

## **Critical reflections on Lynn T. White Jr's ideas on the ecological crisis**

Tauya Chinama<sup>13</sup>

### **Abstract**

*The study is a reflection on Lynn Townsend White's ideas on the roots of the ecology crisis. Modelling arguments and counter arguments on the notion that medieval Christianity, has resulted in destructive handling of nature that has led to the toxic anthropocentrism. Methodologically, a phenomenological approach was adopted with White and his ideas as its idiographic focus. Furthermore, the study also examined why and how is Christianity is viewed as having doctrine that promotes destruction of the environment by White. Modelling and resorting to supportive and counter arguments in relation to the notion that medieval Christianity, promoted an anthropocentrism and exploitative attitude towards nature, the study scrutinized how and why Christianity is viewed as the origin of the ecological crisis, through reflecting on Christian medieval view on nature; which resulted in animism elimination, over emphasis on anthropocentrism and theocentrism. Finally, the reflection exhorted the exploration of St Francis of Assisi's life experiences and teachings a Christian radical in the words of White, due to the fact that his life and expression of faith had enough dose of animism which was and is under bastardization/elimination threat by the mainstream Christianity.*

**Key terms:** ecological crisis, medieval Christianity, St Francis of Assisi, anthropocentricism, nature

---

<sup>13</sup> Catholic University of Zimbabwe. Email: tauyachinama@gmail.com

## **1. Introduction**

The paper is partly not exhaustively a critical review of White's ideas on the ecological crisis referencing; *"The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis"* (Florida Institute of Technology, 2021). The paper presented arguments based on the notion that medieval Christianity developed an exploitative attitude towards nature; through critical examination of why White takes Christian anthropocentrism as responsible for the ecological crisis. In addition, the paper makes a concise discourse on anthropocentrism and theocentrism; elimination of animism and St Francis of Assisi's ideas on the ecology which seemed to be fringe during the medieval era.

## **2. Christian medieval view on nature**

White's (1967) work; *"The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis"*, is a humanistic investigation of history; connecting and critiquing the morals and values of the medieval or dark ages Christianity to the destruction of nature (Zoran Turza; Bernadette Rigal-Cellard). The brutal honesty of White's assertions was necessitated by a number of issues and it became so clear to the freshly learned environmental crisis, White's acumen to have an impact on the diverse audience beyond the confines of historians, established a brutal attack on Christianity, which led to apologetic Christian historians to occupy themselves with problems raised up by historical data so as look for defense against White's opinions. However, this didn't stop what White started and it further initiated shaper a new discipline to which the historians belonged. White's ideas remain valid today and constitute a pivotal part in the modern-day environmental debate on the nexus between religion and nature (Hall, 1989).

White's work took into consideration the view that not only the medieval era was conclusive epoch in the dawn of technological hegemony but that highly developed charisma of medieval Christianity delivered the cognitive grounds for modern technological creativity. White proposed arguments which were wide-ranging to fundamental perspective and essential part of progress. Monks, White argued,

considered work to be existential and an indispensable practice of devotion and faith (Taylor, 2016). Furthermore, White proposed that religion has a significant potency to determine human cultures and that religious morals often work as conscious manifestation of the subconscious effect of the religion.

The impact of White's propositions on ecologists, philosophers, and religious scholars had both immediate and long-lasting implications. His ideas were absorbed by the press, making headlines and a number of reactions to his ideas were directed towards his allegation that medieval Christianity is largely responsible for the destruction of nature. Scriptural and apologetically one can argue that institution of destructive tendencies ought to be defined as authorizing a stewardship affiliation to the natural world. Inconsistently, while numerous eco-theologians argued clamorously in contradiction of White, they may possibly use his hypothesis to buttress the opinion that environmentalism is at extremity a religious and ethical movement, they assumed that religious morals were the most operative remedy to environmental dilapidation and recommended that St. Francis of Assisi be made the patron saint of environmentalists (Whitney, 2016).

Ovitt, Jr. (1987) argued, in contrary and in support to a number of academics who delivered signal that pre-Christian cultures also had annals of ecological destruction. The wide-ranging rejoinders established that the relation between religion and ecological deterioration were barely direct. However, influential and inventive analysis fashioned cohort benchmark of present forthcoming discourse.

### **3. An alternative Christian view**

Despite, White's accusation of the medieval church doctrine as basis for the ecological crisis; he also notes what can be called alternative Christian view pushed by radicals on the margins of the church in the medieval era. White (1967) puts assumptive propositions in support of the idea that the Judeo-Christian values are the main basis of ecological crisis, they were assumptive because they seem to magnify the medieval Christianity's role towards destruction of nature. White

argues that Christian dogmatic doctrine of creation places human beings above all creation, the anthropocentric teaching found in the scriptures.

