

Lecture 3: Intro to the Environmental Humanities, *Christianity and the Bible* (*eco-theology*)

Genesis

The opening three chapters of the Judeo-Christian Bible are perhaps the most influential two pages ever written, as they provide the founding myth, and the basis today for a variety of ideologies (such as creationism), for somewhere between 1.5 and 2 billion human beings.

Moreover, these two pages have arguably shaped Western literature more than any other text, as they have been repeatedly referenced and interpreted.

In addition to having far-reaching environmental import, the first three chapters of Genesis have profoundly influenced how we think about women, gender, creation (and, more recently, evolution), evil (sin), sex (again sin), free will, human destiny, cosmology, labor, animal rights, our notion of deity, and much more.

Genesis is still clearly echoed in our post-Christian world, as it has also become incorporated into the thinking and beliefs of non-Christians in the West.

Starting with Lynn White Jr.'s very influential article in 1967 (which we read), ecocritics, environmental-ists, eco-theologians, and Christians themselves have given a great deal of thought to the environmental implications of the Judeo-Christian faith.

Because many environmentalists have interpreted Christianity as not being earth-friendly, in the 1970s, '80s, and '90s a variety of alternative spiritualities were considered and championed, such as Taoism, Shinto, Buddhism, and Native American and New-Age spiritualism.

This is not to say that Christianity cannot be interpreted as being earth-friendly. In fact, Al Gore, now a Nobel laureate environmentalist, is a devout Christian. Whether Christianity is earth-friendly or not largely comes down to a hermeneutic issue: the interpretation of the Bible, which we are under-taking.

Genesis, the text

1. In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.
2. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.
3. And God said, "Let there be light: and there was light."

4. And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness.
5. And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And the evening and the morning were the first day.
6. And God said, "Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters.
7. And God made the firmament, and divided the waters...

Genesis, Chapter 1

"1. In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth."

From the very beginning, the Bible postulates a metaphysical God, one who is apart from, superior to, and creator of the whole of creation. As he is metaphysical, the Judeo-Christian God is similar to Gilgamesh's god Shamash.

Such a deity is radically different from an earth deity like a genius loci (such as Humbaba), who are intimately connected to, and in fact part of, the earth. The Judeo-Christian God is not part of the earth, but rather stands apart from it, and indeed is postulated as superior to the earth and all of his creation.

From this opening sentence of the Hebrew Bible onward, a rift arguably opens up between the physical and meta-physical in Judeo-Christian thought. As we shall repeatedly see this term with Plato and others, such a rift has profound environmental implications, as it privileges the metaphysical over the physical.

Genesis and the Environment

"In Antiquity every tree, every spring, every stream, every hill had its own genius loci, its guardian spirit. These spirits were accessible to men, but were very unlike men; centaurs, fauns, and mermaids show their ambivalence. Before one cut a tree, mined a mountain, or dammed a brook, it was important to placate the spirit in charge of that particular situation, and to keep it placated. By destroying pagan animism, Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects."

Lynn White Jr. (p. 48 Reader)

According to White, historically Christianity did to all of the genius loci deities what Gilgamesh did to Humbaba: it killed them off, and with them the ancient prohibitions against exploiting the earth.

(Incidentally, although surprisingly short, Lynn White's 1967 essay on the "The Historic Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis" was enormously influential, causing scores of environmentalists, and Christians, to rethink Christianity.)

With the advent of Christianity, "the spirits in natural objects [genius loci], which formerly had protected nature from man, evaporated. Man's effective monopoly on spirit in this world was confirmed, and the old inhibitions to the exploitation of nature crumbled." Lynn White Jr. (p. 48 Reader)

Because Christians are championed by a powerful metaphysical God (as Gilgamesh was championed by Shamash), they can, according to White, act in a mood of indifference to the environment because "the old inhibitions to the exploitation of nature crumbled" with the advent of Christianity.

For this reason, many environmentalists have carefully reconsidered systems of belief that retain earth deities, such as Native America spiritualism.

"The victory of Christianity over paganism was the greatest psychic revolution in the history of our culture." Lynn White Jr. (p. 47 Reader)

White and many, many environmentalists that have followed him have seen this as profoundly important, in fact, have called it "the greatest psychic revolution in the history of our culture," as it substituted a metaphysical God for physical, earth deities that protected the environment--from us.

To many of these environmentalists, this was the decisive moment in Western history when human beings changed for the worse our posture toward the environment.

Genesis, Chapter 1

'11. And God said, "Let the earth bring forth grass, the herb yielding seed, and the fruit tree yielding fruit after his kind, whose seed is in itself, upon the earth: and it was so."

Not only is the Judeo-Christian deity a metaphysical God superior to the earth, the earth is subordinate and obedient to God, as it does his will. All of the "natural" processes here on earth are ruled over by this metaphysical god.

Environmentalists have warned that such dualism is potentially very problematic, as in privileging the metaphysical it marginalizes the physical, and in so doing finds the environment potentially unimportant.

"26. And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth."

"28. And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth."

Environmentalists have argued that these verses give human beings dominion over the entire planet, which is ours to do with as we please. In short, it postulates the whole earth, and all the life on it, as here for, and centered on, human beings.

"Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen."

Lynn White Jr. (p. 47 Reader)

Anthropocentrism, which literally mean "human centered," is a key concept for environmentalists, as such a worldview suggests that everything on earth (plants, animals, etc.) centers on us; is here just for our use. To White, no other religion comes close to being as anthropocentric as Christianity.

The opposite of anthropocentrism is "biocentrism," the belief that no one form of life (such as human beings) is superior to any other. Because certain earth-centered religions are almost by definition biocentric, many environmentalists have championed them over Christianity.

