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Religion and Violence against Nature

A car's bumper sticker reads, 'Are you an environmentalist or do you work for a living?' Well, I am an environmentalist and I do work for a living, but not in the way the bumper sticker suggests. I want to protect old growth forests but I rarely get sweaty while working in them. And if the bumper sticker makes me uneasy, writing this article also made me uneasy as I assessed the 'work' we do as scholars of religion and environmentalists. The stakes are high and demand our metaphorical and literal sweat.

The ongoing human war against non-human nature surpasses all other forms of violence in the early 21st century. An all too familiar litany of environmental woes includes: (1) Massive deforestation. Asia lost over a third of its tropical forests in the last several decades of the twentieth century and experts predict that in the next two decades the remaining tropical forests of Southeast Asia, South Asia, and Central America will disappear (Homer-Dixon 1999: 65–6). Much of my research takes place in El Salvador which has only one per cent of its original forests still standing. (2) Loss of biodiversity. We face a crisis of biodiversity; at current rates of extinction we will lose an additional 25 per cent of all plant and animal species within the next one hundred years. Thomas Homer-Dixon writes that 'Such a loss would rival four of the five previous mass extinctions on earth. From both a moral and practical view, it could be the single greatest calamity human beings inflict on the planet.' (Homer-Dixon 1999: 72.) (3) Global warming. The reduction in the ozone layer and the earth's warming threaten crops, forests, amphibians, phytoplankton, animal and human health. (4) Threats to water. Eighty per cent of China's major rivers are so polluted that they can no longer support fish. Nitrogen-based fertilizer runoff has created a dead zone in the Gulf of Mexico where no sea life exists. The United States has lost 50 per cent of its original wetlands, and in my state, California, the figure is 95 per cent. A golf course in Thailand uses the same amount of water as 60,000 rural villagers, telling us that within our species some of us wage the war against nature more vigorously than others.

Violence against nature is also the world's greatest killer of people. Eighty-five per cent of the developing world's deaths and diseases can be attributed to preventable water and airborne illnesses and the United

Nations predicts that by 2025, two-thirds of the world's population will not have potable drinking water.

Violence against the environment thus yields a harvest of death for humans. Ricardo Navarro writes from El Salvador that,

In many countries or regions in the south, the environmental destruction has reached such levels that what were once considered gifts from God, like air, water or food, are now the main sources of death. In El Salvador for example, the leading causes of death are infectious respiratory diseases, coming from air pollution and gastrointestinal diseases coming from water and food pollution. In other words, the most dangerous things that a human being can do in El Salvador are to breathe air, drink water, or eat food. (Navarro 2005: 1467.)

Most of us are well aware of the environmental crisis that I have briefly described here. Yet, scholars of religion or peace studies rarely consider environmental issues when theorizing about violence. A 'more encompassing, inclusive sense of violence and non-violence' (Peluso and Watts 2001: 29) recognizes that drinking, breathing and eating are dangerous activities for many of the world's peoples.

Why think about religion when we ponder environmental degradation? Religion provides a framework by which we can understand a group's relationship to non-human nature and to actions on behalf of the environment. Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim write that, 'While in the past none of the religions of the world have had to face an environmental crisis such as we are now confronting, they remain key instruments in shaping attitudes toward nature' (Tucker and Grim 2000: xvii). I realize that analyzing the beliefs and actions of religious actors is complicated terrain; religious traditions, identities, and institutions, are continually contested and re-shaped to fit historical, social, economic, and cultural conditions. However, as Bruce Lincoln has noted, although material means and will must first exist, there are styles of religious ideology that inhibit violence and others that encourage it.¹ As is the case with human-to-human violence, religious ideology may also either encourage or discourage assaults on the environment. Taking religious traditions and actors into account, deepens our understanding of the contemporary environmental crisis and environmental struggles and movements.

1 Comments made during presentation at the European Association for the Study of Religion conference at Turku, Finland, Thursday, August 18, 2005.