Conradie argued that; “most ecological reinterpretations of Genesis 1:28 attempt to move away from an understanding of dominion as domination, instead, the meaning of dominion is interpreted in terms of the metaphor of stewardship” (Conradie, 2006:77).

The argument disregards the destructive attitude displayed by human beings afore; “Ever since man became a numerous species, he has affected his environment notably. The hypothesis that his fire-driven method of hunting created the world’s greatest grasslands and helped to exterminate the monster mammals of the Pleistocene from much of the globe is plausible, if not proved.” (White, 1967:1203).

Moncrief proposes that Judeo-Christian attitudes is in tandem with capitalism. It is this value relational that directly caused ecological crisis (White, 1970:511).

White further states that the convergence was predicated on dogmatic teachings, notion of maintaining dominance, religious steered move coupled with the desire of manipulation, conquering and monitoring. This intentional change, more or less may designate the ecological crisis as morals incorporated and moulded by the society (University of Queensland, 2012). This is further clear in the near-extirpation of animistic tenets in today’s society (White, 1967:1205).

White argues that the extinction of the animistic values which is being facilitated by Christianity, abuse nature (White, 1967:1205). White describes the method in which non-Christian dogmas detail each tree, spring, stream, and hill had its own *genus loci* (guardian spirit) (White, 1967:1205). Christianity replaced animism with the cult of saints. White notes instances where Christians barred people from revered ecological sites to halt people from adoring their deities, and rise to the ordered frustration animism as archaic and backward (University of Queensland, 2012). “Ecologists in all parts of the world who have been searching for ways to formulate ecologically sustainable ways of development, have increasingly come

to the realization that the indigenous peoples of the third world, with their animistic and shamanistic beliefs, have in fact been practicing the kinds of sustainable lifestyles that we are now trying to develop” (Mander, 1991), therefore, proposed change of attitudes, by recommending reformists cemented as follows; “I personally doubt that disastrous ecological backlash can be avoided simply by applying to our problems more science and more technology” (White, 1967:273).

#### **4. Elimination of animism**

White (1973) in *“continuing the Conversation”*, exposed an unreliably but well-thought notes on ecological after effect influence, vitiate the ecology, and the problem is actually philosophical and ideological (Matthew T. Riley). “What people do about their ecology depends on what they think about themselves in relation to things around them” (White, 1967:1205). All the same, White concentrated on the analysis relations in the societies’ social constructions and proposed that the problems are a boundary between humans and nature, where humans are ranked above nature. An animistic culture upholding a mutual relationship with nature can generate technologies dependable with their worldview. An animistic and ecological considerate society seeks to comprehend the circumstances.

Despite that some eminent preservationists have designated deliberations on preservation as “silly arguments that are diverting attention from the real business” (Toomey, 2014), preferring “a stronger focus on synthesizing and expanding the evidence base that can identify what works and what fails in conservation so that we can move from philosophical debates to rigorous assessments of the effectiveness of actions” (Tallis & Lubchenco, 2014), their expression on what works and what fails can be adjudicated as deprivation. The certainty of preservation practice is too multifaceted and nuanced for such moral certitude (Marvier & Kareiva, 2014). White warned and that technologizing is not way out of ecological crisis. He wrote, “We shall continue to have a worsening ecological crisis until we reject the axiom that nature has no reason for existence save to serve humans” (White, 1967). White, again and again, notes man-nature dichotomy is innate, until it is eliminated not only from thoughts but also from

emotions. What is needed, White argued, is a philosophy that is a viable equivalent to animism (White, 1973), a philosophy and conforming ethic confirming the inherent value of nature, and declining the human/nature dichotomy. "Humans commit their lives to what they consider good" (White, 1973), in other words White was alluding to the matter of human centeredness (anthropocentrism).

## **5. Anthropocentrism and Theocentrism**

There is a slim line between anthropocentrism and theocentrism, therefore this section is meant to offer a discourse on the two; theocentrism in some sense buttresses anthropocentrism because theocentrism is predicated on anthropocentrism. Compliance with Francis Bacon's contention that we need to "torture nature's secrets from her", this view contemplates man as distinct from and superior to nature and it deliberates nature as a passive, substantially dividable and moved by outside rather than internal forces (Gladwin, Kennelly & Krause, 1995). Lewis detected "We reduce things to mere nature in order that we may conquer them. We are always conquering nature, because nature is the name for what we have, to some extent, conquered" (Lewis, 1953: 44). Leopold envisioned an allowance comprise of ill-treatment; "without an internal change in our intellectual emphasis, loyalties, affections and convictions. But the proof that conservation has not yet touched these foundations of conduct lies in the fact that philosophy and religion have not yet heard of it" (Leopoldo, 1949:210).

