

Protestantism and Biblical Foundations for Ecological Care

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Introduction

This paper is an advocacy for a doctrinal foundation and the Protestant ideal to redirect care for the environment in a more virtuous pattern than what we have seen from the religious public, specifically in the United States. Though this is an advocacy for a revised version of Protestant thought on the environmental crisis, this is not a condemnation of Pope Francis or his view on the environmental crisis advocated for through his own avenues. The method by which the Pope is allowed a substantial platform to speak out is not a detriment to the continuing issue of an ethical consensus on Climate Change. His 2015 Encyclical letter provides progressive policies structured to allow the Catholic community to conform to the scientific community to shape theology rather than theology informing the principles by which we inform scientific direction. This paper is meant to guide the religious public on matters of ecology in the most progressive way possible. If we persuade the religious community to conform their concrete ideologies to a society at odds, the risk of the religious community refuting reality may manifest.

Pope Francis, in his 2015 Encyclical Letter, primarily acknowledges the need for “theological and philosophical reflections” (Francis, 17) on the environment to be peripheral to the science and reality. Francis uses a method of introducing science first to reinforce morality espoused in scripture as opposed to scripture influencing our scientists and policy makers or the society at large. Pragmatic as it may seem and not without sound arguments inspired by a visibly destructive pattern of behavior, this is by no means a force of concern for the Protestant public that lean towards a disregard for the papacy. The response from the Catholic community was highly receptive, especially in upper-level offices. Archbishop Joseph E. Kurtz of Louisville, Kentucky said in response to *Laudato Si'* that, “the need for urgent action is clear and (Pope Francis) appeals to us to become “painfully aware” of what is happening to the world.”

Archbishop Kurtz is the President of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops that, with its over 300 bishops and dioceses at hand, maintains influence across the United States.¹

The Protestant Majority

The need to acknowledge the unique position of Protestants in the United States is out of demographic necessity. The latest Religious Landscape Survey (RLS) conducted by Pew Research in 2014 mapped out religious affiliation among over 35,071 individuals from all 50 states. With a margin of error <1% the study reported that the percentage of adults who identified as Christian was 70.6% whereas the percentage of adults who identified as Protestant or Catholic were 46.6% and 20.8%, respectively. Protestants include the Mainline, Evangelical, and Historical Black Protestant churches. A study conducted by Pew in 2017 mapping out the religious landscape of all 535 members of the 115th Congress reported that 55.9% identified as Protestant and 31.9% identified as Catholic.

Represented at higher rate in Congress compared to the RLS study, possibly due to stigma associated around morality and public office², Protestants still situate themselves among the majority of Christians in the United States. So attention being directed to both to lawmakers and their constituents, concern for specific belief and ideas should begin with those within majorities in order to introduce developing public opinions.

Protestant Philosophy

Martin Luther, a 16th Century German monk and a central figure of the Protestant Reformation, said, “If now we take the sword from them they (the papists) will be sorry. And we must truly take it, not by force, but by means of the Word” (Luther, 379). Again, the essence of the Reformation was the desire to reclaim the doctrine of the Lord for purposes of broadcasting it

¹ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops: Bishops and Diocese. <http://www.usccb.org/news/2015/15-094.cfm>

² A 2014 study conducted by Pew Research determined that 53% of adults in the United States say that for a person to be moral, they have to believe in God.

to the world. The sword by which the papists use scripture is antithetical to the potential altruism it invokes among those with the liberty to worship. “Then let us see to it that we allow the pure Word of God to take its course, and afterward leave them (the people) free to follow, whom it has taken captive; yea, they will follow voluntarily” (Luther, 381). This is meant to invoke that the scripture is in need of liberation and those with the autonomy to worship on their own accord will do so not out of coercion but out of desire.

Sola Scriptura is Latin for by “scripture alone” and a major tenant of Lutheran philosophy. Luther writes, “Only keep to the scriptures” (Luther, *Large Catechism*) and to “Believe the scriptures, they will not lie to you and they know your flesh better than you yourself” (Luther, *Large Catechism*). Luther’s philosophy for reform is founded on observing scripture with resoluteness.