It is beyond the reach of this article to explore the incredibly diverse views concerning nature both among and within religious traditions. Instead, my slightly more modest (although still terribly immodest) goal will be to present Lynn White Jr's claim that Christianity is especially culpable for the modern environmental crisis; explore the role of Roman Catholicism in environmental movements and struggles in Latin America; briefly analyze the 'religion' of environmentalism in the United States; detail the violent backlash against environmental groups both in Latin America and the United States; and suggest where we need further study and action. I will be taking broad strokes rather than the close case-study approach that is usually my style.

In his now famous, or infamous 1967 essay, 'The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis', medieval historian Lynn White Jr initiated years of fierce debate among religion scholars and environmentalists when he claimed that the Judeo-Christian tradition, with its emphasis on 'the transcendence of God above nature and the dominion of humans over nature led to a devaluing of the natural world and a subsequent destruction of its resources for utilitarian ends' (White 1967: 1205). White writes, 'Especially in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen' (White 1967: 1205). Christians may now be 'greening' their religion, but White argued that for nearly two thousand years, the Christian tradition in its practice and theology justified the exploitation of nature. He concluded his essay by writing, 'Since the roots of our environmental trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious' (White 1967: 1207).

White's brief essay unleashed a flurry of debate that continues today; you would be hard pressed to find an article or presentation on Christianity and the environment that doesn't begin with a mention of his essay; in that sense I am quite predictable. I will engage White by looking at the role of Roman Catholicism in Latin America both to affirm and contest his thesis.

Roman Catholicism remains the dominant religion in Latin America. Although *campesinos* (peasant farmers) may practice a 'folk Catholicism' that is tied to nature, the institutional Roman Catholic Church in Latin America itself does not, as Anna Peterson writes, '...have a long tradition of explicit theological and moral reflection about the natural world' (Peterson 2005: 1048). Early Christian and medieval theologians such as Bonaventure, Francis of Assisi, and Hildegard of Bingen expressed appreciation of nature in their theologies and presumed that a harmonious order between humans and the natural world corresponded to God's design. Their views however, did not reflect dominant theologies at the time of the

encounter and conquest. The post-Reformation Catholicism that reached the Americas presumed that the domination of nature and other peoples by Christians reflected God's will. Extraction of resources, destruction of land, and colonizing of 'savages' thus posed few theological problems and these dominant Roman Catholic theologies and practices persisted in Latin America for nearly 500 years. The Roman Catholic Church tended to ally itself with local power elites, governments, and the wealthy for most of its history in Latin America.²

The emergence of liberation theology however, marked a sea change in the role of at least parts of the Roman Catholic Church in Latin America. Liberation theology grew in Latin America during the late 1960s as a response by activist priests and concerned laypeople to increased poverty, the failed promises of modernization, and the brutality of military dictatorships. It grew quickly over the next decades, spread from Latin America to other less affluent nations, and with the publication of *A Theology of Liberation* by Gustavo Gutierrez in 1971 was introduced to an even wider audience. Liberation theology did not address ecological concerns in its early years, focusing instead on the social, economic, and political dimensions of the oppression of the poor. Increasingly however, liberation theologians linked destruction of the earth and the oppression of the poor; the poor's liberation was seen as impossible without a defense of the environment. Liberation theologians now frequently promote ecological understanding as a paradigm for interpreting social realities.

The Latin American Bishops Conference (CELAM) meetings in Medellin, Colombia in 1968 and in Puebla, Mexico in 1979 underscored the 'preferential option for the poor' as being at the heart of Christian theology. They claimed that the poor and oppressed are hermeneutically privileged; thus all social analysis must begin with their experience. This hermeneutical privilege holds true for environmental issues as well as for theology. Just as the poor of the land are central to theological discourse, they must also be central to ecological discourse according to contemporary Latin American ecotheologians.

Liberation theologians emphasize social sin and structural injustice over individual wrongdoing. They claim that environmental exploitation stems from structural injustices that affect both the poor and the non-human world; ecological problems cannot be resolved until structures of

2 See the history of the Roman Catholic Church's relationship with Latin American governments in Bonino 1983.

exploitation and domination are transformed. Social sin is thus not just the poverty and exploitation of people, but also the contamination of their resources. Ricardo Navarro, director of the Centro Salvadoreño de Tecnología Apropiada (CESTA – the Salvadoran Center for Appropriate Technology) and a founding member of the Salvadoran Ecological Union, claims that polluting rivers through the excessive use of pesticides is a social sin equal to denying food to people through unjust economic and social structures; both cause death and are framed theologically as violent acts against the poor (Navarro 1990: 99).

