

Original Paper

Elective Affinities in the Anthropocene: Christianity and the Natural Environment Reconsidered

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Abstract

To reach a deeper understanding of the complex relationship between religion and the natural environment, it is important to move beyond essentializing any religious tradition as having a pro-environmental or anti-environmental ethic. Rather, prior work has shown that the canonical, scholarly, and popular literatures and discourse of a number of religious traditions can and have been socially and rhetorically constructed as supporting an array of positions, from preservation to profligacy, and much in between those two ideal types. In this paper, we develop Max Weber's theory of "elective affinities" and adapt it to the Anthropocene, to make the case that in a fragmented society, people and communities of convenience tend to choose the tropes and framing from the dominant culture to justify self-interested action. That often can take the form of religious discourse. In the sense of finding a wide array of practical interpretations relative to the environment, the theory is largely supported, although we do find important nuances. It is instructive to look at how the language and legitimacy of one institution (e.g. religion) has been used to justify and legitimate that of others (e.g. the polity). While these processes of institutional co-optation can be effective in the short run, they may have corrosive longer-term effects. Key rhetorical, and in fact political, battles in the Third Millennium, will likely be organized around how to adapt pre-industrial religion to late industrial and perhaps post-industrial times, and it remains to see how central the natural environment will be in what communities hold sacred.

Keywords

environmental ethics, institutional co-optation, anthropocene, environmental rhetoric, religious discourse

What is the relationship between religion and the natural environment? In this paper, we explore the complexities of this question, unpacking some of the literature and thought specifically from Christianity. We will make the case that contained within the vastness of the Christian tradition are warrants for a wide array of ways of relating to the natural environment, on the collective, as well as the individual, level.

As an entrée into these complexities, we draw on the theoretical framework of Max Weber (1904-5/1958; 1903-1917/1949). In his work linking world religions with social and cultural practices, Weber used the term “elective affinities” to indicate how people tended to be in religions that in many ways were commensurate with their world views. Rich people tended to preponderate in religions with certain beliefs and practices, while poor people tended to be in other religions, for example.

Over the last century, there has been a tendency among some scholars, to read Weber as having implied a causality, where religions with a this-world or “inner-worldly” and ascetic orientation tended to have adherents whose likelihood of gaining worldly success and riches was greater than those with an “other-worldly” and/or perhaps a more mystical orientation. Another interpretation of Weber does not necessarily attribute cause, but simply notes the correlation between these positions. This correlation is what Weber called “elective affinity.” In this paper, we expand the Weberian thesis from the economy to the environment. In so doing, we look primarily at the elective affinity branch of his theory (for expanded treatments of various aspects of Weber’s thesis, see LeMoyne & Burns, 1998; Crossley, 2007).

There is a case that can be made that, particularly now, five centuries after Weber’s original focus, a number of important changes have occurred. We can examine them textually and rhetorically, looking for central tropes and prioritizing summary symbols around which ideas and communities are built (Burns, 1999; Burns & LeMoyne, 2001), particularly in terms of how these are constructed relative to the natural environment (Burns, 2009; Burns & LeMoyne, 2003; Burns & Caniglia, 2017).

People are able to choose their religion to a large degree. Even for those who stay with the religion of their birth, which is still the majority of people, *there is the opportunity now to choose orientation to that religion*. Examples of this are many, but we will confine ourselves here to a few for illustrative purposes. Conservative Catholic politicians may choose to follow the teachings of the Pope on abortion and gay marriage, for example, yet ignore his recent Encyclical on Climate Change. Progressives may pick up on largely the opposite messages. This “Cafeteria Catholicism,” or choosing which aspects of one’s religion to subscribe to (Phillips, 2012), is a phenomenon that has become more common across Christian traditions, and indeed to religion more generally (Putnam, 2012; Hunter, 1992).

This brings up an important point in many major religions and their denominations now. Some of the most profound differences now can be found *within* religious traditions (Hunter, 1992; Burns, 2014; Smith, 2015). Individuals may still be in community, but they can choose *which* community to a far greater degree than ever, as well as their *orientation* to those communities.

