Essays

AFTER LYNN WHITE: RELIGIOUS ETHICS AND ENVIRONMENTAL PROBLEMS

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ABSTRACT

The fields of environmental ethics and of religion and ecology have been shaped by Lynn White Jr.'s thesis that the roots of ecological crisis lie in religious cosmology. Independent critical movements in both fields, however, now question this methodological legacy and argue for alternative ways of inquiry. For religious ethics, the twin controversies cast doubt on prevailing ways of connecting environmental problems to religious deliberations because the criticisms raise questions about what counts as an environmental problem, how religious traditions change, and whether ethicists should approach problems and traditions with reformist commitments. This article examines the critiques of White's legacy and presents a pluralist alternative that focuses religious ethics on the contextual strategies produced by moral communities as they confront environmental problems.

KEY WORDS: *religion and ecology*, *environmental ethics*, *Lynn White*, *eco-theology*, *pragmatism*

FIVE PAGES PUBLISHED in the journal *Science* in 1967 have remarkably shaped the way that religious ethics understands environmental problems. In them, historian Lynn White Jr. argued that "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis" lie in religious cosmology—specifically in Western Christianity's anthropocentrism and instrumentalist view of nature (1967). It has proven a generative thesis: while White's indictment of the Western worldview attracted controversy, his way of connecting the moral implications of religious cosmology to environmental problems helped to develop the academic fields of environmental ethics and of religion and ecology.

Christian environmental theologies have been especially shaped by White's thesis because they have needed to fashion some response to the elegant power of his complaint. "Christianity bears a huge burden of guilt," proposed White, because the destructive alliance of science, technology, and democracy that now threatens the earth was developed through the worldview of "the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen" (1967, 1205–6). Western Christianity's cosmology taught Europeans to view themselves as separate from

nature, which they could dominate with indifference in pursuit of their salvific destiny. The environmental task was therefore clear: recover an ecological worldview centered on nature's value rather than human transcendence.

White's thesis acquired its hegemonic legacy not because it was so generally accepted, of course, but because it was so generally debated. Faced with such a stark indictment, theological responses might accept White's critique and propose reconstructive cosmologies, or refute it by claiming that, properly considered, the Christian worldview is not so anthropocentric (or that its anthropocentrism need not lead to exploitation). In other words, these responses might reaffirm, reconstruct, retrieve, or revise the Christian worldview. Yet with all of the focus on whether and which values make for an ecological worldview, White's field-shaping assumption about the relation between cosmology and environmental problems has usually remained unexamined.

Forty years later, however, White's legacy is contested by critical reflection within two fields. Within environmental ethics, arguments from pragmatists, urbanists, and agrarians attempt to move the field away from focusing on anthropocentrism and nature's value in order to shift discussion toward the political possibilities of civic experience. Within religion and ecology, critics point to the pluralism of environment-related religious experience, thereby calling their field to move beyond its reformist focus on worldviews. While independent of each other, both critical movements question the connection between cosmology and environmental problems that White's legacy helped to establish.

For religious ethics, these criticisms pose basic methodological queries for its own understanding of environmental problems. Basic questions emerge from controversy in both fields. Critics of religion and ecology interrogate how its scholars select, describe, and evaluate religious phenomena. Critics of environmental ethics wonder what counts as an environmental problem as well as about what an ethical theory must accomplish. Criticisms of both fields question White's methodological legacy by reexamining the notions of cultural change that inform work on moral values and environmental problems. They do so in part because they respond to two cultural developments barely imaginable in 1967: (1) the development of a pluralist array of environmental strategies in ethics, politics, and economics, and (2) the emergence of religious environmentalisms in manifold forms.[1]

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[1] I cannot address here a third major development since 1967: the science of ecology has also undergone self-critical changes, including some reaction against appropriations of ecology in the humanities and environmentalist culture. A line of critique against White's legacy developed from changes in ecology can be found in the editors' introduction and conclusion of Lodge and Hamlin 2006.

Recognizing diverse communities producing multiple kinds of responses to various problems, how should scholars interpret and evaluate them?

In order to show how this question matters for the way religious ethics engages environmental problems, I will first explain recent criticism of the cosmological approach in religion and ecology and compare it to the pragmatist intervention in environmental ethics. Following leads from both criticisms (but without fully accepting either), I will then argue for focusing ethical attention on the strategies produced by moral communities as they confront environmental problems. In contrast to a cosmological conception of religious engagement with ecological crisis, this pluralist approach recognizes the contextual production of multiple confrontations with environmental problems. Describing that pluralism uncovers surprising strategic similarities, and I will show how this approach reveals alliances among projects and texts not usually treated in proximity. Yet, in the end, my argument vindicates certain aspects of the cosmological approach since it recognizes how practical strategies draw on worldviews as a resource for inventing new capacities from their moral traditions.

In this article, I will focus particularly on the relationship between Christian ethics and environmental problems because the Christian case stands especially vulnerable to concerns about White's methodological legacy. Since it is the main object of his critique, Christian environmental ethics has been strongly determined by response to White, and thus will illustrate the general challenges to religious ethics presented by subsequent criticisms of White's legacy.

1. The Methods of Religion and Ecology

Before White comes to his analysis of Christian axioms, he introduces the hypothesis that "what people do about their ecology depends on what they think about themselves in relation to the things around them" (1967, 1205). Since people learn how to think about things from religion, White says, we should look to the religious worldview accompanying modern technological society, which means the prevailing cosmology learned from medieval Western Christianity. Now threatened by ecological crisis, it is time to "rethink our axioms" (1204). If the deep roots of the crisis lie in cosmological values, then so does the remedy.

In the forty years since the initial publication of White's essay, Christian ecotheologies have robustly responded. Nearly every book on the relation of Christianity to its environment refers to White's thesis,

and most introduce their argument as a definite response to it.[2] Surveys often organize the literature along some continuum of worldview values, doing typology by cosmology. So even when his indictment of Christianity is refuted, White's basic way of framing environmental problems often sets the stage for theological scholarship. As Elspeth Whitney observes:

> Paradoxically, although many ecotheologians argued vociferously against White, they could use his thesis to reinforce the view that environmentalism was at bottom a religious and ethical movement. Like White, they believed that religious values were the most effective antidote [2005, 1736].

