

Review of Todd LeVasseur and Anna Peterson (eds.), *Religion and the Ecological Crisis: The 'Lynn White Thesis' at Fifty* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

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Lynn White Jr.'s 1967 seminal paper 'The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis' (henceforth, 'Roots'), published in *Science*, was catalytic in initiating and shaping new disciplines such as, ecotheology (now commonly called religion and ecology), environmental ethics, ecophilosophy, and environmental history, as well as American environmentalism as a social and intellectual movement.<sup>1</sup> Fifty-five years later, a Google Scholar search shows that it has been cited 8,779 times from the time of publication and continues to be cited to the present day.<sup>2</sup> 'Roots' has inspired many scholarly ventures including over 700 pieces of scholarship addressing the role (if any) that religious ideas have in shaping human perception of the environment and their behaviour towards it.<sup>3</sup> It has also been instrumental in the origination of scholarly journals such as the *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* and its predecessor, *Ecotheology: The Journal of Religion, Nature and Environment*.<sup>4</sup> Its impact and influence on the environmental humanities, although heavily critiqued, cannot be denied.

Thus, in 2017, to honour the golden anniversary (fifty years since its first publication), as a celebration and critical reflection of this influential five-page thesis, *Religion and the Ecological Crisis: The 'Lynn White Thesis' at Fifty* (henceforth *LYT50*) was published. *LYT50* is an interdisciplinary (due to the impact 'Roots' has had on a variety of disciplines) collection of essays by leading scholars

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<sup>1</sup> Elspeth Whitney. "Lynn White Jr.'s 'The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis' After 50 Years," *History Compass* 13, no. 8 (2015), 396. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/hic3.12254>

<sup>2</sup> This figure is taken from a Google Scholar search on 11 September 2022. There are multiple entries for 'Roots' and so this number may underestimate the actual number of citations.

<sup>3</sup> Bron Taylor, Gretel Van Wieren, and Bernard Daley Zaleha. "Lynn White Jr. and the Greening-of-Religion Hypothesis." *Conservation Biology*, 30, no. 5 (2016), 308. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/cobi.12735>

<sup>4</sup> Todd LeVasseur and Anna Peterson, eds., *Religion and Ecological Crisis: The "Lynn White Thesis" at Fifty* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 97.



that contemplates upon and reassess White and his ecological thesis. Todd LeVasseur and Anna Peterson, the editors of this collection, also remind us that an equally important reason for the publication of *LYT50* is that, to their frustration and sadness, the environmental crises that helped instigate White's article half a century earlier are still very much with us today.<sup>5</sup>

LeVasseur and Peterson open with an analogy that illustrates the importance of 'Roots' in the last 50 years, saying it "has become the foundation, jumping-off point, and lodestar for countless academic endeavours and even a new subdiscipline or two."<sup>6</sup> They go on to summarise it, distilling three claims that they believe have prompted the ongoing discourse and discussion. In short:

*First, [White] argues that ideological and cultural factors, especially religion, are the root causes of the "ecologic crisis" facing contemporary humans.*

*Second, he identifies Western Christianity as particularly influential in creating environmentally destructive attitudes.*

*Third, he suggests that, just as the fundamental causes of ecological destruction are religious, so too must their solution be religious.*

The controversial nature of these claims has led many commentators to highlight one or more of these themes, depending on their own background, academic field, and goals, lighting the lamps of many new sub-disciplines.

LeVasseur and Peterson also outline a pair of later essays, "Continuing the Conversation" (1973) and "The Future of Compassion" (1978), in which White responds to the critique received. Both reiterated and expanded the main arguments found in 'Roots.' A sample of the critique White's thesis received is presented from religious studies, theology, history, and natural and social science scholars on issues ranging from the particulars of his critique of Christian anthropocentrism to the broader claim about the significance of ideas in shaping environmental behaviour; the accuracy of his analysis of Medieval Europe; and the legitimacy of his comparison between Asian and Western environmental attitudes, to name but a few.