1. Elective Affinities and Why They Matter

Originally introduced by the noted German author, Johann Wilhelm von Goethe (1808/2008; 1828-31/2008), *Wahlverwandtschaft*, is typically rendered in English as “elective affinity,” yet one of its alternative renderings, “kindred by choice,” gives a better sense of the concept. Goethe, who was writing in the Romantic Period early in the Industrial Age, promulgated the idea of “chemistry” in human relationships. Much as certain chemical elements have an “affinity” for one another, so to do people have such attractions.

It is important to situate this in the modernity project in general. As feudalism was breaking down, being replaced by industrial capitalism, so many of the ideas, mores and beliefs were adapting. The class-based, arranged marriages were giving way, over time, to affinity based coupling.

Throughout history, in every part of culture and its respective institutions, there has been the phenomenon of cultural lag (Ogburn, 1932/1961). That is to say, when there is a change in material conditions (e.g. the invention and growing use of industrial machinery, increasing population, and the opening of trade routes and opportunities in a “New World”), the culture tends to adapt by changing what it values over time, but those changes tend not to fully fit the new material conditions, because there is a lag time in that adaptation. This time between changes in the material conditions faced by real people in a society at a given place and time, and the adaptive culture capable of handling those conditions in ways that are optimal for the people and the natural environment, is commonly referred to by social theorists as “Cultural Lag.”

The lag time tends to be less in cosmopolitan places (e.g. world cities), and greater in areas where communication, transportation, and population density are less (e.g. rural areas). The often-cited urban-rural value differences, voting behavior, support for ideas such as gay marriage and female clergy, and attitudes toward the environment, all vary, as do, to a large degree, approaches toward religion (Hunter, 1992) and the environment (Burns, 2014; Burns, Hekmatpour, & Speer, 2018).

In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Max Weber (1904-5/1958) grounds much of his theory in the idea of *elective affinities*. A number of readers of Weber see him making the argument that Protestantism indirectly acts as a *cause* for capitalism, albeit in concert with other forces (e.g. individual labor markets, a money and market economy and a rise in industrialism) through a macro-level set of values, beliefs and *mores*, characterized as an “ethic.” This in turn sets the stage for a “spirit” (*Geist*) which is ripe for the rise of capitalism (Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2011). At the end of the *Protestant Ethic*, Weber quotes Goethe’s Faust: “Specialists without spirit; sensualists without heart...” In this, he articulates an “iron cage of rationality” that industrial modernity and the bureaucracies that separate humanity from nature have wrought.

We need to make several observations here: first, there are a *number* of Protestant Ethics. Weber makes distinctions among Calvinists, Anabaptists, and Methodists, for example, with each filling a key niche in the rising hegemony of capitalism. It is the relatively small group of Calvinists who Weber focuses on as feeding into the capitalist class itself. Other aspects of Christianity, Catholicism and Orthodoxy,

have their own ethics. It further could be argued that these in turn have a number of sub-cultures and ethics. Second, Weber was not focusing on the Protestantism of his day, but primarily on the Protestantism of the 16th Century (and the late 15th) in the events of the early Reformation, and even those predating the Reformation itself.

Yet even with those important qualifications, Weber's trenchant analysis offers a tremendous amount of analytical insight. It is true that, with some exceptions, largely Calvinist populations (e.g. the Northeast U.S., England, the Netherlands, *inter alia*, did take off early and spectacularly in terms of economic development. Yet there is an aspect of the Protestant Ethic, or perhaps a Christian Ethic stated more broadly, that also has been associated with environmental degradation. The landmark work by Lynn White (1967) in *Science* and other venues makes this assertion.

Other options have reasserted themselves in the time since St. Benedict in the 5th Century and, more recently, the analysis of Lynn White in the mid-to-late 20th Century. There is, for example, the "Benedict Option" of disengaging, moving away from society and its problems, at least in theory. This does not address the larger issue of the environmental crises we face, but it is another read of the broad literature of Christianity (Dreher, 2017).

Albert Schweitzer (1969) was another voice in the 1960s. He articulated a vision of honoring all life, not limited to human life, but the interrelated flora and animal life in the broader environment. A variant, but an important one, is the quiescent option. This involves staying in the world, fully engaged, yet spending quality time each day in prayer and quiet meditation, far from the "madding crowd" (Sarah, 2017).

