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# THE DISENCHANTMENT OF NATURE AND CHRISTIANITY'S "BURDEN OF GUILT"

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*RÉSUMÉ : Dans une conférence, donnée en 1966, sur « Les causes historiques de notre crise écologique », Lynn White accuse le christianisme d'être responsable de la crise. Il soutient que la doctrine chrétienne de la création, qui s'appuie sur les récits de la Genèse, est complètement anthropocentirque, donnant à l'homme tout pouvoir sur la nature et le laissant libre d'en user à sa guise. Les récits bibliques de la création, en plaçant Dieu au-dessus du monde, désenchantent la nature, en la transformant en un objet sans vie, sans intention propre. Une telle conception fait que les humains se sentent libres d'exploiter les ressources naturelles sans autre considération que leur propre intérêt. Cet article entend montrer qu'une acceptation non critique de la thèse de White conduit à une fausse compréhension de la vision biblique de la nature. La Bible ne désenchante pas la nature. C'est là plutôt l'effet des idées de Francis Bacon et de ses disciples.*

*ABSTRACT : In an address entitled "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis" given in 1966, Lynn White blamed Christianity for the ecological crisis. He argued that the Christian doctrine of creation, based upon the Genesis accounts, is unabashedly anthropocentric, giving humans dominion over the earth and leaving them free to use it as they see fit. The biblical creation accounts, by setting God over against the world, disenchant the world of nature, turning it into an object with no life or purpose of its own. Such a conception makes it easy for humans to feel free to exploit the earth's resources without regard to any considerations other than purely human ones. The argument of this article is that White is wrong and that an uncritical acceptance of his thesis has led to a serious misunderstanding of the biblical view of nature. The Bible does not disenchant nature. It is further argued that the disenchantment of nature which underlies modernity — and which has indeed been a significant factor contributing to the present ecological crisis — is derived more from the ideas of Francis Bacon and his followers than it is from the Bible.*

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In 1966 the medieval historian Lynn White delivered an address entitled "The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis" to the American Association for the Advancement of Science. This address was subsequently published in the journal *Science* in 1967. Although White said nothing particularly original in this article[1] it

1. See Cameron WYBROW, *The Bible, Baconianism, and Mastery over Nature. The Old Testament and its Modern Misreading*, New York, Peter Lang, 1991.

caught the attention of the academic world in a way few other articles have done and for the past thirty years it has been widely accepted as the authoritative word on the subject.

## WHITE'S THREE BASIC ARGUMENTS

White argues that Christianity destroyed pagan animism, thus making the rapacious exploitation of nature possible. White says :

> In antiquity every tree, every spring, every stream, every hill had its own [...] guardian spirit. [...] 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.[2]

White is thus claiming that in the Christian world-view nature is seen as inanimate matter which humans are free to use as they see fit.

White links this argument to two others. First he claims that the Judeo-Christian creation accounts found in Genesis establish "man" as ruler of creation. In Genesis 2:7 man named all the animals and thus, says White, "God planned [the whole creation] for man's benefit and rule : no item in the physical creation has any purpose save to serve man's purposes. And, although man's body is made of clay, he is not simply part of nature : he is made in God's image." To this White adds a second argument, that Western Christianity stressed that salvation was to be found in right conduct and therefore action was elevated over contemplation. This voluntarist type of Christianity, when coupled with the investigation into the workings of nature, eventually leads to the idea that nature must be conquered and exploited. He concludes that Christianity bears a "huge burden of guilt" for the ecological crisis.

It is conventional wisdom today to see White as right and to place the burden of guilt for our present environmental problems firmly on the shoulders of Christianity.[3] My purpose in this article is not only to take issue with this broad consensus but also to suggest that the discussion of Christianity's guilt has diverted attention from a more meaningful discussion of the causes of nature's disenchantment in the modern world.

Let us begin our examination of White with the argument that Christianity disenchants nature and thus provides the necessary preconditions for the exploitation of nature. It has to be acknowledged from the outset that the Judeo-Christian accounts of creation desacralize nature. The Jewish-Christian God is quite distinct from nature and nature is in no way suffused with the divine as in other religious traditions such as Hinduism. If this is the point White is making then he is indeed correct. But White goes beyond this argument when he speaks of Christianity being indifferent to the

2. Lynn WHITE, Jr., "The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis," *Science*, 155 (1967), p. 1205f.

3. A host of writers such as New Age guru Theodore Rozak, building engineer Ian McHarg and media star David Suzuki have all taken the guilt of Christianity to be axiomatic.