In other words, while White's thesis attracted many theological rejoinders, the debate tended to accept his assumption about the cosmological roots of environmental problems and the need to promote cultural change.

White's thesis has provided similar orientation for the proliferating energies in the broader field of religion and ecology. For if religions shape the worldviews we live by, and our ways of living are in crisis, then academics of every specialty and adherents of every religion can recognize a common arena of inquiry with shared terms of reference. Trained by Thomas Berry to recognize a strong role for religious cosmology in cultural change, Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim have constructively harnessed the connection between worldviews and ecological crisis to summon wide interfaith, interdisciplinary scholarly work.[3] As organizers of the Forum on Religion and Ecology and editors of the book series *Religions of the World and Ecology*, they have guided hundreds of participants into forging an intelligible field project from the midst of many incommensurable views of religion.[4] "Recognizing that religions are key shapers of people's worldviews," says Tucker, "this broad research project has identified both ideas and practices supporting a sustainable environmental future" (2003, 21). The field thus supports the development of religions "contributing to the

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[2] This includes my own book (Jenkins 2008). This article reconsiders some of its implicit assumptions about how theological argument matters for religious and cultural change, thanks in part to critical questions from Ludger Viefuhs-Bailey at a forum of the Yale Initiative in Religion and Politics.

[3] On cosmology as formal research object, see Tucker and Grim 2001.

[4] See the Forum on Religion and Ecology Web site (http://www.religionandecology. org). In their foreword to the book series, Tucker and Grim offer pairings of quotes from White and Berry as they frame their invitation and objectives (Tucker and Grim 2000, xvi–xvii, xxiv–xxv). For Berry's sense of the relation between cosmology and cultural change, see Berry 1990, xi–xv and 24–69.

emergence of a broader cosmological orientation and environmental ethics based on diverse sensibilities of the sacred dimensions of the more-than-human world" (23).

Until recently, there has been little incentive for religious ethicists to question that research project because its cosmological orientation seems very good for us. If religious worldviews matter for cultural history, then religious ethics matters for determining the future. The cosmological connection locates religion at the crux of a social crisis, and therefore it makes religious scholars indispensable for guiding sustainable social reform. Meanwhile, the controversy provoked by White keeps religious analysis at the center of cultural reflection. For if Christian axioms lie at the root of catastrophic cultural practices, then they must be vindicated, reformed, or replaced with better ones. The subsequent uproar has debated axial options: maybe a radically Christian crisis requires Christian therapy, or maybe it points to the need for new religious roots, perhaps cultivated from non-Western cosmologies.

Tucker and Grim adroitly direct the controversy after White into an inclusive, post-industrial cultural reform project:

> While the details of his argument have been vehemently debated, it is increasingly clear that the environmental crisis and its perpetuation due to industrialization, secularization, and ethical indifference present a serious challenge to the world's religions. . . . Thus how to adapt religious teaching to this task of revaluing nature so as to prevent its destruction marks a significant new phase in religious thought . . . [which requires] examining worldviews and ethics among the world's religions that differ from those that have captured the imagination of contemporary industrialized societies [2000, xxv].

So the White thesis appears to have been a boon to religious ethics, simultaneously making religion necessary for understanding a complex social crisis and supplying comparative terms of reference for the work of responding. Within religion and ecology, White's legacy has helped foster and focus a fertile exchange of interfaith work, yielding new patterns of pluralist engagement and academic attention to social practices.

Recently, however, some religion scholars have begun to question the range of that pluralism and, behind it, the influence of White's preliminary notion that religious cosmology produces environmental behavior. Bron Taylor, editor of the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature* and of the *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature, and Culture*, has gathered and voiced much of this criticism. He attests that the *Encyclopedia* project was in fact conceived in order "to remedy lacunae in the inherited 'religion and ecology' field" (2005a, 1375). Taylor seems to have two main complaints, both derived from White's

legacy: he thinks that the field constrains attention to the worldviews of global religions and that the constraint operates from an activist agenda.

The first complaint calls into question White's premise that religious values are moving forces of cultural history. Must the religious ethicist adopt the idealist conception of social behavior assumed in a cosmological approach?[5] Whitney offers historical reasons for pause by asking, "Had White shown that religion was a cause of technological development, or simply that the technological development that was taking place for economic and political reasons was framed in Christian terms?" (2005, 1736).[6] If the latter, it would change the environmental task for religious ethics from assessing worldviews to honing critical engagement with economics and politics. The ethicist might entertain the converse to White's thesis: why not hold that cosmology ("what they think about themselves in relation to the things around them") is produced by social practice ("what people do about their ecology")? If that were the case, it would shift the ethical task away from transforming cosmology and toward transforming social practices.[7]

Or maybe the relations of religion, ecology, and society run more reflexively. Taylor makes a point of including anthropological, sociological, and materialist explanations of religious behavior (2005b, xv). His methodological inclusiveness seems motivated by a phenomenological worry that prevailing methods have "left much nature-related religiosity out of sight" (2005a, 1375–76). The cosmological approach of religion and ecology, he thinks, leads to the omissions of relevant religious phenomena by focusing on the mainstream of global traditions to the exclusion of marginal, hybridizing, and novel religious expressions. However, according to Taylor, that is precisely where the most innovative religious productions happen and to overlook them is "not good religious studies": "critical religious studies recognizes the critical role that hybridity and boundary transgression play in the history of religion" (2005a, 1375–76).[8]

This seems unfair to Tucker and Grim since the Harvard series hardly cleaves to the mainstream of traditions, includes a volume on

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[5] Mark Stoll attempts to defeat White's appeal to ecology by carrying the idealist premise a step further, arguing that protestant ideas helped invent ecology (2006).