The collection of essays that follows are written by leading scholars within the environmental humanities who were asked "not only to reflect upon any enduring significance of 'Roots' but also to explain how it may have helped influence their own academic fields and their trajectories as scholars interested in human-nature interactions."<sup>7</sup> Many of these scholars also re-evaluated White's claims, which has made *LYT50* a constructive critique of his arguments from a diverse and

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<sup>5</sup> LeVasseur and Peterson, *Religion and Ecological Crisis*, 10.

<sup>6</sup> LeVasseur and Peterson, 1.

<sup>7</sup> LeVasseur and Peterson, 11.

wide range of perspectives that are useful as an introductory text for the environmental humanities rather than just a celebration of White's intellectual legacy.

The first chapter by Elspeth Witney, 'Lynn White Jr.'s "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis" after Fifty Years' provides a broad and constructive sample of the reception White's article has received across disciplines and contextualises him as a medieval historian assessing the impact that 'Roots' and his more scholarly work had both within his discipline and externally. Witney concludes by saying that although White was an 'excellent historian,' 'Roots' was a profoundly ahistorical exposé, more sermon than scholarship, that impelled much response. Its persistent hold to this current day infers that "White had tapped into a reservoir of deeply held but unresolved cultural issues about the roots of the environmental damage."<sup>8</sup>

The next contribution, 'The Historical Roots of Environmental Philosophy' depicts the influence 'Roots' has had on initiating the field of environmental philosophy. Eminent environmental ethicist J. Baird Callicott provides a first-hand account of the progression of the field and a summary of his reflections after half a century of professional engagement. He reassesses 'Roots' underlying and much-repeated assumption, that it is ideas that drive behaviour or "What we do about our ecology depends on how we think about it."<sup>9</sup> Which he says, in the light of contemporary understanding, is "laughable."<sup>10</sup> Callicott ends by appealing to philosophers, particularly environmental philosophers, to, firstly, think about and rethink the nature of nature, human nature, and the relationship between humans and nature and, secondly, to see it as just one small (albeit vital) piece of the environmental crisis puzzle alongside other disciplines.

Environmental historian, Mark Stoll, in 'Sinners in the Hands of an Ecologic Crisis: Lynn White's Environmental Jeremiad' explores the wide range of reactions that 'Roots' triggered amongst religious scholars and thinkers in America. The response was triumvirate; apologetic, denial, and greening. Stoll argues that it was not "doctrines of dominion, anthropocentrism, arrogance, or a Weberian disenchantment of nature" that led to the exploitation of nature but paradoxically "ideals of social justice and stewardship."<sup>11</sup> Stoll concludes with an appeal to lay aside 'Roots' and "look to historical societies for those moral, social, and ecological principles that in the past have nurtured justice and sustainability."<sup>12</sup>

Michael Northcott's chapter, 'Lynn White Jr. Right and Wrong: The Anti-Ecological Character of Latin Christianity and the Pro-Ecological Turn of Protestantism' also takes a historical approach to re-count the environmental movement. He argues that White's thesis failed to recognise the

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<sup>8</sup> LeVasseur and Peterson, 28.

<sup>9</sup> LeVasseur and Peterson, 36.

<sup>10</sup> LeVasseur and Peterson, 44.

<sup>11</sup> LeVasseur and Peterson, 50.

<sup>12</sup> LeVasseur and Peterson, 58.

Protestant contribution to the twentieth-century environmental movement and this omission has led to an over-generalisation attributing the burden of guilt to all of Latin Christianity and particularly an oversight of Presbyterianism which, “had within it the seeds of a different trajectory.”<sup>13</sup>

Taking an anthropological perspective, Shepard Krech III in ‘Animism and Reincarnation: Lynn White in Indian Country,’ draws on Native American culture to reflect on the ecological integrity of animism that White claims was destroyed by Christianity. Krech argues that aspects of indigenous culture such as reincarnation and its dietary preference and treatment of Buffalo puts into question the extent to which indigenous peoples were called to protect the natural world.