Definitely, religious doctrine seems to support mistreatment of the ecology and the book of Genesis is considered as the derivation of the mistreatment. As White critique; "superior to nature, and to be contemptuous of it, willing to use it for our slightest whim" (White, 1967:1205). John Passmore (1974) sustained the critique noting that; the Lord fashioned man, to 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 creep upon the earth as stated in Genesis 1: 26 (Pass more, 1974).

However, “God's attitude toward his creation is supposed to give us a whole view that is totally different, but our view of creation tends to be a pagan view. Use whatever is there. Do what you want with it; you have the power over it” (Merton, 1963a). Undeniably, changing circumstance of worldwide climate change, species elimination and endocrine disturbance, Christianity has become involved in environmental issues which has resulted in Christian reexamining its doctrine towards ecological morality.

Anthropocentrism considers humans as focus of life. Lewis (1953) penned inquiringly of the problem in “*The Abolition of Man*”, discovering in natural science a step by step evolution that aide man to nature and that in its ultimate step abolishes man completely (Lewis, 1953). There is an alternate ecology that spreads beyond anthropocentric, which offers vibrant and productive ideas as expressed by John Paul II; “... once all mention of the divine has been detached, it is not astounding that the significance of all else come to be severely distorted. Nature itself, from being *mater* (mother), will be condensed to being matter, and is exposed to all kinds of maltreatment” ( John Paul II, 1995). Weis requests for an expanding consciousness that “earth and heaven are not separate entities, and that our actions should flow from and express the dynamic balance and interconnectedness of life” (Weis, 1992:7); as mentioned earlier, Weis’s proposition buttresses the slim line between anthropocentrism and theocentrism.

## **6. St Francis of Assisi and the ecology**

Interestingly, St Francis of Assisi blends well his Christian doctrinal faith and animism. White points out that, “Since the roots of our trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious, whether we call it that or not” (White 1967:1207). This confers significance of the entitlement that human beliefs and morals are “critical factors that determine the success or failure of any plan to improve sustainability of the environment” (Lumbreras, Oviedo & Angel 2021:2).

To this reason, the natural ecology epitomizes an archetypal social and anthropological sustainability alternate. The theological foundation for this is the persuasion that nature is a mirror of the divine embodiment so that humanity is called to cooperate with creation and not just to rule domineeringly over it (Michetti, 2004:195). St Francis of Assisi chants the maternal personality of the earth, which withstands and administers devoid of dominion, and evades any allusion to the “*potestas*” (sovereign authority of the lords based on economic power) (Dalarun, 2021). The central message of St Francis of Assisi’s canticle is that only the chorale of all creatures can offer the human being the chance for social appeasement and, even profounder, for coming to terms with Sister Bodily Dead, which makes human survival so problematical (Buffon, 2021).

In The Assisi Compilation (*Compilatio Assisiensis*), St Francis of Assisi venerates the way the lark gets its diet: it is content with what it merely catches along its way, plunging in the manure as well (Dalarun, 2021:130). Analogously, St Francis of Assisi is also moved by domesticated animals such as sheep, cows and donkeys, which are gratified with the food they are given daily just like the Friars Minor, according to The Earlier Rule, are anticipated to live either by the work they can do or by begging (Dalarun, 2021:68). St Francis of Assisi’s rules for the friars inaugurate not only that the goods must not be owned, but that they can be used absolutely as far as they are austerely necessary (Dalarun, 2021:70). Consequently, modern-day defence of animal rights is certainly grounded on the notion that animals have sentience to bodily harm and that such sentience should be deliberated by legal systems (Williams, 2003).

## **7. Conclusion**

The paper has partly reviewed White’s thoughts and their implications on the origins of the ecological crisis. Modelling and resorting to supportive and counter arguments in relation to the notion that medieval Christianity, promoted an anthropocentrism and destructive attitude towards nature. Furthermore, the paper

examined why and how Christianity is viewed as responsible for the ecological crisis by White, under a number of rubric, covering the nature and status of Christian medieval in relation to nature; a proposed fringe voices to magnify in the medieval Christianity; consequences of eliminating animism; the nexus between anthropocentrism and theocentrism; and critical analysis of medieval Christian radicals' ideas on nature (St Francis of Assisi) (Cusato, McMichael, Johnson et al) The paper strived to explore the lifestyle of a Christian radical in the words of white, due to the fact that his life experiences and expression of faith had enough dose of animism which was under bastardization threat by the mainstream Christianity.

## References

Ovitt, George, Jr. *The Restoration of Perfection: Labor and Technology in Medieval Culture*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987.