[6] Lewis Moncrief raised similar questions shortly after White's publication (Moncrief 1970). See also Whitney 2006 and Harrison 1999.

[7] Anna Peterson 2007, noting the cultural ineffectiveness of focusing on better ideas, argues for this kind of reversal of White's position.

[8] Explaining the need for a new journal in the field, Taylor writes that "the 'worldviews' approach has typically paid insufficient attention to the important roles religion play in public spheres and how systems of meaning and religious identities are 'enacted' . . . [thus] occluding from vision phenomena that might well be relevant" (2007, 9).

indigenous perspectives, and entertains a number of essays with boundary-transgressive proposals.[9] Nonetheless, however overdrawn, Taylor's claim does suggest alternative ways of connecting the religious and the ecological, offering possibilities for a deeper pluralism. Taylor's second complaint helps situate this suggestion within a broader concern over the field's relation to cultural reform. Taylor thinks that the limited scope of work in religion and ecology has to do with its reformist commitments. Indeed, he says its leaders have been "apocalyptic in concern" and have thus organized scholarly work to serve a "global, green-religious transformation" (2005c, 1377). The involvement of scholarship with environmental activism raises questions about whether a normative modality jeopardizes its integrity of interpretation or at least constrains its scope. Taylor sees a fundamental division in the field between those operating in a "confessional/ethical" mode and those doing "historical/social" scholarship, and he clearly favors the neutral pluralism that he associates with the latter (2005a, 1376).[10]

Both complaints have to do with White's legacy. Taylor seems right to argue that religion and ecology has been a problem-driven research program; White made the connection between the two terms by referring to a massive social crisis whose recognition has helped to sustain the field's inquiry. The research questions that Tucker and Grim pose to the field's scholars also refer to a shared sense of environmental crisis. Insofar as the field focuses on the mainstream of global traditions, then, it is because they generally follow White in perceiving a cultural crisis with roots in major worldviews.

For religious environmental ethics, Taylor's criticism calls for methodological reflection. Has White's cosmological way of framing environmental crisis hindered alternative methods of inquiry or suppressed constructive responses? Have the terms of the comparative exercise—nonanthropocentrism and nature's value within worldviews—become regulative criteria for interpreting and constructing arguments within traditions? Christian ethics in particular must examine whether it tends to overlook important phenomena by focusing on assessing and revising cosmology. Is it adequately describing nature-related Christian religiosity, attending to innovative practices, and interpreting the fertile grounds of lived experience? Or does a preoccupation with worldviews cause it to miss sites of creative theological production?

The criticisms of religion and ecology, in other words, force any religious environmental ethic to take responsibility for its methods of

[9] In a suspect mix of the methodological and the personal, these comments appear in an excursus within one of Taylor's own entries for the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, itself already critical of Tucker and Grim (2005a, 1375–76).

[10] Sarah McFarland Taylor notes that an analogous debate has taken place in feminist studies (S. M. Taylor 2007b).

argument. Addressing religious ethics to environmental problems inevitably involves a view of the relation of religious ideas to social behavior, and of theological production to environmental problems. Christian environmental ethics (my own book included) has largely evaded those methodological questions, even as it has been definitively shaped by one particular answer to them, because for forty years it has been pursuing an urgent task of cultural reform. Taylor's complaint about the confessional/ethical approach ends the evasion by questioning that reformist task. Is scholarly inquiry determined by uninterrogated environmentalist commitments? What justifies the ethicist's notion of environmental problems, and how do commitments to social change shape her arguments?

Now certainly one could reply, in less or more apocalyptic tones, that environmental issues perspicuously pose real threats for which any minimally adequate ethic must have some reply. But how does Christian ethics frame those threats as moral problems? What do those catalogs of ecological distress, standard as book introductions, indicate for the task of a theological ethic? What kinds of problems do they select and why? Of particular importance for considering methodology after White is the question of whether ethics faces a singular ecologic crisis generated from some root corruption or multiple environment-related social problems.

These questions press toward a second kind of methodological inquiry: what must an environmental ethic accomplish? White's thesis presented a clear normative program; now, in the midst of doubts about the sufficiency of that program, Christian ethics must face this methodological question anew before developing a theological response. The task for Christian ethics illustrates a challenge to religious ethics generally: to settle the troubles with White's legacy, religious ethics must defend or elaborate its understanding of environmental problems. To do so it might look for help from environmental ethics, but White's legacy creates troubles in that field as well.

2. Pragmatism in Environmental Ethics

Lynn White wrote before there was a field of environmental ethics, and his article's conception of environmental crisis helped to shape early inquiry in the field. Since then, not only has the field grown, establishing its own guild and journals, but it has also developed competing ethical strategies for framing environmental problems (see Jenkins 2008, chap. 2). The religious ethicist looking to environmental ethics to help resolve methodological decisions in religion and ecology therefore meets a field with its own debate over methods and objectives. Moreover, the debate involves its own reconsiderations of White's

legacy. That complicates the task for religious ethics. Rather than receiving well-framed problems for religious consideration, it must instead review contests over what counts as an adequate environmental ethic and decide by its own lights how to define the problems to which it responds.

Christian environmental ethics rarely tarries over this initial decision, perhaps because it often fails to recognize White's legacy in defining its notion of the environmental task. The introductory catalogs of ecological distress appear to adumbrate a shared sense of crisis. However, in the specific issues they list they implicitly do more: they signal the set of issues that the ethicist considers representative of crisis and thus the kinds of problems that an ethic must adequately address. Biodiversity loss may appear in most lists, but what about sustainable city planning or public health? Could poverty count as an environmental issue? Those lists therefore stake a position (however unwitting) in the secular field's methodological debates over what counts as an environmental problem.