In the next chapter, ‘Lynn White Jr., One Catalyst in the Historical Development of Spiritual Ecology,’ Leslie Sponsel illustrates how White was a forerunner in ecotheology and the heavy criticism of ‘Roots’ is often due to superficial reading. She argues that White’s thesis, through its enduring analysis and critique, catalysed the emergence of ‘spiritual ecology,’ which differs from the emphasis on religion found in ‘Roots’. For Sponsel, “the spiritual often drives the others, but is the least researched” and, in spiritual ecology, the environmental crisis expresses a plethora of varied environmental issues from the local to the global levels.<sup>14</sup> She concludes by recognising the limitations as well as the validity of White’s argument and acknowledges White as a highly respected historian in his time and for making history through catalysing new sub-fields and significant discussion exploring the relationship between religion and the environment.

The Evangelist philosopher, Christopher Cone, in ‘Continuing the Conversation: Applying Lynn White Jr.’s Prescriptions for a Christian Environmental Ethic’, reassess both the traditional dominionist interpretation and stewardship interpretation, calling them “exegetically deficient and inadequate for answering White’s critique.”<sup>15</sup> Instead, he proposes an alternative interpretation; redacted dominionism, “which asserts that human relations to nature are based on theocentric rather than anthropocentric themes, and that the dominion mandate was redacted as the Genesis narrative progressed.”<sup>16</sup> He ends by noting that redacted dominionism, although a minority interpretation, is certainly plausible and could be a useful and less controversial means to achieve White’s proposition of a transformation within Christianity itself, to recover and put into practice less destructive attitudes.

Christopher Key Chapple reviews ‘Roots’ from the perspective of Asian religions (specifically Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism). In ‘Lynn White Jr. and India: Romance? Reality?’ he argues that “White romanticized, and perhaps Orientalized and exoticized, Asian culture” due to the limited

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<sup>13</sup> LeVasseur and Peterson, 72.

<sup>14</sup> LeVasseur and Peterson, 97.

<sup>15</sup> LeVasseur and Peterson, 103.

<sup>16</sup> LeVasseur and Peterson, 103.

information available at the time.<sup>17</sup> He offers some reflections of how Asian ideas and practices have nonetheless inspired a deeper awareness to the human condition through an array of now mainstream disciplines and practices.

In 'The Challenges of Worldview Transformation: "To Rethink and Refeel Our Origins and Destiny",' Heather Eaton provides a positive appraisal of 'Roots,' agreeing with White by positing that "a fundamental collective rethinking, worldview evaluation, and cultural reorientation are necessary."<sup>18</sup> Eaton samples the theory surrounding 'worldviews' and asserts that "the shift from one worldview to another is neither straightforward nor well understood, especially at a societal level," however, the increase in ecological deterioration since 'Roots' calls for a "counter reaction" that "cultivates a global ecological democracy" akin to Thomas Berry's response to this challenge.<sup>19</sup>

Chaone Mallory's ecofeminist critique, 'Gender and Genesis: Religion, Secular Science, and the Project of Power and Control,' puts 'Roots' into conversation with Carolyn Merchant's pioneering work *The Death of Nature* (1980). Whilst she praises White's meta-concern, she argues that "his gendered scholarly assumptions miss very important forces," namely how patriarchal attitudes of domination, dominion, power, and control have oppressed and continue to oppress *both* women and nature.<sup>20</sup> She ends by paraphrasing White: "as the roots of our trouble are so largely gendered, the solution must be gendered too."<sup>21</sup>