Yet there is an argument to be made that Christianity can also be read in a more "Franciscan" light, in which the earth is to be stewarded and taken care of. We go into some of these ideas more deeply in the pages that follow, unpacking many of the key texts. We start first with some general observations about Christianity and its complex relation with the environment, and we then move to important nuances and particularities.

2. Methodology

We look for a sense of how Christians and other influenced by Christian thinking and culture were and are likely to perceive, and ultimately to interact with, the environment. It is crucial here to emphasize that, as Lynn White (1967) pointed out, as did Weber and others before him, the influence of a dominant religion is not confined to its believers. Skeptics and others across a wide array, including atheists, were and are profoundly influenced by the dominant culture and ethical system (not always directly, and often obliquely, or even *via negativa*). Throughout our work, we seek to cast this much wider net. We look for influences of Christianity on the broader culture, particularly in terms of its orientation to the natural environment.

In our work, we take guidance from Max Weber, particularly his work on comparative religions, and also from his *Methodology of the Social Sciences* (1903-1917/1949). His approach could be

characterized, as can ours broadly speaking, as hermeneutical. As he describes in his Methodology work Weber use the comparative-historical framework, tempered by *Verstehen*, or attempting to enter into the intellectual and ethical frameworks of the social actors he was studying, with the goal of understanding, and in turn articulating the dominant ethical orientations of the people and cultures in his focus.

As did Weber, we look to the religions that people throughout history have looked to for guidance. We read history and scripture with this in mind. It bears noting that our goal here is not to preach or even to hold a particular religious view as primary. Rather, our goal is understanding, and in turn, we seek to convey our emergent understanding as we work through a group of texts and more generally through the sweep of history.

We look to canonical texts in Christianity, including the Bible, but then moving beyond the Bible *per se*, giving close consideration to philosophers, theologians and social observers throughout history, culminating in the late 20th and early 21st Centuries. We cite the sources we draw on throughout the text. It bears noting that for Biblical references, we rely primarily on two scholarly and deeply vetted translations. For Biblical references throughout our work, the two major Bible translations upon which we rely, chosen for their scholarship on the one hand, and differing perspectives on the other are: 1) New International Version [NIV] 2011; and 2) New Revised Standard Version [NRSV] 1991).

Bible scholars and others will no doubt note that one of the translations we draw on tends to be more popular among conservative communities, while the other finds itself more in favor with progressive communities. We do not try to privilege one or the other, but use both in order, we hope, to come to a balanced reading. Regardless of where they have found favor, we emphasize that both of the Bible translations we use are noted by scholars of all stripes as rigorous and competently done. These were the primary reasons for our choices.

3. Some Initial Observations Regarding Christianity and the Environment

Christianity, especially in so far as it reflects its roots in Judaism, offers a strongly intimate connection between God and creation. This is obvious from the often noted creation myth in Genesis, chapters 1-3 of the Hebrew Scripture. Put simply, the natural world is *generated* by God and expresses the nature and intent of God. If nature is conceived this way, two things follow: nature is not free standing and subject to understanding entirely on its own terms, and nature is itself a revelation of God. (This later becomes evident in the common distinction between *special revelation* or Scripture and *natural revelation* or the created order. We will go into more detail on this later.)

Thus, in Hebrew Scripture nature is profoundly honored but always in connection with God as its source. That is, nature *reveals* God. This is disclosed most vividly in a number of the Psalms and Job: (Psalms 8, 19, 29, 50, 65, 77, 95-98, 103-4, 121, 136, 147-48; Job 9, 12, 28, 38-39). All of these passages express the intimate connection between God and nature, stressing how nature reveals God (for discussion, see Gilkey, 2001). Two of the more salient Psalms regarding nature are 8 and 19: 1-6.

Much as God and nature are intimately identified in ancient Judaism—and by implication in early Christianity—so human beings are described as distinct from nature. Because God created humans “in his own image and likeness,” humans are identified more with God than nature. This feature of the creation myth is soon made a constant in Jewish and later Christian understanding. (Genesis, 1:26-28) This anthropocentric line of thinking is expounded throughout Psalm 8, and this is not the only citation. In brief, one of the abiding claims of both Judaism and Christianity is *human exceptionalism*. This conviction has continued right down to the present and is still problematic in relation to the environment.