One of the first points in that debate considers whether the field forms around a single crisis, allowing for a monist project of values, or around a set of particular problems, requiring pluralist and contextual engagements. In the first two decades after White, discussions in environmental ethics largely followed White's intuition of a single crisis by considering proposals for ethical nonanthropocentrism and nature's intrinsic value. A paperback edition of Aldo Leopold's *Sand County Almanac* was published in 1968, and White's thesis seemed a pithy moral summary: we might become ethical citizens and members of the land community by revoking the anthropocentric privilege learned from the Abrahamic religions and recognizing nature's intrinsic value (Leopold 1949). In 1973—the same year that Arne Naess coined the phrase "deep ecology"—Richard Routley asked, "Is There a Need for a New, an Environmental Ethic?" (Naess 1973; Routley 1973). Routley answered affirmatively, calling for a critique of human chauvinism alongside proposals for nature's intrinsic value. Holmes Rolston and a host of others responded to the call, and while there was controversy about how to get there and what it included, by 1984 J. Baird Callicott could explain to the American Philosophical Association that the cohesive intellectual project of environmental ethics was "the development of non-anthropocentric value theory" (Callicott 1984, 299).

Since then, a wave of criticism has swept the field. Already in 1988, Christopher Stone surveyed an initial generation of discussion in environmental ethics and doubted that the range of social practices and relevant theories it included was contained by the single project of nonanthropocentric value theory. In his view, theorists only supposed

they had a common project in order to avoid facing some difficult initial decisions about the criteria for a successful ethic. In particular, Stone argued that the initial choice between anthropocentrism and nonanthropocentrism seemed inadequate to the complexity of environmental problems (1988).

Stone's article voiced some of the first grumblings from urban planners, community organizers, restorationists, and agrarians who worry that starting from metaethics distracts the field from many of the issues that matter most to civic discussion—issues like land conservation, environmental health, and sustainable cities. They share a pragmatist complaint that the range of environment-related problems exceeds the capacity of the project for nonanthropocentric value theory. By beginning from metaethical values, the pragmatist coalition claims, environmental ethics systemically excludes significant problems, thereby impoverishing its relevance to public debates and alienating itself from civic reform practices. Because the field has focused on cosmological theories, they say, it has inadequately engaged agriculture, sustainable design, restoration, urban environmental management, and a host of problems that constitute a hybrid of ecological, cultural, and political values.

The pragmatists' misgivings represent more than a contest between monist and pluralist understandings of environmental problems, and more than practitioners' suspicion of theory. The pragmatists worry that by beginning from metaethics the field overlooks the social practices through which moral values are renegotiated. A monist metaethical agenda, they think, has led the field to overemphasize the unity and novelty of the environmental ethics project, thereby severing it from a longer history of environment-concerned civic philosophy.[11]

Ben Minteer's recent book, *The Landscape of Reform,* consequently attempts to reopen the field of environmental ethics by restoring memory of conservation philosophy, agrarian reform, and urban planning in the early twentieth century. Courses in environmental ethics sometimes begin by pitting John Muir against Gifford Pinchot as historical proxy for the debate between nonanthropocentric value theory and anthropocentric utilitarianism, then turning to Aldo Leopold to vindicate the former as the project of environmental ethics. This not only oversimplifies history, claims Minteer, it closes down the options for ethics. As a therapeutic response, Minteer reclaims Liberty Hyde Bailey (agrarian conservationist), Lewis Mumford (regional planner), and Benton MacKaye (forester and planner of the Appalachian Trail), interpreting them as civic pragmatists engaged

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[11] For representative pragmatist anthologies, see Light and Katz 1995; Light and de-Shalit 2003.

with shaping healthy relationships of land and people. Their various theories do not fall into positions for or against nature's value, but instead accept "the interpenetrating character of intrinsic and instrumental values in experience." They are neither ecocentric nor anthropocentric, but share a landscape-based sensibility that "incorporates critical elements of both sensibilities in a more holistic, balanced, and practical vision of human environmental experience" (Minteer 2006, 4).

Minteer and the pragmatists claim that environmental ethics has been captured by a methodology that both overlooks the complexity of environmental problems and neglects the social practices and historical resources that matter most to civic debates.[12] Taylor's criticisms outline an analogous complaint within religion and ecology. Attempts toward a Christian environmental ethic therefore encounter methodological trouble on both sides. Should the ethicist question White's legacy for religious studies and turn to the secular field for reorientation, she discovers there a field with its own fracture—and one caused by similar forces.

When Minteer explains the curious lack of attention to agriculture by environmental ethicists he blames habits learned from White's essay (Minteer 2006, 158–59, 190). After White, he says, environmental thought became aloof from civic debate and geographical practice. In a separate article, Minteer joins Robert Manning to survey a series of ways in which White's legacy has distorted the field (Minteer and Manning 2005). Bryan Norton, another environmental pragmatist, opens a recent book this way:

> In my view, the discipline of environmental philosophy was in fact misshaped by a confluence of small accidents, beginning in 1967 with the provocative comment by the historian Lynn White Jr., that our environmental crisis results from the "anthropocentric" nature of Christianity. . . . Then, when professional philosophers began asking, in the early 1970s, what philosophers could contribute to environmental thought and action they . . . interpreted White as having associated Christianity with a particular substantive *theory* about moral value. . . . As a result, most philosophical discussion of environmental issues has centered on the question of whether natural objects other than humans have intrinsic or inherent value [2003, 9].

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[12] One might suppose those resources include religious practices and resources, but the pragmatists tend to stay away from faith communities, perhaps because of another of White's legacies in the field of environmental ethics—namely, the suspicion he generated toward any Abrahamic resource. On the consequent lack of engagement with Jewish and Christian teachings in environmental education, see Hitzhusen 2007.

Norton goes on to represent Leopold as in fact an adaptive land manager developing an ecologically informed model of social decision making. Norton, Manning, and Minteer think that White's legacy led environmental ethics to form its task around value theory to the omission of the social practices and personal experiences that generate civic commitments. Even some of the pragmatists' detractors agree on White's legacy here; Baird Callicott defends his view of the metaethical task of environmental ethics by insisting on the ecocentric view of Leopold and appealing to White's article as "the seminal paper in environmental ethics" (Callicott 1999, 40–41). According to Callicott, "the agenda for environmental ethics thus was set."