Genesis, Chapter 1

"28. And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion... over every living thing that moveth upon the earth."

In Hebrew "replenish" is male': "to make full or abundant, to fill."

"Subdue" is kabash: "to subdue, force, to tramp down."

"Dominion" is radah: "to rule, dominate, tread down." (In Latin, which is the language that the Bible has primarily been read in throughout its history, "dominion" is dominus: "lord, master")

Environmental critics have noted that these words all suggest a disturbing posture toward the earth. (Male' has been interpreted as worrisome because it encourages

human beings to overpopulate the planet, which has negative environmental consequences.)

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Environmentalists, such as Lynn White Jr., have argued that these lines are very clear on how we should relate to other animals, and in fact all life on earth: we are, according to this passage, lord and master of all life on the planet, which is here just to serve us. From an environmental viewpoint, this is worrisome.

Moreover, as Genesis 1:24-27 (and 2:7) recount very different creation stories for human beings and animals (unlike evolution), human beings are imagined as created differently from, and in fact are seen as superior to, all other life on earth. Environmentalists have found this view disturbing as well.

"28. And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion... over every living thing that moveth upon the earth."

Environmental critics have also noted that this passage encourages human beings to overpopulate the planet. (Genesis 1:28 has in fact been used in Christian arguments against both birth control and abortion.)

Because many environmentalists have taken the position that our human population needs to stabilize for the health of the planet, Genesis 1:28 is often seen as problematic.

Genesis, Chapter 2

"7. And God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul."

In spite of the fact that Adam is here literally made out of the earth (in Hebrew 'adam means "made of clay"; 'adama is the word for "earth"), for nearly 2000 years Christian theologians have argued that human beings have a dual nature, half body and half soul, the latter being the better.

This view, which is a form of metaphysical dualism (an important belief), associates the "real" human nature (the soul) with the metaphysical Judeo-Christian God and his realm (Heaven), while seeing the body, and in fact everything on earth, as potentially illusory, inferior, and even evil.

Dualism

Disassociating human beings from their physical, earthy nature, which is seen as evil, is clearly problematic environmentally.

The implications of metaphysical dualism are profound:

If human beings are merely visitors here on earth, spirits suffering bondage in physical bodies--and on a physical planet--while making their way back "home" to be with their God in a distinctly un-physical, un-earthy realm, then how much does the earth really matter, if at all?

Environmentalists have argued that such a belief encourages human beings to act like bad hotel guests, who care little about, and in fact sometimes trash, their rooms because they are leaving soon to return home. In this case, to return to their "true" home to be with God in Heaven in the next life.

Because in other systems of belief the earth is the true home of human beings, who are not imagined as having a dual nature at once physical and meta-physical, environmentalists have looked carefully at these religions.

Genesis, Chapter 2

"15. And the Lord God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it."

In Hebrew "dress" is abad, "to work for another, serve another by labor," and "keep" is shamar, "to keep, guard, keep watch, protect, save life."

In contrast to Genesis 1:28, environmentalists have also looked at Genesis 2.15 favorably, as it suggests that human beings are actually genius loci entrusted to protect (shamar) the planet.

As these passages make clear, interpretation (hermeneutics) plays a major role in our understanding of this--and in fact any-- text.

Genesis, Chapter 3

'17. And unto Adam he said, "Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee, saying, Thou shalt not eat of it: cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life;"

'18. "Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field;"

'19. "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return."

Aside from being potentially misogynistic, these lines have profound environmental implications:

'17-19. "...cursed is the ground for thy sake...Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee...In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground."

This is the punishment that Adam, and with him all of humanity, receives from God because of Original Sin. Consequently, after the Fall human beings have a new relationship to the earth, one that is essentially adversarial. Perhaps not surprisingly, environmentalists have found this disturbing.

The belief that the earth no longer cares for human beings, who now have to take, forcefully if necessary, everything that they need to survive, is worrisome

As we shall see, this is similar to Hesiod's fall from the Golden Age to the Iron Age, and Virgil's shift from the pastoral to the georgic way of life. In all three views, the entire earth was once a *locus amoenus*, a paradise, lost.

'17-19. "...cursed is the ground for thy sake...Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee...In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground."

Because of this and other passages, for nearly 2000 years Christian theologians have argued that the earth is in a state of irretrievable state of decay as a result of the biblical Fall. In this view, human beings can be saved, not the earth.

As John Donne, a 17th-century English poet baldly put it, "The world is but a carcass. Forget this world, and scarce think of it so, / As of old clothes, cast off a year ago."

Environmentalists, not surprisingly, have found this disturbing, as it suggests that the planet has no future other than decay. In other words, an environmental "tipping point" occurred 6000 years ago at the biblical Fall.

In recent years scholars, such as Jeremy Cohen, have revisited Lynn White's thesis to question whether pre-modern Jews and Christians actually believed that they could act in a mode of indifference to the planet. The subject is still very much being debated.

Cohen's book, which is both carefully researched and compelling, is entitled "'Be Fertile and Increase, Fill the Earth and Master It': The Ancient and Medieval Career of a Biblical Text," which is a reference to Genesis 1:28.

Epilogue

The debate over how to environmentally interpret the Judeo-Christian Bible still very much continues today:

In March of 2007 a number of prominent Christian activists, led by James C. Dobson (founder of the organization Focus on the Family), called on the National Association of Evangelicals to dismiss an official who urged that climate change be taken seriously.

Many of these individuals felt their political agenda was being co-opted by those sympathetic to the pet cause of Al Gore and other liberals. More deeply, however, to some Christians it raised (as it did to John Donne) the larger question of just how much this place, this planet, should matter.

This may well be one of the most important questions facing us all today.