Why? When the Genesis myth states that humanity is to have *dominion* over the creation (read, natural world) this may have been interpreted in early stages of Judaism and Christianity to mean humans are to be *stewards* over nature, it devolved even within Christianity to ideas of domination and exploitation of nature. The *dominion* interpretation had a significant following throughout history. One striking example from the 17th Century was Francis Bacon’s (1620/1855) attitude toward nature, that human beings are (1) distinct from nature and (2) are to have control of nature. That view has held significant influence on how the scientific method developed and has a continued influence even unto this day (Burns & Boyd, 2018).

Note that there are actually two versions of the creation myth in Genesis: First, Genesis 1:1-2:3 and Second, Genesis 2:4-25. In the latter account note that the first human, Adam, is given the task of *naming* all of the animals. But as has often been pointed out, naming is an act of empowerment and picks up in the second creation myth something of dominion.

Both the close identification of God with nature and human exceptionalism have proven to be stumbling blocks for Christianity, especially since the modern era and the rise of science. The former resists the consideration of nature in itself and for itself, and the latter allows for false elevation of humanity over nature, denying humanity’s status as part of nature.

4. The Rise of Christianity as a Distinct Religion

As long as Christianity remained a Jewish sect, it remained closely allied to those roots. However, largely as a result of the devastation of Judaism, beginning with the sack of Jerusalem in 70 AD. Christianity became increasingly distinct and gradually Judaism and Christianity became separate religions altogether. (Of course, the fact that it retained and included the Hebrew Scripture as part of its own Christian Scripture suggests that the influence of Judaism has continued to a significant extent.)

This is where Christianity clearly shifts its emphasis largely as a result of its encounters with and responses to the Greek and Roman worlds, including the influence of Paganism. This led to a twofold shaping of Christianity. On the one hand, it resisted paganism (including the mystery cults), which in some respects led to some Christian depreciation of the role of nature. This was subtle but gradually becomes more decisive for Christian interpretation. On the other hand, Christianity became subject to Greek categories for its self-understanding (Sacks, 2012). And what was the Greek claim that so

colored the emergence of Christianity as a distinct religion? It was the primacy of *reason* in coming to a human understanding of nature, God, and humanity. Reason, according to Sacks, was never and still is not central to Judaism. Herein there is a clear break between Judaism and Christianity.

In the course of the next two thousand years this means that Christianity gradually evolved with distinct attitudes toward nature, God, and humanity. With the emergence of modernity and its focus on rationality in the guise of science, nature could begin to pry itself free of the close identity between God and nature (Jones, 2014). This process came to full flower in the 18th century, but along with it, science “took control” of nature, so to speak. Nature was no longer adored as the revealer of God, but more strictly as a human resource for human exploitation (Jones, 2014). Imbedded in this idea, of course, the human exceptionalism that began with the creation myth continued apace, though no longer based on the creation myth. Humans became, as it were, liberated into their own rationality—and concurrently into their own *individuality* (later evolving or devolving into individualism).

5. The Impact of Greek Perspectives on Later Environmental Developments

Two notable consequences followed Christianity’s embracing Greek categories for its self-interpretation. First, Christianity embraced a distinction between the higher nature of humanity and its more vulgar condition as embodied! Second, Christianity became increasingly devoted to the subtleties of dogma and the problem of heresy, thus rising above, as it were, issues relating to the natural world. Let’s examine these two aspects of Christian history.

For the Greeks, along with stressing rationality as the single most unique feature of human beings—for instance, Aristotle’s definition of humans as “rational animals”—considered the natural world, and especially the human body, as inferior to the mind and thus to the *higher capacities* of humanity. This is evident in the writings of St. Paul, which became part of scripture. (Cf. I Corinthians 3:1-4, Gal. 5:17-25; 6:12-13, Eph. 2:3, Rom. 8:5-9; 13:14) Note that the flesh is always inferior and problematic for the higher life, i.e., the spiritual. Likewise, some passages speak of the *natural* man, and this was later used to distinguish more generally what is natural from the higher life.