There are reasons to hesitate in accepting the summons of the environmental pragmatists, but their criticisms demonstrate that the field currently hosts an argument over how to connect ethics and environmental problems. That means the religious ethicist cannot merely supply religious resources to a shared project and then convince religious constituencies to adopt its results. A religious ethic contributes to arguments over the goals and methods of environmental ethics in the way that it adopts strategies from the secular field.[13]

So when a Christian ethicist avers that "the task of ecotheology is to theologize Aldo Leopold," he not only assumes White's cosmological view of the environmental task, but also adopts a reading of Leopold that White's legacy helped to create (Cowdin 2000, 261).[14] He therefore takes the objective of Christian environmental ethics from the reflexive legacy of White's thesis in two fields. But now, by uncovering White's legacy and interrogating its connection between cosmology and crisis, critics from both fields question that objective. Their alternative proposals at least force the religious ethicist to justify his understanding of the practical task.

The pragmatists put forward several further claims as well: they ask ethicists to attend to concrete social problems, to develop conceptual resources capable of making problems relevant to a specific community's moral experience, and to begin reflection from within the practices that mediate cultural change. The moral for Christian ethics is to focus less on the ecological quality of worldviews and more on the possibilities within Christian experience for participatory adaptations to contextual problems. Their proposal seems to align with Taylor's call for religionists to better attend to popular experience and creative expressions.

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[13] See chapter 2 of Jenkins 2008 for reasons to worry about environmental pragmatism, and chapters 3–5 for a description of the various ways in which Christian ethics appropriates secular strategies.

[14] Compare this to Larry Rasmussen's theologically nuanced appropriation of Leopold (1996, 344–48).

However, an important dissimilarity qualifies the respective critical movements. Taylor blames the limited scope of religion and ecology on its normative agenda, while the pragmatists think that their field's inadequacy stems from not being normative enough. Taylor thinks that a "confessional/ethical" responsiveness to environmental problems keeps scholars from making sense of lived experience. The pragmatists argue that ethics can better make sense of practical civic experience precisely by letting the problems more fully determine the field's tasks. The more ethical, say the pragmatists, the more pluralist and the closer to lived experience.

That dissimilarity among analogous critiques of White's legacy suggests a hypothesis for religious ethics: an ethic might admit more plurality and better attend to the adaptive innovations of lived experience (Taylor's admonition) precisely by letting problems determine its normative agenda (the pragmatist counsel). Listening to both criticisms, a Christian environmental ethic might generate more effective theological responses by working from the various ways that faith communities already address environmental problems. The ethical mode of religion and ecology, it turns out, may correspond to the way problems drive new religious productions.[15]

Instead of deciding for a definite conception of environmental ethics, therefore, religious ethics might let the contest shape an initial inquiry by asking how various religious strategies frame and address environmental problems. Ethics can entertain that methodological hypothesis because of another cultural change since 1967: the rise of religious environmentalisms.

3. Interpreting Religious Environmentalisms

Lynn White wrote in the first flush of a cultural environmentalism that had little visible support from religious traditions. Indeed, his thesis seemed to provoke some hostility. With a few exceptions, the first generation of environmental ethics could assume general antipathy from religious communities, and ecotheologians could despair over the lethargic response from churches. White's thesis offered a way of understanding that indifference, while imagining alternatives and exerting pressure for change.

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[15] The model could extend to extra-traditional, marginal expressions. Recent work from Roger Gottlieb and Bron Taylor himself suggests that consciousness of environmental crisis is a significant factor in new religious productions (Gottlieb 2006; Taylor 2004). Insofar as environmental crisis forms a new global dimension of religious experience, adequately interpreting religious experience requires accounting for the generative occasion of environmental problems.

Since then, however, many religious environmentalisms have indeed developed. In Christianity the most visible responses are official, like the National Council of Churches's EcoJustice office, letters from Catholic bishops, or the summits convened by Bartholomew I, the "Green Patriarch." But more important than changes from official leaders are the grassroots initiatives that have emerged around the world as environmental problems instigate innovative responses from across the theological spectrum. Christian groups replant trees and sell the carbon offsets in Uganda; teach organic agriculture in Japan; combine mission outreach with rainforest education in Belize; restore traditional land care practices in Honduras and the Philippines; struggle for just water management policies in South Africa; protest illegal forest destruction in Brazil; witness against mountaintop-removal mining in West Virginia; and recover biblically humane animal husbandry in South Dakota. A network of Catholic religious communities ecologically revises its forms of worship and daily life. Churches are building green and running carbon audits, while denominational camps restore their lands for native species and introduce ecology into their ministries of spiritual retreat.

All this activity changes the task of Christian environmental ethics since now it has constituent communities that look to its writings for help and an arena of practical theological creativity that it must acknowledge. No longer does cosmology provide the only live connection to ecology, for these initiatives produce their own capacities to connect Christian moral experience to environmental problems, variously perceived. These new shoots of Christian practice pose several specific tasks for Christian ethics: (1) interpreting their theological diversity, (2) cultivating ethical resources useful to their practical strategies, and (3) developing effective lines of critique.[16]

Interpretation, the first task, raises again the methodological question about how to make sense of such a varied religious landscape. Taylor's call for descriptive pluralism attentive to innovative religious productions seems apt. However, notice the reformist trajectory to these Christian innovations; their new religious productions respond to some sense of environmental threat. Their "nature-related religiosity" seems ethical all the way down, redeploying theological beliefs and practices for the sake of constructing strategies of response. That seems to justify the expectation of Tucker and Grim that significant religious transformation will happen as communities make their traditions respond to a sense of environmental crisis. Adequate pluralist

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[16] Excellent theological interpretations of lived Christian environmentalisms include S. M. Taylor 2007a and Peterson 2005.

description therefore requires appreciation of each community's "confessional/ethical" strategy for change.