"feelings" of natural objects and the "spirit" in mountains, streams and trees. What he seems to be saying here is that Christianity sees nature as mere inert, unresponsive material. But to say that nature is desacralized is one thing ; to say that it is unresponsive inert matter is quite another.

Let us look, for example, at the verse which White himself quotes to support his thesis, namely Gen 2:7. In the RSV translation this verse says : "Then the Lord God formed man out of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and he became a living being." In the original Hebrew there is a play on words which is not captured in the English translation. The Hebrew for "man" is *'adam* and for ground it is *'adamah*. A better translation would therefore be : "Then God formed an *earthling* from the clods of the *earth* and breathed into its nostril the breath of life : and the earthling became a living being."[4]

To translate *'adam* as "man" thus deflects attention away from the fact that there is an intimate connection between the earth and humans, and rather focuses attention on an entirely different issue : the relationship between the human male and the human female. By the use of the term *'adam* the text is telling us "that the essence of human life is not its eventual classification into gendered categories but rather its organic connection to the earth."[5] In this text an inextricable link is established between man and the ground. Man is an earthling, a earthlike being, who comes from the earth, eats food won from the earth (Gen 3:17 ; 4:2 ; 9:20) and returns to the earth at death (3:19). The earth is not mere impersonal matter, but rather in some sense responsible for humans and *responsive to them.*

That the earth is responsive to humans is borne out by other passages in Genesis. In Gen 4:10-12, for example, after Cain has killed Abel, God says :

> What have you done ? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground. And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you till the ground, it shall no longer yield to you its strength ; you shall be a fugitive and wanderer on the earth.[6]

As Cameron Wybrow comments : "Certainly it seems to be the ground, not God, which is refusing to lend its strength to Cain's future agricultural efforts. On the face of it, the ground appears to be sensitive to human unrighteousness and to revolt against it."[7] A similar idea can be found in other chapters of Genesis such as Gen 19 and in other books such as Leviticus (chapter 18).

Psalm 96:11-13 is a particularly interesting description of the responsiveness of nature :

> Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice ;
> let the sea roar, and all that fills it ;

4. See Anne PRIMAVESI, *From Apocalypse to Genesis. Ecology, Feminism and Christianity*, Minneapolis, Fortress, 1991, p. 205.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Revised Standard Version, Copyright 1962, 1973 by Oxford University Press.
7. C. WYBROW, *The Bible, Baconianism, and Mastery over Nature*, p. 123.

let the field exult, and everything in it ;
Then shall all the trees of the wood sing for joy
before the Lord (RSV).

Ps 148 is very similar in tone and similar ideas may also be found in Isaiah chapters 44 and 49 and in Psalms 19 and 114.[8] Nature is important to God for his own purposes, and it is not simply there for our benefit. Nature is, for example, part of God's eschatological plan and thus is important in its own right. It is not simply impersonal "stuff" set over against the human. Old Testament pictures of eschatological salvation include a transformed nature — that is, nature participates in God's salvific purposes. Hosea sees the new covenant as made not just with humans but with the whole of creation (Hos 2:18). A world immersed in the "knowledge of the Lord" is, according to Isaiah, a world in which the whole of nature lives in harmony. In the New Testament, besides the Book of Revelation with its emphasis on a new heaven and a new earth, and its critique in Revelation 11:8 of "the destroyers of the earth," there is the famous passage in Romans 8 in which Paul includes the whole of creation in the redemptive process. When Christianity rejected Gnosticism it affirmed this very view that creation and redemption cannot be separated. As the famous Oxford mathematician Charles Coulson once put it : "God not only directs the play, he built the theatre." Human destiny and the destiny of nature are inextricably intertwined ; this hardly establishes a cultural climate in which nature can be exploited in a mood of indifference ! Thus White is surely wrong in suggesting that Genesis laid the foundation for such a disenchantment of nature. He is also wrong in claiming that the Genesis creation accounts established humans as the rulers of creation. We have seen that he fails to understand the full significance of Gen 2:7. He then gives *too much* significance to what is said in Genesis 2:19, where man names the animals. White claims that the giving of names to the animals is a symbolic way of saying that man has power over them. Thus, for White, this text is yet another example of man's dominion over nature, in this case the animal kingdom. Let us examine this text. In the RSV Gen 2:18-20 reads :

> Then the Lord God said, "It is not good that man should be alone ; I will make a helper fit for him." So out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them ; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all cattle, and to birds of the air, and to beasts of the field ; but for the man there was not found a helper fit for him.