The emphasis on structural injustice and economic, political, and social institutions led liberation theologians to propose social ecology as the philosophical movement within environmentalism that best expressed a liberation perspective. The United Nations first international conference on the environment held in Stockholm in 1972 had a great influence on theologians such as Carlos Herz and Eduardo Contreras of Peru and Eduardo Guaynas of Uruguay. Participants from less affluent countries called poverty an environmental problem; both social ecologists and liberation theologians agreed that no divide exists between social and environmental issues.

Sharp criticisms of more affluent countries emerged from an analysis based on social ecology and liberation theology, with relations between rich and poor countries characterized as neocolonial and exploitive. Tony Brun writes, 'As opposed to the North, where the environmental crisis is felt in a context of material well being, in the South it is closely related to poverty. In Latin America, the dramatic situation of its natural ecosystems is related to the profound social problems.' (Brun 1994: 82.) Liberation theologians uniformly denounce the neoliberal model of development and global capitalism for their 'anti-ecological character'.

Religious ecofeminism belongs to what Costa Rican theologian Elsa Tamez and Brazilian Ivone Gebara term the third stage of feminist theology in Latin America. Women theologians in the first phase (1970–80) according to Tamez and Gebara, tended to see themselves as liberation theologians and enthusiastically participated in the growing Christian base community movement. An explicitly feminist consciousness grew during the second phase (1980–90) and the current third phase (1990 onward) is marked by 'challenges to the patriarchal anthropology and cosmivision in liberation theology itself and by the construction of a Latin American ecofeminism' (Lorentzen 2005: 689). Most Latin American ecofeminists came from Christian base communities (and may still be very active within them) and were influenced by liberation theology. Many still consider

themselves liberation theologians, or more appropriately ecofeminist liberation theologians. Ivone Gebara is the most widely known spokesperson for ecofeminist theology from a Latin American perspective. Gebara gained international attention in 1995 when the Vatican, under the auspices of the Congregation of the Doctrine and Faith, silenced her for two years. Gebara had claimed that liberation theology needed to be tolerant of women's choice for abortion given the hardship of raising children in the context of desperate poverty. The Congregation instructed Gebara not to speak, teach, or write for two years and sent her to France for theological reeducation. She returned to Brazil in 1997 and again became active in writing ecofeminist theology and environmental activism.

Latin American ecofeminists contend that women and nature are linked ideologically and conceptually, but also that environmental destruction affects women differently from men.³ Women are more likely to provide family sustenance and thus depend on a healthy environment. They must provide clean water for their families; in the countryside they need trees for fuel, food, and fodder. They bear the brunt of childcare and care of the sick and elderly; thus polluted waters that give family members cholera or diarrhea (the largest cause of child death in poor countries) affect them directly.

Ecofeminist theologians share with liberation theology the idea of hermeneutic privilege. They contend however, that the poor women of Latin America are the oppressed within the oppressed. The methodology developed by Latin America's ecofeminist theologians puts women's corporality (sexuality, sex, body, etc.) at its center and explores the relationship between the daily life of women and systemic forms of oppression, thus connecting women's exploitation with environmental and economic exploitation.

Christian base communities became the ideal loci for the articulation and praxis of ecotheologies. Base communities addressed environmental issues such as air pollution, water contamination, inadequate sanitation services, soil erosion, mining, the use of chemical pesticides, logging, and other ecological issues that directly affected their communities' health and well-being. Christian base communities in Brazil's Amazon River basin have supported and organized rubber tappers and other poor landholders in struggles against ranchers. The Pastoral Land Commission of the Roman Catholic Church of Brazil was formed to work on environmental and other issues with landless peasants. Since its formation, it has worked

3 For my criticism of some of ecofeminism's claims, see Lorentzen 2003: 57–71.

to protect fishing habitat, to gain land for peasants, and to protect the Amazon jungle for rubber tappers and indigenous peoples. The Center for Appropriate Technology in El Salvador organizes eco-communities and promotes bicycle-powered flourmills and small-scale hydro-generators. The Conspirando collective of Chile is part of a network of active ecofeminist liberation theology movements through Latin America. Churches, base communities, and Catholic organizations participate with popular social and environmental movements throughout Latin America. Religious belief and practice are seen as inseparable from environmental struggle.