Ideal worldviews, however, may not best explain that transformation. Interpreters often locate projects along a cosmological continuum, from anthropocentric to nonanthropocentric.[17] So, for example, stewardship and environmental justice initiatives appear to the anthropocentric side while creation spirituality and deep ecology sit on the other. We now have critical reasons from two fields to suspect that the continuum occludes diversity insofar as it supposes that environmental theologies pursue a single task focused around reforming worldviews. By excluding alternative notions of the environmental task, the comparative continuum suppresses recognition of normative pluralism and the adaptive religious innovations it represents. Where a religious environmentalism seems insufficiently explained by cosmological transformation, the interpreter should look for evidence of another strategy at work.

Consider, for example, interpretation of environmental justice, which is perhaps the most significant Christian contribution to public environmental deliberation in the United States. When the United Church of Christ's report "Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States" described a racist distribution of environmental hazards, it sparked a momentous perceptual shift in the connection between environmental and social justice concerns (United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice 1987). Charges of environmental racism connected ecological integrity to human dignity, capturing new attention from churches and policymakers alike and shaming mainstream environmental organizations into reorienting their public priorities. Environmental justice initiatives achieved this political shift in a surprising nonconformist way: by focusing on the ecological dimensions of interpersonal justice.

When evaluated by the criteria of anthropocentrism and nature's value, environmental justice seems a less radical and more anthropocentric companion to strategies that more fully develop respect for nature itself.[18] By White's criteria, environmental justice looks conceptually immature and cosmologically conservative in relation to

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[17] See, for examples, Michael Northcott's field-shaping presentation of Christian environmental ethics (1996) and Callicott's global survey of environmental ethics (1997). In a standard textbook, James Martin-Schramm and Robert Stivers instruct students to begin reflection by locating themselves on this continuum (Martin-Schramm and Stivers 2003, 30).

[18] On the difference between Christian "environmental justice" and "eco-justice" discourses, see Jenkins 2008, 51–64 and 94–97. Due in part to the methodological assumptions described here, my book leaves environmental justice underdescribed as a theological strategy.

more ecocentric theologies. To categorize it that way, however, would miss how environmental justice innovatively expands human dignity through ecological and social space in order to meet a specific political problem. And to miss that innovation would perpetuate the disconnection between environmental thought and critical race theory; in other words, missing the pluralism here perpetuates the whiteness of American environmental theory (Schlosberg 1999, 4–39).[19]

Environmental justice represents its own strategy of religious ethics, one responsive to an embodied and raced experience of environmental problems. The serial association of toxins with minority geographies represents a racist production of social bodies (Pulido 2000, 12–40). From within those bodies, this theological ethic starts its response, beginning not from a dualist separation of humanity from environment—as White saw the crisis—but from the collapse of distressed environments into oppressed human bodies. Environmental racism represents not so much the alienation of the social from the ecological as it does a social ecology of death. It is a "contemporary form of lynching a whole people" (Townes 1995, 55).

Environmental justice is a "problem-focused coping strategy" developed from the confrontation of the American civil rights movement with white racism (Bullard 1990, 1–17). Ethicists responding to this understanding of environmental problems often have formed their theological strategy around an ecological anthropology in which creation's integrity and human dignity are mutually constitutive. Linking personal, social, and ecological relations, Emilie Townes writes that "the yoking of civil and environmental rights is crucial to ontological wholeness" (1995, 60). Reflecting on the unjust distribution of toxins leads Thomas Hoyt to reclaim the ontological wholeness represented in Christ's embrace of the human: "humans are of the earth, interdependent parts of nature" (1996, 171). Instead of starting from ecological ontology, however, his strategy moves toward it by a trajectory of social justice that focuses on the needs of bodily survival. From reflection on rendering justice to human bodies, then, the emergent ontological theories support "active opposition to all forms of violence against humans (male and female), against nature (including nonhuman animals), against the environment and against the land" (Williams 1997, 118–19).

By suspending a cosmological conception of the ethical task we can see environmental justice initiatives operating from within their own

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[19] This leads to the perception that ecocentric thought is misanthropic (Schrader-Frechette 2002, 3–8) or racist (Cone 2001). See Antonio 2004 for a discussion of how White's cosmological legacy may distort interpretation of African understandings of nature.

account of environmental problems and pursuing their own strategy of theological production. As they develop that strategy, they may deploy cosmological symbols as they seek to produce and sustain a resistance community's capacity to respond to the cultural crisis it perceives. Leonardo Boff's *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor* makes evident this strategic appropriation of worldviews (1997). If we start from a commitment to the human poor by taking their problems as a first description of environmental problems, claims Boff, we must recognize a connection between oppression of the poor and exploitation of nature. Chronicling crimes against Amazon ecosystems in conjunction with crimes against Amazonian indigenous peoples (sometimes suffering the same napalm attacks), Boff traces a violent cultural logic rooted in the colonial worldview's impoverished sense of humanity. The "ultimate basis" of both problems is "the ongoing disruption of the basic connectedness with the whole of the universe" by an individualist, promethean anthropology (1997, 74, 81). Boff's liberationist strategy of response therefore incorporates an account of humanity's participation in the drama of evolution in order to provide theological grounds for practical resistance to the dominant exploitative logic.

Boff thus shows how communities confronting systems of environmentally mediated injustice may develop theological strategies that deal with worldviews, even calling for fundamentally reforming a culture's basic story (1997, 74–75, 110–13). Boff's eventual renarration of humanity's ecological role in fact seems close to something Thomas Berry would endorse. Here, however, the cosmology does not determine the method of response but offers one kind of cultural resource for use by a contextual theological strategy. Paying attention to such strategies, we can see how an environmental justice strategy might end up closer to some classic ecocentric positions than an initial positioning on the cosmological continuum would make it appear.[20] Quotes like those above from Townes and Hoyt hint at this conceptual proximity. Boff's movement from human suffering to ecological anthropology illuminates their shared strategic pattern. Interpreting ecotheologies according to the cosmological method prevalent in religion and ecology could therefore lead both to misinterpreting theological diversity and to overlooking surprising strategic similarities among otherwise distant theological communities.[21]

Notice also, however, the interpretive necessity of a reformist approach and the critical importance of cosmology as a normative

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[20] Noticing this, Mark Wallace develops a deep green environmental justice ethic from contextual reflection on toxic distributions (2005).

