nature of man.

Though White attributed this exploitation exclusively to religion, specifically Occidental religion, it would be imprudent to ignore the involvement of science and technology. Before the development of science and technology, there existed religion, with the same scriptures. It was only after such development that the health of nature declined rapidly. Even after 50 years of its publication, one cannot refute White's notion that religion is reflected in certain activities, environment protection being one of them, as seen in the case of Tanzania. Correctly it has been declared as the holy text of Environmental law and "*one of the most significant articles to appear in environmental studies in the second half of the 20th century*".