This brief look at the role of Roman Catholicism in Latin America both affirms and contests White's thesis. Roman Catholicism provided an ideological underpinning for a massive assault on the land and indigenous peoples for most of Latin America's history. Yet in the form of liberation theology it provided an ideological underpinning for some of the continent's most vigorous environmental movements. Lynn White and many environmentalists claim that bio- or ecocentric worldviews are the most pure, and thus more likely to encourage positive environmental actions. Environmental philosopher J. Baird Callicott's sweeping survey, for example, analyzed religious traditions around the world for their environmental friendliness (Callicott 1994). He did this by assessing whether a tradition's teachings corresponded to the land ethic articulated by Aldo Leopold, who wrote that 'A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise' (Leopold 1949: 224). Obviously biocentric religious worldviews are privileged in Callicott's assessment. Yet, Latin America's liberation theology has a decidedly anthropocentric approach based on the survival of the poor. It has also led to some of the most sustained environmental struggles of the last three decades.

Certainly religious beliefs that tend to be less anthropocentric animate contemporary indigenous environmental activism in Latin America. I've written about some of these movements elsewhere and will not address them in depth here. Let me briefly say that while recognizing the great diversity of beliefs and practices and the aftermath of colonization, most scholars still claim that indigenous worldviews encourage concern for nature and, by extension, practices that are not environmentally exploitative. Leslie E. Sponsel writes of the Amazon jungle, for example, 'indigenous environmental impact is usually negligible to moderate' (Sponsel 2005: 38) and Edward Cleary and Timothy Steigenga write that contemporary indigenous 'mobilization cannot be understood without a careful consideration of religious factors. While specific political openings and social

and economic processes facilitated the indigenous resurgence, religious institutions, beliefs and practices provided many of the resources, motivations, identities, and networks that nurtured the movement.' (Cleary and Steingenga 2004: 17.)

Increasingly, environmentalists from more affluent nations have joined Latin American indigenous land struggles to bring international attention to their efforts to protest deforestation, resist mining, and protect intellectual property. These alliances have often proven successful. The danger exists, however, that non-native outsiders, with a superficial understanding of indigenous religions and lifeways, may objectify native religions and indigenous peoples in their search for the 'pure' environmentalist. John Grim writes that, 'This romantic exploitation of indigenous religions typically accentuates a perceived native ecological wisdom as having been genetically transmitted' (Grim 2001: xxxvi).

I'd like to further engage White by moving north for a while. Years ago I roamed California's High Sierra mountain range with my friends, all of us wilderness guides and ecologically-oriented Christians. 'Minimum impact' was our motto. We aimed to live lightly on the land and the environmentalist John Muir, rather than the apostle Paul, was the writer of our sacred texts. Conjuring up images of well-fed churchgoers with a Bible in one hand and a chainsaw in the other, the mainstream Christianity from which we all came, was no friend to the wilderness we cared about passionately. Sadly we agreed with White that Christianity promoted a theology of domination over nature, which contributed to ecological crises.

Current theological and environmental statements from mainstream Christian denominations no longer resemble those I viewed as a young wilderness guide however; even theologically conservative churches now promote environmental theologies. As Sigurd Bergmann writes,

Since the 1970s, churches and theologians in Europe have addressed the ecological challenge in three ways. First, the environmental crisis has been regarded simply as a reason to reformulate conventional doctrines of faith. Second, elements from ecological science have eclectically mixed with selected elements from Christian tradition. A third way has sought for critical-constructive mediations of ecological insights and interpretations of God. In the latter, theology works as a part of a larger ecological discourse and asks for specific Christian reconstructions ... The understanding of God itself is challenged by the suffering of nature caused by men and women who are supposed to be images of God the Creator. (Bergmann 2005: 381.)