[21] Laurel Kearns observes how theological and cultural "boundary-crossings have provoked innovative strategies and cooperative efforts" (2007, 99).

resource. Describing environmental justice as a unique practical strategy requires understanding it as an ethical response to a sense of crisis and as a strategy for religious and cultural transformation. Not just "nature-related religiosity" susceptible to any number of methodologies, environmental justice's revisionary ecological anthropology responds to social threat and aims for cultural change. Taking seriously its theological innovations therefore requires a certain methodological commitment: the ethicist must interpret environmental justice as an adaptive theological response to a moral crisis, which requires intellectual solidarity with a reform community's commitments. Contra Taylor, Christian environmental thought has been slow to interpret new, marginal forms of religiosity not because it has been too reformist in method, but rather because it has been insufficiently so. Making visible the creative character of environmental justice requires beginning with its particular, contextual way of framing a problem and interpreting the responsive theological productions as live strategies of cultural transformation.

On this view, each moral community may define environmental problems in its own way. Interpreting their strategic responses thus requires a prima facie commitment to work with those problems as constructed by some community. Rather than beginning from cosmic crisis, ethics operates more parochially, starting from the strategic productions unique to a particular problem-community.[22] This appears to demand a trade-off between ethical scales—specifically, a trade-off between the locally attentive and the globally relevant. Cosmologically inclined critics might reply that environmental justice approaches simply do not suffice for addressing the roots of the crisis or the scalar extent of the problems. Indeed, by the principle of subsidiarity, irreducibly global problems would require global ethics. The more contextual the strategy, the less competent it seems for addressing a global crisis.[23]

A sense of global crisis may be one reason why White wondered whether democracy could survive its own axioms: a federation of contextual solutions can address only those problems that fall within the scope of each moral community's capacity to respond. But that

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[22] Let a problem-community demarcate a social arena constituted by those members of a moral tradition addressing some shared problem. This is close to the view presented by Graham Ward, who draws attention to standpoint projects of religious traditions, which perform their claims through an operational pragmatics that helps to drive cultural transformation (2005).

[23] Kevin O'Brien pressed this point to me. Lurking throughout this essay is the conceptual significance of place in relation to environmental problems, a theme raised especially by the environmental justice example, but which I must leave unexplored here.

worry holds only if parochial moral communities have a static capacity for response and operate in cultural isolation. Successful strategies of response will make possible further moral innovation, thus illuminating further dimensions to their initial framing of the problem, leading both to further cultural engagements and to the recognition of further problems (which, in turn, can generate ongoing productive response from the community).[24] Beginning with the practical strategies of specific problem-communities therefore identifies processes of moral adaptation and cultural change. That points to the next two tasks, cultivating and critiquing, both of which further empower the processes of strategic religious productions that the ethicist interprets.

Beginning with the practical strategies of specific problem-communities also underscores how this contextually pluralist methodology retains a significant role for cosmology. Boff appealed to a cosmological orientation in order to build the theological capacity of response required by an adequate environmental justice strategy. For this contextual strategy, then, a cosmological sense of the crisis serves as a critical resource for fully understanding the problems faced by Amazonian peoples and the possibilities that they may have for response. As other communities work in similar trajectories, White's thesis (or Berry's cosmology) may be an important resource for many imaginative reform strategies.[25] This type of contextual theological creativity may well work toward "living cosmologies" (M. E. Tucker and J. Grim, unpublished data).

4. Cultivating and Critiquing Religious Environmentalisms

Insofar as Christian environmental ethics fails to recognize the plurality of practical strategies at work in lived religious environmentalisms, it diminishes its capacity for the second and third practical tasks—cultivation and critique. Theological resources developed to cultivate an ecocentric cosmological orientation may seem oblique or

[24] My discussion of practical strategies has been informed by Anna Swidler, but it differs in its emphasis on the generative role of confrontation with new social problems (Swidler 1986, 273–86). Swidler works from Pierre Bourdieu, who generally downplays interpreting cultural change as a future-oriented adaptive response to new problems, instead focusing on how a cultural habitus non-intentionally reproduces itself by recognizing as problems only those issues for which it already possesses the principle of a solution. This implies that traditions limit diversity even as they promote new inventions. My appeal to problem-communities points particularly to those members of a tradition using their reflective facility in tandem with the logic of a habitus to make its confrontation with problems unusually risky, future-oriented, and productive (Bourdieu 1990, 52–65).

[25] Note the guiding influence of Berry's cosmology on the Catholic reform movement described in S. M. Taylor 2007a.

alien to a practical strategy developed for a church's response to toxic hazards or a community's stewardship of a salmon run. Similarly, lines of critique referring to a single comparative code may fail to disturb inadequate strategies if the codes do not matter to a community's commitments.

Activist organizers sometimes chafe at the cosmological preoccupations of academic ecotheology, asking for reflections more intelligible within the vocabularies and practices inhabited by their constituents. They want "pastoral strategies," they say, that make environmental problems matter for theological communities (Somplatzky-Jarman et al. 2000, 573–90). They want environmental theologies that begin with lived patterns of practical experience rather than with the ideal patterns of worldviews. Remember the pragmatists' complaint that value theory alienates ethics from working with the civic resources actually available for generating social reform. Similarly, a Christian environmental ethic that begins from cosmology may sever itself from the moral worlds inhabited by members and from the problems that they think they face.

Any radical critique shares this vulnerability to some degree, and ecotheologians might respond that White's thesis simply proves that some hostility to the received picture of Christian life is therapeutic. Nevertheless, as we have seen with Boff, beginning from responses to concrete problems does not preclude ecocentric revisions of theology or reconstructions of cultural worldviews. Beginning from shared moral patterns helps Christian ethics focus on the strategic reform projects that appropriate, reconstruct, and regenerate cosmologies.