White, Lynn, Jr. *Medieval Religion and Technology: Collected Essays*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1978.

White, Lynn, Jr. "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis." *Science* 155: 3767 (10 March 1967), 1203–1207.

White, Lynn, Jr. *Medieval Technology and Social Change*. London: Oxford University Press, 1962.

Conradie, E. M. 2006, „Christianity and Ecological Theology: Resources for Further Research“, *Study Guides in Religion and Theology*, Vol. 11, pp. 77-81.

The Holy Bible, King James Version. New York: American Bible Society: 1999; Bartleby.com, 2000. [www.bartleby.com/108/](http://www.bartleby.com/108/). [20 December 2012].

Mander, J. 1991, „In the Absence of the Sacred“ *The Failure of Technology and the Survival of the Indian Nations*. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books,

Moncrief, L. W. 1970. The cultural basis for our environmental crisis. *Science* (New York, NY), 170(3957), 508.

L. White Jr., “[Continuing the conversation]” in *Western Man and Environmental Ethics*, I. Barbour, Ed. (Addison-Wesley, 1973), chap.5, pp. 55-64.

D. Toomey, A scientist’s call for civility and diversity in conservation, interview with Jane Lubchenco. *Yale Env.* 360. Nov. 13, 2014. [http://e360.yale.edu/feature/interview\\_jane\\_lubchenco\\_scientist\\_calls\\_for\\_diversity\\_and\\_civility\\_in\\_conservation/2826/](http://e360.yale.edu/feature/interview_jane_lubchenco_scientist_calls_for_diversity_and_civility_in_conservation/2826/)

H. Tallis, J. Lubchenco, Working together: a call for inclusive conservation. *Nature*. 515, 27-28 (2014).

M. Marvier, P. Kareiva, Extinction is a moral wrong but conservation is complicated. *Biological Conservation*. 176, 281-282 (2014).

Bonaventure, (1978) *The Life of St. Francis*, (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press).

Camus, A. (1955) *The myth of Sisyphus*, (London: Hamish Hamilton).

Gladwin, T., J. Kennelly & T. Krause (1995) "Shifting paradigms for sustainable development: Implications for management theory and research", *Academy of Management Review*, 20(4): 874-907.

Leopold, A. (1949) *A Sand County Almanac, And Sketches Here and There*, (New York: Oxford University Press).

Lewis, C.S. (1953) *The Abolition of Man*, (New York: The Macmillan Co.).

Merton, T. (1963a) Lecture: St. Thomas: The Importance of Creation in God's View, April 3. (Louisville, Kentucky: Thomas Merton Studies Center), tape 95A.

Passmore, J. (1974) *Man's Responsibility For Nature: Ecological Problems and Western Traditions* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons).

Pope John Paul II (1995) *Encyclical Letter Evangelium Vitae* (Boston, MA: Pauline Books and Media).

Weis, M. (1992) "Living beings call us to reflective living," *Merton Seasonal*, Autumn: 4-9.

Lumbreras, S.; Oviedo, L.; Angel, H.-F. The missing piece in sustainability indices: Accounting for the human factor. *Sustainability* 2021, 13, 11796.

John Paul II. Apostolical Letter *Inter Sanctos*. 29 December 1979. Available online: [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paulii/la/apost\\_letters/1979/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_apl\\_19791129\\_inter-sanctos.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paulii/la/apost_letters/1979/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19791129_inter-sanctos.html) (accessed on 13 September 2023).

Michetti, R. Francesco d'Assisi e il paradosso della minoritas: La Vita beati Francisci di Tommaso da Celano. In Nuovi Studi Storici; Istituto Storico per il Medioevo: Rome, Italy, 2004.

Dalarun, J. Gouverner c'est Servir. Essai de Démocratie Médiévale; Alma: Paris, France, 2021.

Francis of Assisi. Early Documents; Armstrong, R.J., Wayne Hellman, J.A., Short, W., Eds.; New City Press: New York, NY, USA, 1999–2001; Volume 3.

Buffon, G. Il Cantico di frate Sole. Il soccorso delle creature all'uomo indegno di nominare il "Sommo Bene". *Antonianum* 2021, 96, 7–28.

Williams, C.D. Liberating the Enlightenment: How a transforms relationship with animals can transcend Modernity. *Relig. Educ.* 2003, 98, 95–107.

Hall, Bert S. "Lynn Townsend White, jr. (1907-1987)." (1989): 194-213.

Taylor, Bron, Gretel Van Wieren, and Bernard Zaleha. "The Greening of Religion Hypothesis (Part Two): Assessing the Data from Lynn White, Jr, to Pope Francis." *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 10.3 (2016): 306-78.