Turning to the rationale behind what German Sociologist Max Weber calls the “ethics of ascetic Protestantism” (Weber, 27) we can continue to analyze, in a more modern approach, the pragmatic side of what the reformers advocated for. This type of advocacy for Protestantism might stir the ghosts of anti-capitalists like Weber but this paper is not concerned with preaching pro or anti-capitalist sentiments so I will not address them here. The aspect of Protestantism that this paper is concerned with is adherence to scripture, as Luther believed. Because Biblical scriptures and the Gospel hold the most weight in Christian communities, this is where we start. The historical foundations and ideology of the Protestant movements being largely settled, assuming their structure for doctrinal groundwork, the arguments for a progressive Protestant community should utilize the doctrinal details at hand.

Pragmatic Ecological Theology

Honing in on the importance of specific scripture and how a large population of the United States belongs to a religious sect dependent on following said scripture with close examination and analysis, the topic of reconciling theology with environmental care is more important than ever. The work of Lynn White, Jr. made clear the seemingly hopeless nature that Christianity has built and perpetuated in the realm of ecology. White, a professor of medieval history, said “We shall continue to have a worsening ecological crisis until we reject the Christian axiom that nature has no reason for existence save to serve man” (White, 6). White’s work points out the clear need to substitute the doctrine of domination throughout the Bible for a more altruistic approach that he sees in such thinkers on matters of ecology as Saint Francis of Assisi.

Though he viewed the attempt at reconciliation of Christian dogma by Saint Francis as an ultimate failure,³ White still recognized the reality of a religiously motivated public as a continuing force behind topics like ecology. “More science and more technology are not going to get us out of the present ecologic crisis until we find a new religion, or rethink our old one” (White, 5). Theology can shape reality for good or for bad. The examples in the Bible to support an image of a capitalist society gone awry are there and have been cited by scholars over the past few decades to exhibit the root causes for environmental degradation as religiously motivated.

Aside from White, Eco-Feminist Val Plumwood is a fierce critic of antiquated Christian dogma.⁴ Her theory on the Christian view of human’s assignment on the earth is that the thought of death and decay are merely the acknowledgements of Christians that our “self” is continuing

³ “The greatest spiritual revolutionary in Western history, Saint Francis, proposed what he thought was an alternative Christian view of nature and man's relation to it; he tried to substitute the idea of the equality of all creatures, including man, for the idea of man's limitless rule of creation. He failed” -(White, 6).

⁴ “Its meaning is that the decay of the body is of no significance (a theme given added emphasis in the Christian doctrine of the resurrection), for the human essence is not tied to the body or to the world of changes, but is embedded in a transcendent spiritual order which persists” – (Plumwood, 101).

in the transcendent rather than being immersed in the physical world. Our recognition of our self “is in conflict with the basic conditions and fact of its physical existence” (Plumwood, 100). But even this theory is in conflict with such authors as Thomas J. Altizer who was instrumental to the furthering of theories surrounding the Death of God in Christianity.

When discussing the Death of Christ and what follows for Christianity, Altizer is among the school of thought that recognizes a “continual metamorphosis” of the divine. “It is precisely the self-annihilation of God from his original redemptive form that has liberated humanity from the transcendent realm” (Altizer, 110). God, becoming manifest in physical form, is brought to death and immerses with the world. For environmental advocacy, a God within the margins of what we recognize as time and space diminishes incentive for exploiting the earth that is seemingly in sync and acting as a conduit for the divine.

White is concerned with attacking the Christian traditions that have fed an attitude of ecological neglect but still advocates for uplifting the teachings of antiquated figures such as St. Francis of Assisi similar to the way Pope Francis does in his Encyclical Letter. Altizer is an example of someone utilizing the doctrine at hand and saying, “Wait, we went wrong here.” Protestants should realize that adhering to and studying scripture has more potential than mere institutional traditions. A devotion to scripture is what the reformers wanted. White, although not malicious in his intent to promote a healthy criticism of Christianity, unfortunately fails to realize the potential positive influence that scripture has.