There are two words used for the human body: *soma* and *sarx*. The former is a neutral reference to the body as such. The latter is more complex and difficult to define with precision. It means the ordinary human self with all of its foibles and propensity to sin, including especially human desires. The passages referenced above all use the word *sarx*, translated as flesh and only more rarely as body.

The Pauline emphasis on denigrating the flesh, the human earthly creature, did two things to later developments. First, it became fixated on sex and sexual acts as belonging to the fleshly life. Second, from the denigrating of the flesh, it was but a short move for many interpreters of Christian Scripture to move to nature itself. In subtle and sometimes not so subtle ways, nature becomes suspect, harking back to the thorns and thistles introduced after the Fall in the creation myth.

As for the second issue derived from the Greeks, the primacy of human rationality, this emphasis led to two notable consequences: the rise of dogma and the emergence of modern science. The issue of

dogma may seem irrelevant to the problems of the environment but further examination yields a number of influences.

We trace the centrality of dogma back to the Council of Nicea, conducted at the behest of Emperor Constantine circa 325 CE. In effect, this council (and supplemented shortly thereafter by the Councils of Chalcedon and Constantinople) argued over what became the Doctrine of the Trinity. That process eventuated in the primacy of dogma in establishing Christian credibility. This preoccupation continued well into the modern era and for centuries was the source of heresy trials, the Inquisition, and other ways of insisting on orthodoxy (Freeman, 2005). The emphasis on orthodoxy led, in turn, to a preoccupation with highly abstract ideas and a subtle loss of attention to the world around us. This was long before issues of the environment were conceived, but what is most important in this respect is that religion became “other worldly” in increasingly extreme ways.

This stress on dogma also brought on interest in and attention to religious epistemology. How do we know these dogmas can stand the test of truth? This is where the distinction and relation between two modes of revelation came sharply into focus: *Special Revelation*, basically identified with Scripture through the church’s official interpretation (the magisterium) and *Natural Revelation*, basically meaning the natural order and how it discloses God and what God intends through Creation. This distinction is one of the basic ways of showing Christianity’s epistemological coherence. Implicit in this is the idea that nature cannot and does not contradict Scripture and that Scripture helps us better understand nature.

This will later rear its head especially in rejecting evolution as an adequate explanation of how life forms came/come into being and change. This is evident in the Catholic tradition through the actions of Vatican I and in the Protestant/Sectarian traditions through Fundamentalism. Underlying this later development in the 19th/20th centuries, is the desire and drive to keep orthodoxy pure from contamination.

The twofold source of knowledge, special and natural, reached their apogee in the late Middle Ages with St. Thomas Aquinas and what became known as the Medieval Synthesis between the divine and natural dimensions. This did not last long. Even before Thomas’ death, it began to be picked apart by Duns Scotus, Ockham, and others. And this breakdown led to the emergence in early modernity of science as an increasingly separate and independent inquiry into the natural order.

6. The Collapse of the Medieval Synthesis and the Rise of Modernity

Christianity endured its most decisive crisis during the Renaissance (roughly 13th to 17th centuries). On the one hand, the first stirrings of secularization began with the recovery of ancient Roman humanism, as well as the recovery of Lucretius’ *The Nature of Things* (99 BCE/2005 CE). This was perhaps the most reductionist analysis of creation as nothing more than a coagulation of atoms. Lucretius’ influence on the Renaissance is but foretaste of later extremes in scientism/secularism. (Greenblatt, 2011).

On the other hand, the ferment that began in Christianity itself in the fifteenth century and breaking forth in the Protestant Reformation preoccupied Christianity away from natural interests and back into dogmatic preoccupation. This lasted until the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, which largely ended that round of Religious Wars.

Of course, during the 17th Century, science was reintroducing concern for the natural world. Consider Galileo, Bacon, and other early scientists of the era (for discussion, see Finocchiaro, 2005). At the same time, a more secularized social and political order was unfolding, moving toward the emergence of democracy. John Locke's (1689/1990) was particularly influential in this regard.

We need not trace this major restructuring of Western Civilization as it emerged into modernity. Suffice to say, its force came to concentration in what was popularly known as the Industrial Revolution. Christianity offered little resistance to this move as such (Galileo's struggle with the Church being counter evidence), but it increasingly came into implicit competition with modernity. This only became overt and intensified in the late 19th century with the rising popularity of Darwin and the theory of evolution.