It is hard to see in what sense the naming of the animals, as portrayed here, is the crucial point of the text. It appears, rather, to be almost incidental. As Cameron Wybrow comments :

> The purpose of parading the animals in front of Adam is not to present him with subjects to be ruled, but to determine whether Adam will deem any of the creatures to be a "helper

8. Isaiah 44:23 ; 49:13 ; Psalms 19:14 ; Psalms 144:1-8. A text which is also important to this debate, and which is only alluded to by White, is Genesis 1:28. For a discussion of this, see my *Christ and Modernity. Christian Self-Understanding in a Technological Age*, Waterloo, Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1985, p. 110-114.

> fit for him." In the event, Adam names the animals, but nothing is said about the names or their significance, and the only certain conclusion is that none of the names denotes the appropriate kind of "helper." The important part of the story lies not in the naming of the animals, but in the next segment, in which God makes a woman and brings her to the man (2.21-22). The woman, whom Adam calls "bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh" (2.23), is accepted by him, although, interestingly enough, she is never said to be the helper for whom the man was looking. The theme of the story is the difficulty of finding a companion for man ; to make the naming of the animals central to the passage is to do literary violence to it.[9]

It is said that a threefold cord is not quickly broken. We have seen, however, that the first two cords of White's argument — that Christianity disenchants nature and that Genesis establishes humans as rulers of creation — have broken quite easily. The third cord, however, is made of much stronger material. It is to this that we now turn.

## FRANCIS BACON'S VIEW OF NATURE AND HUMAN CONDITION

White argues that in the Middle Ages Western Christianity elevated action over contemplation. This voluntarist type of Christianity combined with an investigative approach to the workings of nature was to produce an exploitative and domineering attitude towards nature.

White is right to stress that there were those in the Middle Ages who investigated how nature works. Preeminent among such individuals was the monk Roger Bacon. But to *understand* nature is not to *exploit* it. Roger Bacon never suggested that nature was to be exploited. It was *Francis* Bacon, some three centuries later, who urged us to conquer and exploit nature for, as he put it, "the relief of man's estate" — that is, for human well-being and comfort. White has made the wrong choice of Bacon and, to pursue the pun, his thesis is quite indigestible.

Similarly, the argument that Western Christianity divorced action and contemplation in the Middle Ages is very exaggerated. Contemplation and action were eventually divorced, but it was again in the thought of Francis Bacon. It was he who explicitly said that the life of charity or action was superior to the life of contemplation. No one prior to Francis Bacon had been so radically explicit in divorcing the two.

The basic assumption in Bacon's thinking is that nature is impersonal and inert and can — and indeed should — be dealt with in an objective manner. He says :

> For as all works do shew forth the power and skill of the workman, and not his image ; so it is of the works of God ; which do shew the omnipotency and wisdom of the maker, but not his image ; and therefore therein the heathen opinion differeth from the sacred truth ; for they supposed the world to be the image of God, and man to be an extract or compendious image of the world ; but the Scriptures never vouchsafe to attribute to the world that

9. C. WYBROW, *The Bible, Baconianism, and Mastery over Nature*, p. 143.

> honour, as to be the image of God, but only *the work of his hands* ; neither do they speak of any other image of God, but man.[10]

Thus for Bacon nature has to be understood and studied as an artifact, as the work of God's hands, not as something which has purpose and worth of its own.

Bacon then proceeds to articulate the view that the human condition could be considerably improved by using our knowledge of the natural world to conquer and exploit it, and in so doing alleviate human suffering and promote happiness. In his writings he systematically recounts how this is to be done. Bacon's own words refute White's thesis, for Bacon recognized himself as a pioneer and criticised his predecessors who had not realized the importance of using our knowledge of the world so that human life might be, as he said, "endowed with new inventions and riches." The manipulation of nature could only take place when humans realized the importance of experiments and the practical application of knowledge. Thus he rejected :

> The opinion, or inveterate conceit, which is both vainglorious and prejudicial, namely, that the dignity of the human mind is lowered by long and frequent intercourse with experiments and particulars, which are the objects of sense, confined to matter ; especially since such matters generally require labour and investigation.[11]