Rich and analytical discussions can be met with either stagnation or consolidation of thought to achieve something progressive. Either way, it starts with a foundation. The scripture is the foundation in this case and what the religious community should build off of. Critics of religion citing scripture that coincides with an attitude of environmental deprivation and

dominion want to accomplish one of two things: to humiliate or degrade a religion that promotes such behavior or simply acknowledge harmful scripture to correspond with a similar attitude in the public sphere. Both methods stem from arrogance, unfortunately. The arrogance of wanting religious people to abandon their faith and the arrogance of pointing out all of the bad things their religion teaches will not work to push toward progressive thought. We have to work with what we have. The ability to scold the distasteful passages in the Bible is the same ability that can be used to embellish the progressive passages. But I will not disagree with White and Plumwood on the fact that the institutions have been failing us for some time. Potential for scripture to overcome failed customs, however, remains a fertile ground for exploration.

Ecological Care in Scripture

Allow me to provide examples for ecological care within scripture. Psalm 96:11-12 speaks of the “trees in the forest (that) sing for joy.” Revelations 11:18 says, on the wrath of God, that, “Your wrath has come...for rewarding your servants...and for destroying those who destroy the earth.” Song of Solomon 2:12 says, “The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land.” These examples are among the most indulgent and descriptive of God’s adoration for nature.

The more abstract discussions on nature, sin, and the earth in the Bible reveal a subtle but profound image of our potential impact. Isaiah 24:4-5 tells us “The earth dries up and withers, the world languishes and withers; the heavens languish together with the earth. The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants.” In the Bible, physicality of the world and flesh are fleeting. This passage from Isaiah reinforces the need to recognize both the finite aspect of the world but that the heavens are not untethered by a cosmic connection to the physical and are capable of a reciprocal suffering. The world suffers from its finite nature due to the presence of sin.

Romans 8:22-23 says, “We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.” This language of the apocalypse by Paul is mindful of a spirit that wanders through both humans and nature but nonetheless all tainted with the burden of sin. This image of a creation in pain or suffering from a world filled with exploitation and vice is crucial to understanding the power that certain Biblical passages have with topics such as the environmental care. The presence of terms such as sin, however, may get lost in the weeds as to how it functions for humans’ relation to both the immanent world and the transcendental heavens.

Frederick Quinn, notable advocate for stewardship, writes, “Sin includes both a willing turning away from God and the systematic destruction of God’s creation” (Quinn, 25). Sin is both rebellion and an efficient system of the excess of desires functioning with or without intention but nonetheless resulting in the disruption of harmony. Excess is a tenant of our current environmental crisis. “The Greek word for sin, *hamartia*, came from an archery term meaning to “miss the mark” (Quinn, 25). Christianity views humanity as in a constant state of “missing the mark” by our perpetual desire to rebel against God. To reconcile a relationship between humans and God, excess must be recognized as the ingrained resistance to God that Christians are faced with daily but have the ability to resolve by restoring proper relationships. In relation to Altizer, these examples are in keeping to his view on a world with a Creator immersed within all aspects of the cosmos, and not merely relegated to the heavens, as oxymoronic as that sounds.

It’s crucial to realize that the earth and the heavens are in relationship and not isolated from one or the other’s suffering. As humans, our brains tend to be viewed as wholly separate from our body but they are the same. One responds to the other in the same way that the heavens

are in continuous response to the earthly sin of humanity and the fruits of this earth. Christians will need to acknowledge these relationships for there to be a recognition of how destruction permeates the earth without the tendency to see heaven as existing as a separate entity.

Conclusion

“We find a convergence of mainstream and evangelical, small and large denominations on ecology and creation issues” (Quinn, 132). For the sake of earth, there should be abundant unity among common Christian virtues. Uniting the underlying and concrete philosophies as well as the irrefutable evidence for a creation adored by both its creator and inhabitants will help mend the disharmony that could not be more evident in our current environmental crisis.

The free ability to worship and study what the Bible offers, as Luther advocated, is the continuing foundation by which the scripture remains a formidable source for a majority of the Christian population. We owe mindfulness to the importance of certain passages and their place within a world ravaged by environmental destruction. The passages that uplift stewardship in the Bible and scold those who waste and destroy are abundant and can hold their weight among both scholars and a religious community devoted to adhering to scripture with ferocity.

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