

Patrology, Ecology, and Eschatology: Looking Forward to the Future of the Planet by Looking Back to the Fathers of the Church¹

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Abstract

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Nearly a half-century ago in an infamous article, Lynn White Jr. accused Christianity of being complicit in environmental degradation, a claim that has met with widespread rebuttal. And yet, there are signs today of renewed ecological degradation in manifold forms, and peoples of all intellectual disciplines and backgrounds are struggling to respond to these challenges. Theologians have their role to play, and this article shows that there are deep theological resources within early Christianity addressing the goodness, stewardship, and salvation of God's creation. Drawing especially on the patristic literature of such as Irenaeus of Lyons, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Athanasius of Alexandria, John Chrysostom, Basil of Caesarea, Ps-Dionysius the Areopagite, John of Damascus, Maximus the Confessor, Origen of Alexandria, Gregory of Nyssa, and Ambrose of Milan, the author argues that we need today new forms of asceticism in addition to fasting from food that will help us forego excessive consumption and in so doing free us to draw into a deeper communion with all of God's creation.



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Introduction

Recent descriptions of the modern ecological crisis are not optimistic.² It seems crucial that experts from different fields and backgrounds join their efforts together to find solutions together to our environmental problems. One source of insight that remains relatively underdeveloped is theology. This article will examine some common sources for Catholic and Orthodox theology, namely the teaching of the Church Fathers on the goodness of creation, ascetic interaction with nature, and an eschatological vision of the creation.³

A Modern Christian Apologia for the Environment

In 1967 Lynn White, Jr., an American historian, in his short but conceptual article, formulated a thesis that the roots of ecological problems derive from a Christian interpretation of the Bible.⁴ White contended that the Western Judeo-Christian tradition was responsible for obliterating all animistic beliefs that safeguarded trees, rivers, mountains, and other natural resources, thus leading to the loss of all inhibitions in the abuse of nature. As a result, people began to treat nature as being at the service of their needs and whims by means of science and technology. White also claimed that in the Book of Genesis the relationship between human society and the environment is presented as the relationship between dominator and dominated, and in this dualism it was God's will that people exploit nature.⁵ His thesis stirred a heated discussion

² Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, *Climate Change 2007: Synthesis Report, Contribution of Working Groups I, II, and III to the Fourth Assessment Report*, ed. Rajendra K. Pachauri and Andy Reisinger (Geneva: Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2008); see also Lloyd E. Sandelands and Andrew Hoffman, "Sustainability, Faith, and the Market," *Worldviews: Global Religions, Culture, and Ecology* 12 (2008): 129–45.

³ It is unfortunate that even though patristic sources are basically the same for Catholic and Orthodox theology, Catholic and Orthodox theologians who explore patristic views on the environment do not always read each other's studies.

⁴ Lynn White, Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155 (March 10, 1967): 1203–1207.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 1205.

among historians, philosophers, ecologists, and theologians, and thereby became a stimulus for a deeper study of the subject from different points of view. Many refutations have been written since 1967,⁶ but the general trend to articulate criticism of Christian attitudes has not dissipated.⁷ Many secular environmentalists still contend that the Christian and Jewish religions are inimical to the environment and have been so for thousands of years.⁸ From the historical point of view, White was correct in some of his conclusions, but there is also much more evidence than usually acknowledged for more beneficent Christian attitudes toward the environment and non-human nature.⁹ White himself recognized that it was Protestantism and Catholicism that have permitted a “blatant disregard” for the environment, whereas some alternative developments within Christianity, like the one led by Francis of Assisi and

⁶ See John B. Bennett, “On Responding to Lynn White: Ecology and Christianity,” *Ohio Journal of Religious Studies* 5 (1977): 71–77; Jeanne Kay, “Human Dominion over Nature in the Hebrew Bible,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 79 (1989): 214–232.

⁷ See John Passmore, *Man’s Responsibility for Nature: Ecological Problems and Western Traditions* (London: Duckworth, 1974), 3–40, 111–18; William Coleman, “Providence, Capitalism, and Environmental Degradation, English Apologetics in an Era of Economic Revolution,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 37 (1976): 1203–1207; Graham Huggan, Helen Tiffin, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment* (London: Routledge, 2010).

⁸ Robert Booth Fowler, *The Greening of Protestant Thought* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 60.

⁹ Robin Attfield, “Christian Attitudes to Nature,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 44 (1983): 369–386. Wesley Granberg-Michaelson summarized several conclusions reached twenty years after the publication of White’s article: a) White’s description of biblical teaching regarding environment is selective and distortive; b) his view that Christianity paved way for scientific and technological revolutions is questionable; and c) his opinion that environmental destruction has flowed solely from the mindset of Western culture, and not from others, is historically dubious (“Why Christians Lost an Environmental Ethic,” *Epiphany: A Journal of Faith and Insight* 8 [1988] 40–50); see also Ernst M. Conradie, *Christianity and Ecological Theology. Resources for Further Research* (Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2006), 61–65.