The good news is that Christian attitudes and theologies have changed significantly. However, this relatively new environmental consciousness comes at a time when environmental destruction occurs at an unprecedented rate. First World consumption, especially that of the United States, continues to increase. In a culture based on excessive consumption, even those who attempt to live lives of simplicity have a much greater environmental impact than a rural villager in India or Africa; for the average US citizen it is more likely to be 15 times the impact. Unfortunately no data suggest that Christians in the United States consume less, have fewer kids, or are more likely to be environmental activists than are non-Christians, in spite of greener theologies.

In fact, much discourse about the environment by well-intended nature-loving people in the US masks the way in which the non-human world is commodified and consumed. Although pro-environment attitudes have increased over the past few decades (all my students think they are environmentalists and polls in the United States regularly show people expressing positive environmental attitudes), too little of this support for an abstract environmentalism has translated into effective action in changing the way people live and how the economy is organized. The vitality of western capitalism has been based in part on the massive externalization of ecological costs of production. This context, in which ecological costs are exported, allows those of us in affluent countries to mask our own commodification of nature even as we celebrate 'spiritual' connections to nature.

Let me look at one concrete example of how nature is commodified while celebrated. In the United States there is a chain of stores called the Nature Company. Jennifer Price in her excellent article, 'Looking for Nature at the Mall: a Field Guide to the Nature Company' writes

... and if the Nature Company sells over 12,000 products, it is hawking a small handful of large ideas. What does nature mean? Why do so many people ask for Enya in a nature store? The meanings that Americans have traditionally invested in "nature" are keystones of modern middle class culture. The Nature Company is a market bazaar for the meanings of nature. Here you can buy pocket Waldens and John Muir field hats to enjoy nature as wilderness. Here nature is also a destination for "adventure." What meanings of nature does it market and whose nature is on sale here? (Price 1995: 190.)

In a Nature Company store you find fountains, the sound of running water, mood tapes of sunrises and clouds, in short, products for stress relief. Nature, in the 1980s and 1990s United States, became a therapeutic resource, a place for stress relief, and emotional and spiritual healing. As Price notes, the stated mission of a Nature Company store is to connect us to nature, seemingly a good thing. Consumers can buy CDs like the Glacier Bay CD for relaxation and to generate amorphous spiritual feelings. But Price (1995: 195) wonders, 'Why does the Alaska CD sound so much like the Costa Rican cloud forest CD. If I were fishing in a boat in the bay, would coastal Alaska be relaxing? Don't they have a lot of mosquitoes up there? And is the whole natural world really full of flute music?' Quite frankly; when I sweat my way up a mountain pass, I'm not humming Enya.

In short, the marketing is about responding to quasi-religious middle class meanings of nature. We approach the natural world as consumers but can put anti-consumer fears to rest. The products sustain 'middle class ideas of nature that soften the harsh materialism and artificiality of modern capitalist society while they also sustain, through the creation of artifice, the capitalist over consumption of resources' (Price 1995: 201). This is brilliant. I, in the United States, can simultaneously enjoy the material benefits of an expanding economy and the aesthetic and quasi-spiritual benefits of unspoiled nature as I drive my car to backpack in a pristine wilderness, while listening to my rainforest CD and feel virtuous in doing so, because, after all, I am an environmentalist.

If the religious attitudes expressed by Christians or nature-loving consumers rarely lead to concrete environmental action, what of more 'radical environmentalists'? The philosophical movement called deep ecology agrees with Lynn White Jr and Aldo Leopold that moral consideration should be extended to the entire biotic community. The anthropocentric/biocentric distinction is accepted as axiomatic by deep ecologists and it structures their discourse. The start of deep ecology is usually traced to a 1972 lecture by the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess at a Third World Futures conference and it has made its presence felt in a number of ways from the academic to popular environmental groups such as Earth First!. The philosopher George Santayana, the Stoics, Spinoza, St Francis of Assisi, the conservationist Aldo Leopold, Taoism, Buddhism, Native American traditions, and the science of ecology, are all credited with providing philosophical insights as well as inspiration for deep ecology. The moral imperative of deep ecology is that other species of plants and animals have an intrinsic right to exist, a biocentric egalitarianism. Particular goals include

the preservation of unspoiled areas, the restoration of degraded areas to their original conditions, and the reduction in human populations to allow species equal opportunities to flourish.