7. Late Modernity, Rise of the Environmental Crisis, and the Crisis in Christianity

In the 1960s the stirrings of concern for the environment emerged to social consciousness, albeit slowly. Rachel Carson's (1962/2002) *Silent Spring* became a definitive early warning signal and was soon followed by other voices. It was a bit later that theologians and ethicists join the concern. Following shortly thereafter was Lynn White's (1967) landmark essay, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," in which he maintains that the origins of the current crisis date back to early Judaism and Christianity, particularly to the creation myth and the designation of humans as having dominion over nature.

A spate of books and articles soon followed, some written by philosophers and especially ethicists, but this literature early included Christian theologians who believed they must join the voices of those helping to interpret the environmental crisis in theological terms (McFague, 1993). Most of these writers understood that traditional Christian writings, especially Scripture, must be radically reinterpreted with the current situation in mind. In general, this form of theology came to be known as *constructive theology* or alternatively as *process theology*. That is, there involved a deliberate reconstruction of traditional theology so that it may be integrated into the processes and concerns appropriate to our time.

Some of the most noted voices in this movement included John Cobb in *Is It Too Late?* with the subtitle, "A Theology of Ecology" (1971/1995) Cobb subsequently wrote other works relating theology to the environment. This was done in the larger context of Cobb's constructive reinterpretation of God within Christianity which came to be known as *process theology*. In 1993, theologian Sallie McFague, published *God's Body: An Ecological Theology*. Her work was done in the context of a constructive approach to reinterpreting God for late modernity. Gordon Kaufman (1981, 2004) joined this

conversation, seeking to reconstruct a theology of both God and humanity suitable for the age. One such work was *The Theological Imagination: Constructing the Concept of God* (1981). Kaufman latest being *In the Beginning. . . Creativity* (2004), arguing in this work that God is best understood through the metaphor of *creativity*, particularly as it concerns the ecosystem.

In a related vein, Langdon Gilkey (2001) addresses prevailing questions for contemporary theology: its relation to ecology and the current environmental crisis, the plurality of religions and how Christianity must accommodate to the integrity of other religious traditions. In *Blue Twilight* Gilkey's first chapter is devoted to "The Theology of Nature," in which he shows how nature gradually became a significant theme in constructive theology. He begins this chapter by describing the historical situation in twentieth-century theology up into the 1950s. In response to classical theological liberalism in the nineteenth century, a movement arose around 1920 called *Neo-orthodoxy*. Its leader was Karl Barth (see Barth, 1969), whose aim was to protect orthodoxy in the modern context. In this respect, he harked back to the very earliest development of Christianity following the 4th Century Councils Nicaea and Chalcedon, as well as the Council of Constantinople, whereby dogma and orthodoxy dominated. To achieve this aim in the 20th century, Barth insisted that Christianity is a unique and utterly independent of all other contemporary interests, especially science. He does not reject science but maintains that it has nothing to do with the Christian Gospel. With this move Neo-Orthodoxy paid no attention to nature or ecology. The only reason this was not disastrous for Neo-Orthodoxy is that the environmental crisis had not yet become of concern during Barth's career. Only in the 1960s did the crisis enter into America's and Europe's public awareness.

Gilkey also held that the Neo-Orthodox movement became largely irrelevant. A new theology needed to be constructed that allowed nature to be basic to its content, and Gilkey was part of the effort to do it. He insisted that the environmental crisis demanded such a theology. He sought to state the case by reaching back to the distinction between *natural revelation* and *special revelation*. He argues that these two sources for understanding God are fully complimentary. Siting the Protestant theologian, John Calvin, Gilkey shows how he made natural theology the necessary foundation of revealed theology, and revealed theology (Scripture) only refines and completes natural theology. Gilkey offers key arguments supporting this idea and uses it to provide a fresh consideration of natural revelation as the basis for a theological ecology that directly addresses the current critical necessity of appreciating and responding to the environmental crisis.

