

Rosa Mills

Dr. Timothy Jussaume

HON160

28 October 2022

Religion and the Environment

The world we live in today has pitted the ideas of faith and reason against each other, which has made it seem as if there is a conflict between science and religion. Regardless of your stance on this issue, this debate has translated over to how people view our current ecological crisis. In his article “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” Lynn White makes the claim that Christianity is to blame for the environmental issues plaguing the earth. I wholeheartedly disagree with this claim; it is not correct that Christianity is even partly to blame for the ecological crisis. White’s argument is unfounded and subjective, which can be seen through his stances on man’s relationship with nature and on the beloved Catholic figure Saint Francis.

First, I would like to tackle how evident White’s partiality is. If any of what he said about Christian values was correct, then I could see some merit to his claim. The problem is that White’s words are coming from an incredibly biased point of view that, quite frankly, tarnishes any credibility in my eyes. For example, he intentionally uses language that would be provocative to Christians while describing the Biblical account of the creation of man and woman as well as the Church’s view on the saints. Concerning the former he states, “Finally, God had created Adam and, as an afterthought, Eve to keep man from being lonely” (White). Not only is that description a horribly insulting take on the beautiful story contained in the Bible, that Eve was created from the rib of Adam, any Christian will tell you that God does not have

afterthoughts. With regards to the latter he states, “It is often said that for animism the Church substituted the cult of saints” (White). Referring to the saints using a term such as “cult” makes it seem, at its worst, that the concept of saints is something not associated with a major religion or something to be looked down upon by outsiders, at its best, that saints are worshiped by Christians rather than simply venerated and respected as examples of how to live out the faith. To be perfectly blunt, it seems as though White knew he wanted to blame the environmental crisis on Christians, so he twisted their beliefs in a way that made himself feel better for thinking in that manner.

Now to delve into the issue at hand. Most of White’s argument is founded on his assertion that a belief that is inherent to Christianity is that man is meant to use nature solely for his own benefit, regardless of if that results in its destruction. He even goes so far as to say that Christians have “established a dualism of man and nature” and believe that “it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends” (White). People often use Genesis 1:26-28 to justify this way of thinking:

Then God said: Let us make human beings in our image, after our likeness. Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, the tame animals, all the wild animals, and all the creatures that crawl on the earth. God created mankind in his image; in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them and God said to them: Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it. Have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and all the living things that crawl on the earth. (*New American Bible Revised Edition*, Gen. 1.26-28)

At first glance, the usage of the words “dominion” and “subdue” can certainly make it seem as if White’s claim is correct. But in context it is clear that this dominion over nature is more akin to a

responsibility to take care of it. Did nature have no worth until man was created? Why would God have called his creation of light, earth and sea, vegetation, the sun and moon, living creatures in the sea and sky, and animals on the earth “good” if they didn’t have worth without man? In his second encyclical, “Laudato Si’”, Pope Francis states, “If we understand that we are tasked by God to ‘till and keep’ the garden that is the Earth, then we have very strong motivation indeed to preserve and sustainably utilize the Earth’s resources” (Francis). Through this, we can see that nature is something good and it is to be cared for by humans.

At the end of his article, White praises Saint Francis in a way that neglects the fact that he was indeed Christian and refers to his ideas as heretical. He even suggests that Francis ought to be the “patron saint for ecologists” (White). My main question concerning this: why would someone deemed to be a heretic be canonized as a saint? If you know anything about Saint Francis, you know that he actively combatted heresy among his followers and even met with the pope to ensure that the way he and his group were living was theologically correct. He strove to remain faithful to the church in everything that he did, even and especially through any of the actions he took that could be seen as somewhat radical. This is just another instance of White’s ignorance of the facts and common sense in favor of his shoddily fabricated claim.

To conclude, Lynn White’s claim that Christianity is to blame for the ecological crisis is incorrect and poorly supported. As Pope Francis said, “If a mistaken understanding of our own principles has at times led us to justify mistreating nature...we believers should acknowledge that by so doing we were not faithful to the treasures of wisdom which we have been called to protect and preserve” (Francis). Christians believe that it is the responsibility of man to take care of the earth, and to place blame on them for the state of the environment is illogical.

Works Cited

The Bible. New American Bible Revised Edition, 2011.

Francis. "Laudato Si'." *The Holy See*, 24 May 2015,

https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html.

White, Lynn. "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis." *Science*, vol. 155, no. 3767, 1967, pp. 1203–07. <https://www.cmu.ca/faculty/gmatties/lynnwhiterootsofcrisis.pdf>.