Bacon equated knowledge with power — power over nature, power to manipulate and control, power to chart our own destiny. Unless we exercise this power we will, as he put it, "revolve forever in a circle, making only some slight and contemptible progress."[12]

Bacon attacked Aristotle for preferring the contemplative life to the life of action. As he made Aristotle the object of his attack, Bacon managed to obscure the fact that he is attacking his own Christian tradition, which also elevated contemplation over action. As George Ovitt in his book *The Restoration of Perfection*[13] has shown, the Middle Ages remained true to the classical Christian tradition found in such writers as Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, Cassian, and Augustine, all of whom thought that although the active life is more productive than the contemplative, the contemplative is better and greater than the active.[14] When Bacon attacked the contemplative life he was attacking a tradition in which the life of action received its meaning from the life of contemplation. This is most significant, for essentially what Bacon is doing is seeking to make *the life of action intrinsically worthwhile for its own sake.* Once this step is taken, it is only another short step to a view of the world in which efficiency,

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10. Francis BACON, *Of the Advancement of Learning*, in John M. Robinson, ed., *The Philosophical Works of Francis Bacon*, Freeport, NY, Books for Libraries Press, 1970, p. 91. Quoted in C. WYBROW, *The Bible, Baconianism, and Mastery over Nature*, p. 174.
11. Francis BACON, *Novum Organum*, Book I, aphorism 83.
12. *Ibid.*
13. George OVITT, Jr., *The Restoration of Perfection. Labour and Technology in Medieval Culture*, London, Rutgers University Press, 1987.
14. See Dom Cuthbert BUTLER, *Western Mysticism. The Teaching of Augustine, Gregory and Bernard on the Contemplative Life*, London, Constable, 1967, esp. p. 160 and 174. On Origen, see *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, vol. 2, cols. 1769-1770. For Cassian, see cols. 1921-1922.

pragmatism, and utility are the key virtues. In short, it was Bacon who laid the essential groundwork for the view of the world which has led to the ecological crisis.

It is true that Bacon appeals to the Bible in support of his view that nature is impersonal and inanimate, or, to put it in terms of our own inquiry, disenchanted. But one should put this appeal in context. We know that Bacon was clever, cunning, and also disingenuous.[15] He used whatever arguments he thought would be effective. Given the hegemonic power of the Christian church at the time it is not surprising he would buttress his arguments with appeals to the Bible. The fact that he uses the Bible to support his views does not mean that it was the Bible which provided their inspiration. There is, in fact, evidence that his real inspiration came from Greek atomists such as Democritus. Bacon cites the atomists often, and they, of course, saw nature as impersonal and inanimate. Bacon was quite familiar with the idea that a disenchanted or impersonal view of nature was to be found in non-Christian antiquity. Bacon set a Biblical disenchanted view of nature over against a pagan animated one. This is a simplistic dichotomy which obscures the real antithesis, which is an inanimate, impersonal view of nature over against a view of nature as responsive and personal. The issue is not Christianity against paganism. Within both Christianity and paganism there are disenchanted and enchanted views of nature. Christianity as well as paganism has the resources to offer a way of looking at nature which is different from the impersonal one which prevails in the modern world.

## TO CONCLUDE

White's three basic arguments for placing the burden of guilt for the ecological crisis on the shoulders of Christianity do not hold up to close scrutiny. The impersonal and mechanical view of nature espoused by Francis Bacon is far more crucial to the understanding of our present environmental problems, especially when this view became buttressed by the socio-economic realities of the modern scientific era. In the words of Lewis Mumford, "The power that was science and the power that was money were, in the final analysis, the same kind of power : the power of abstraction, measurement, quantification."[16] This suggests that we need a wider context than that of White's inquiry in order to examine the roots of the ecological crisis. This wider context should not simply set Christianity over against paganism but should take into account the rise of science, technology and capitalism and the dynamic relationship between them. Only by studying this wider context will we see where the burden of guilt really lies.

15. Cf. his work *The History of the Reign of Henry VII*, where he uses his material selectively and dishonestly — see A. QUINTON, *Francis Bacon*, Oxford, OUP, 1980, p. 71.

16. Lewis MUMFORD, *Technics and Civilization*, New York, Harcourt and Brace, 1934, p. 25.