The radical environmentalist movement Earth First!'s underlying philosophy is deep ecology. Environmental lobbyists in the United States who believed that an environmental catastrophe could not be averted by a slow, systemic, reformist approach founded Earth First! in 1980. According to Earth First! society is creating an ecological catastrophe. They also contend that corporate power rules the United States, and democratic processes are flawed. Bron Taylor argues that this pillar is essential to Earth First! radicalism. If one says democratic procedures either never existed or have broken down, or that they camouflage domination, then illegal tactics become morally justifiable when coupled with a biocentric view and an apocalyptic eschatology of environmental collapse. (Taylor 1991: 258–66.) Thus, Earth First!'ers may engage in ecodefense such as blockading logging roads or perching in trees to protect them. Some, although increasingly fewer, engage in ecotage, which is seen as economic warfare in order to make wilderness destruction unprofitable. In the case of Earth First! then, strongly held quasi-religious biocentric beliefs lead to concrete actions on behalf of an earth seen as under continual assault.

The response of the state to environmental resistance is almost universally rapid and severe. In the United States, groups like Earth First! and others are considered dangers to national security; even groups that have never engaged in civil disobedience risk being branded 'ecoterrorists'. The FBI has requested that I and other scholars who study environmental movements offer them seminars on ecoterrorism. It also has an environmental crimes task force and has mounted elaborate sting operations. When the late Earth First! activist Judi Bari was the victim of a car bomb in 1990, the FBI accused her of planting the bomb herself. In Latin America, the Pastoral Land Commission of Brazil claims that nearly 2,000 rural workers have been killed in the last three decades of struggle. In short, the state often vigorously asserts its right to use violence against those most committed to protesting environmental degradation. Activists in ecological resistance movements, including those stemming from religious commitment increasingly face reactionary violence.

Let's return to White. Is Christianity the biggest culprit? Under particular material and historical conditions it has served as a religious ideology that has encouraged violence against nature. It has also, in the case of liberation theology, discouraged environmental assaults. Is biocentrism preferable as a religious stance to anthropocentrism? Human survival re-

mains central for many environmental resistance movements, although one might also make the case that more robust environmental resistance arises from biocentric groups like Earth First! in the North American context and indigenous movements in Latin America.

What can scholars of religion contribute? First we can study the link between environmental attitudes and action. A sustainable lifestyle may simply be due to lack of access to destructive technologies, rather than to particular religious beliefs. If scholars look primarily to religious beliefs to explain indigenous relations with the natural world, for example, we overlook a complex history from which indigenous peoples have been excluded from development due to racist policies rather than indigenous choice. Furthermore, localized religious practices don't necessarily provide resources to deal with environmental issues such as global warming that reach beyond a particular sacred grove, mountain, or river. And, the poor everywhere are forced into anti-ecological practices in order to survive even when their religious practices evidence a reverence for nature. Rigorous case studies should be conducted to study the connection between religious teachings and practice and concrete environmental action. These case studies could include comparisons of anthropocentric and bio- or ecocentric worldviews.

Scholars of religion can also speak in the public realm and challenge implicit theologies of domination. The media now direct public attention to terrorism as violence. Scholars of religion can point to the ordinary, unexamined, banal, day-to-day violence against the natural world. We can offer a public service by both problematizing and simplifying. We can problematize by challenging the overly simplistic constructions, rhetoric and policies concerning the environment in the United States. We can also simplify in the way indicated by linguist George Lakoff (2004) as a political strategy. Are there simple rhetorical constructions we can offer in the public realm to assist with the reframing of environmental issues?

As a scholar of religion and an environmentalist, I may indeed have to 'work for a living'.

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