All of this is to say that a significant movement of constructive theologians since the late 1960s has been highly vocal in addressing the environmental crisis. We will not elaborate further, except to say that theology has had to undertake a transformation in the way theology is prosecuted, and the purpose of doing so is to recover a direct and deep appreciation for nature. Gilkey declares that nature is inherently valuable in its own right *because* humanity is a product of nature (evolution) and bears the image of God along with nature bearing that image.

The crucial problems for conservative evangelical (along with fundamentalist) Christians have vigorously resisted the constructive theologies. They have done so on two principal grounds. First, they believe Scripture is not only inerrant but that it trumps any and all other claims to truth that contradict scripture. And of course, their primary target is Darwinian evolution. They see Darwin as a perversion of truth due to the fact that biblical creation contravenes evolution. This has been a long and continuing battle since the late 19th century and is the principal reason that today there is such a harsh anti-scientific thinking in our American culture and its body politic. Some more moderate evangelicals have insisted on muting this message in more accommodating ways, but the attitude that Scripture overrides any science that contradicts it remains pervasive.

Second, and closely allied to the first, is the intense conviction among many evangelicals and fundamentalists that the end of history is immanent and can take place at any moment. This is known either as *The Second Coming* or *The Apocalypse*. Given this belief, they are inclined to maintain that care for the environment is simply irrelevant. This idea seemed to go public—or at least political—when U.S. President Ronald Reagan appointed James Watt as Secretary of the Interior. Watt boldly claimed that the end-time was at hand and that care for the environment was thus irrelevant. The idea has continued to spread among evangelicals and fundamentalists, especially among common people in “Middle-America” (for a related study, see Hochschild, 2016).

These pages provide only a sketch of the dynamics of Christianity over the years. It surely repeats things long known, but we trust it will also provide some new information on the depths to which Christianity has gone in the last 75 years either to embrace environmental concern or to resist and ignore it. This, of course, contains a wide array of orientations, and reveals the profound cleavages in the ranks of Christianity today (for a study of cultural divisions, particularly within Christianity, see Hunter, 1992).

Despite its considerable effects of Christian thought and beliefs on ways in which people relate to the natural environment, it is one religion of many around the world. Parallel analyses of relations between other religions and the environment could be fruitful avenues of inquiry as well. See, for example, Hekmatpour, Burns and Boyd (2017), and Wersal (1995) for studies of the influences of Islamic thought on orientations to the natural environment.

Let us conclude by going back to Lynn White’s seminal piece on the religious sources of our ecological crisis. Near the end of the article he discusses the life and ministry of St Francis of Assisi as a keen exemplar of the bonding of Christianity to nature. In the midst of this discussion he drops hints for our current dilemma over the environment by pointing out the following.

First, he insists that we will not solve this environmental crisis, “. . . until we find a new religion or rethink our old one.” Second, he briefly references “the Irish saints” (and this could include the Celtic Christians) as in some respects a further attempt to affirm nature from a Christian perspective. (Of course, they were more esoteric in their approach, sometimes approaching animism, which the

mainstream of Christianity has rejected. We can also consider many features of animism, and their deep connection with nature)

Third, near the end of Lynn White's essay, he declares that the growth and continuation of the Franciscan idea, . . . "cannot be understood historically apart from the distinctive attitudes toward nature which are deeply grounded in Christian dogma. The fact that most people do not think of these attitudes as Christian is irrelevant [White argues, based upon his view that...] no new set of basic values has been accepted in society to displace those of Christianity. Hence we shall continue to have a worsening ecologic crisis until we reject the Christian axiom that nature has no reason for existence save to serve man."

Finally, among other things, White says that strike at the core of the problem of Christianity in relation to nature and the environment, he declares, ". . . modern science is an extrapolation of natural theology." White declares near the end of his article, "Since the roots of our trouble are so largely religious [that is, human exceptionalism and its domination of nature], the remedy must also be essentially religious, whether we call it that or not. We must rethink and refeel our nature and destiny. The profoundly religious, but heretical sense of the primitive Franciscans for spiritual autonomy of all parts of nature may point in that direction. We propose Francis as a patron saint of ecologists."

We do believe we are in a profound value crisis in relation to nature and the environment. Since religion has historically borne the values that continue to inform us, the resolution necessarily will include that religious depth in significant ways.

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