Paul Waldau's essay, 'A Lens, a Path, a Return Journey—Lynn White and the Question of Animal Protection' argues that current awareness of animal protection was much more than half a century ago, thus White's statements on such issues (especially in his later writings) which quite forcefully disseminates the idea that Christians need to acknowledge a "democracy of all God's creatures" are essential today as we continue to learn about our own species' engagement with ourselves and the other-than-human citizens of the world around us.<sup>22</sup>

'What's Left (Out) of the Lynn White Narrative?,' the penultimate contribution by Whitney Bauman, is a critique on 'narrative' in general and how White (a white, male, Protestant, academic, historian) perhaps privileged a certain type of understanding of 'religion' and 'ecology/nature,' which was dominant in academia at that time. Bauman proceeds by exploring three other 'religion and ecology/nature' narratives unrelated to White, using archipelagic, post-colonial, and queer or new materialist approaches. He concludes by suggesting a pre-made solution that traditional

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<sup>17</sup> LeVasseur and Peterson, 118.

<sup>18</sup> LeVasseur and Peterson, 124.

<sup>19</sup> LeVasseur and Peterson, 126, 131.

<sup>20</sup> LeVasseur and Peterson, 144.

<sup>21</sup> LeVasseur and Peterson, 145.

<sup>22</sup> Matthew T. Riley. "A Spiritual Democracy of All God's Creatures: Ecotheology and the Animals of Lynn White Jr" In *Divinanimality: Animal Theory, Creaturely Theology*, ed. Stephen Moore (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 242.

narratives suggest is the opposite to what is required and rather to resist creating the world in our own image “we need to begin to live differently toward possibilities that understand other earth-creatures as partners in this process of world-making.”<sup>23</sup>

Last, but by no means least, William Jordan III's essay, ‘Therefore the Winds: Some Thoughts on the “Roots,”’ assesses the idea of value in ‘Roots’ with literary critic Frederick Turner’s theory of values that links shame, ritual, and the experience of beauty as the highest level of our understanding. Jordan posits that the abandonment of ritual was the key anti-ecological shift and to restore our ecology the solution lies in creating new rituals to negotiate the human-nature relationship.<sup>24</sup>

Taken together, *LYT50* contains within its pages a wide range of disciplinary perspectives and insights from leading scholars. ‘Roots,’ and White’s thesis in general, has been widely critiqued; it has also been championed for initiating many new subfields, a deeper enquiry into the religious and metaphysical root causes of the ecological crisis, and the human relationship with nature. It has further been criticised for creating a narrative too simplistic for such a complex issue and for excluding grand narratives such as gender, colonialism, ritual and power. However, in both regards, it has paved the way for enhanced and more nuanced scholarship and understanding.

The multi-disciplinary approach taken in *LYT50* offers a gateway into varied perspectives of several important debates within the ‘environmental crisis’ landscape. In this regard, *LYT50* is a rich resource for scholarship in both the environmental humanities and environmental social sciences.

Although *LYT50* offers many reflective insights into the roots of the ecological crisis and White’s influence on the emerging fields, as LeVasseur and Peterson stated in their introduction, it is a miserable situation and, more than half a century after the publication of ‘Roots,’ the environmental crisis is perhaps worse now than it was when White penned his work.

Future scholarship has the opportunity to move beyond White’s thesis and advance and test new theories about the human-nature relationship and how we can live in harmony and balance with and within our environment, and to recognise other earth-creatures and biosystems as partners in our narratives. As Bauman concluded in his essay, “we can’t possibly know what this will look like until we start doing it” however an inter-disciplinary approach can offer more holistic perspectives of this complex and interconnected issue.<sup>25</sup> And, perhaps, deeper commune in nature, akin to the Romantics practice of walking, would provide greater insight, inspiration, and connection to our selves, to non-human beings, to nature and the divine universal principal that connects us all.

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<sup>23</sup> LeVasseur and Peterson, *Religion and Ecological Crisis*, 175.

<sup>24</sup> LeVasseur and Peterson, 186.

<sup>25</sup> LeVasseur and Peterson, 70.