For example, Gordon Lathrop's *Holy Ground* (2003) directs attention to the everyday practices of liturgy as the place Christian cosmologies are produced, enacted, and inculcated. As elemental Christian experience, liturgy not only invokes a cosmology, it trains Christians to make sense of their peculiar and paradoxical world of grace in relation to alternatives. It is where, says Lathrop, Christians are shaped to live out a subversive counter-proposal in a world dominated by a market worldview. Lathrop thus engages with cosmology, then, even calling for liturgists to relearn their moral craft in dialogue with indigenous cosmologies; but he does so by beginning from the moral experience of the local church as the site of a cultural resistance project. Working with lived projects of Christian reform and resistance, ethicists can identify and stimulate productive sites of theological adaptation.

Beginning from worldviews cannot do that as effectively because the criteria for religious reform remain abstracted from practical experience. Observing this alienation of worldviews from Christian experience, two recent authors have argued that, although Christianity may bear much of the blame for our ecological crisis, Lynn White bears

much of the blame for misdirecting theological attention (Lodge and Hamlin 2006, 285–86). That seems too snide; forty years ago, before the emergence of so many religious initiatives, beginning from lived experience would have been more difficult or at least less obvious. White's thesis invented a relation between religion and environmental problems that pressured faith communities to pay theological attention to the living world around them, thereby helping them to foster reform projects.

Christian thought has been slow to move beyond White's legacy in part because it has underestimated the growth and plurality of ethical responses, thus failing to appreciate how pragmatic theological creativity already characterizes lived Christian experience. As concerned communities confront problems by producing new ethical capacities from their traditions, they rediscover or invent the ecological dimensions of Christian experience. By recognizing how problem-driven religious change is in this area, scholars can describe how these projects inscribe environmental issues into Christian experience, transforming it and constructing new relations between Christianity and ecology in the process. In other words, parochial strategies develop multiple methods of connecting theology to environmental problems, thus contributing to cultural change through many incremental steps of pragmatic creativity, each made possible by the previous. Rightly interpreting those connections, the ethicist can cultivate the theological resources most effective for a community's practical strategy.[26]

The ethicist can also ask the most effective critical questions (the third practical task). Once she understands the theological strategy at work, she can identify weaknesses that matter to the community's commitments and articulate inadequacies that undermine its project. For example, if an environmental justice ethic draws on the ecological dimensions of human dignity in order to address a toxic clean-up plan, then the ethicist's first question should not inquire about its anthropocentrism. It should instead ask how effectively the result deals with the specific problem at hand, including its broader cultural and political causes. Does it account for the disembodied and displaced assumptions driving toxic disposal generally? If so, does it describe the environmental and place values implicit in its reliance on a holist

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[26] This approach follows the "modest pragmatism" of Jeffrey Stout, which "insists that the creation of new vocabularies always begins with existing linguistic patterns, making something new out of something found"; a process which is "governed by entrenched standards and assumptions, as well as the perceived needs of the moment" (Stout 2001, 264–65). Stout's "selective retrieval and creative *bricolage*" may not be merely moral if Kathryn Tanner is right that the bricoleur's cultural creativity lies at the heart of theological practice, and so of Christian identity (Tanner 1997).

anthropology? Noticing how the strategy transforms received concepts of theological anthropology, the critic can show how environmental justice claims sit at odds with the ecological poverty of local forms of worship and spirituality. Those practical revisions may in turn rely on a renovation of its doctrine of creation and the notion of participation in God. Now, with those changes, we can ask what other environment-related problems this strategy has brought into view, thus facilitating further reflexivity and confrontation with its own tradition.

Questions like that matter to the practical logic of a moral strategy in a way that neither cosmological assessments nor historical/social descriptions do. Because they begin from the projects that seek to make moral traditions meet new ethical challenges, and because they recognize the operative grammars of a moral community's lived experience, these critical questions sustain ongoing renovation. By treating environmental strategies as adaptive discursive practices rather than deployments of a comparative code or expressions of nature-related spirituality, they can help stimulate an initiative's strategic rationale toward further ethical production and revision.[27] They identify, cultivate, and disturb the logics of change within moral traditions.

So while Christian ethics has good reason to reconsider White's cosmological legacy in the organization of its work, those reasons are at once pluralist and reformist given the multiplicity and problem-driven character of theological production in this arena. I have now sketched a role for Christian environmental ethics that arises out of the gap between the capacities of theological traditions and the demands of difficult problems—a tensive disparity that produces theological creativity for the sake of practical strategies.[28] Recognizing the problem-driven character of religious environmentalisms, Christian ethics can interpret, cultivate, and critique the kinds of theological strategies at work. As it does, ethics assumes a methodological obligation to foster ongoing adaptive responses. For if environmental problems drive theological innovation in the way I have described, then only a reformist mode engages and sustains the strategies of religious change that present the formal object of the ethicist's work. Which is to say, the ethicist cannot interpret new practical theological discourses without participating in their adaptive experiment and making a difference to their outcome.

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[27] I borrow the distinction between discursive practices and comparative codes from Stout 2004, 283–86.

[28] Recognizing the productivity intrinsic to that contextual disparity, the ethicist engages this gulf differently than the akratic gap between ideas and actions that concerns Tucker 2003, 19, 23–26 and Peterson 2007, 45–47 and rather more like the "logical gap" described in Tanner 1992, 17. On how the gap functions differently in "settled" and "unsettled" times, see Swidler 1986, 280.

Practical theological strategies create possibilities for religious and cultural change by producing new moral capacities from received traditions in response to difficult problems. They do so by redeploying within a pattern of life a received repertoire of ideas, actions, stories, symbols, practices, and worldviews. Savvy reform strategists develop redeployments so as to make the problems intelligible and urgent within a community's moral experience, thereby helping a tradition produce new capacities of experience and new possibilities for practical engagement. I have argued that ethicists should not seek to close that fertile gap between environmental problems and moral traditions, but rather attend to the various strategies that seek to make it as productive as possible.[29]

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