

James Hooker

Prof. Mullan

Environmental Ethics

6 March 2025

Christian Mysticism as Environmentalism

Subjectively, religion describes a personal connection to God, faith, or Spirit that has the potential for determining a person's worldview. Objectively, religion can be defined as a particular set of beliefs, traditions, customs, and practices that have the potential for determining an entire culture's worldview. The dichotomy between the subjective and objective realities of religion is an important point of interest in examining environmental ethics - the subjective experience influences an individual's morality, duty, and responsibility to the world, while the objective experience influences the political and cultural climate of which the individual is a part. Reevaluating our personal relationship with the world, and deconstructing the influences of our culture are huge steps toward maintaining balance with the environment. One of the most popular religions in the United States and most of the western world is Christianity, a religion which can be construed in an anthropocentric lens but also upholds an inclusive defence of the environment in its more mystical aspects.

The creation of the world according to Christianity is detailed in *Genesis*. This story, taken literally, has burrowed itself in the minds of men as a story of possession and ownership. This interpretation, paired with the exploitative nature of capitalism, has resulted in a mass ignorance, negatively impacting the environment and our relationship with the earth. For example, *Genesis* is often cited as a command from God for humans to uphold their authority

over the rest of the terrestrial world. The primary example of this suggests human mastery over God's domain: "Be fertile and increase, fill the earth and master it, and rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and all the living things that creep on earth" (1:28). To the cunning magnate, the Word of God ends here; it is a command of God to master this earth and rule over its creatures. And perhaps, to rule over other cultures, classes, and women as well. Succumbing to innate desires for power, the light-reader of the Bible sees justification and opportunity for systematic hierarchy. According to *Earthcare*, "Ecofeminists and other critics have identified the link between hierarchy and domination as a central pillar of patriarchy, simultaneously supporting the patriarchal subjugation of women and the human subjugation of nature" (40). Although domination is not a widely praised aspect of Christianity, the sentiment still seeps through, creeping up at its worst in domestic and sexual abuse within the church, and at best, as an ignorance of reality and delusive comfort in stagnation.

But there are ideals presented in the text which transcend this power-desire-driven interpretation. *Earthcare* presents a perspective of *Genesis* as describing "a harmonious human society... [which] lives in respectful harmony with nature, treating it with care as God's treasured property, and as a sanctuary filled with the divine presence" (40). There are many patron saints from the Christian religion that personify nature as a divine manifestation of God - beautiful, precious, our Mother and Father. St. Francis of Assisi is one such Saint. St. Francis of Assisi, a 12th-century Italian mystic, lauds his relationship to God and nature in the "Canticle of the Sun":

How beautiful is He, how radiant in all His splendor? / Of You, Most High, He bears the likeness / All praise be Yours, my Lord, through Sister Moon and Stars; In the heavens

You have made them, bright / And precious and fair / All praise be Yours, my Lord,
 through Brothers Wind and Air / And fair and stormy, all the weather's moods / By which
 You cherish all that You have made / All praise be Yours, my Lord, through Sister Water,
 / So useful, lowly, precious and pure...

St. Francis continues to praise and commend his Lord in the forms of all nature. Such ideals are not only the spontaneous outpourings of a mystic-poet. Upon closer inspection, the story of creation according to Genesis offers a worldview just as marvelous as St. Francis describes. After creating all of the earth, sky and seas, plants and animals, God says, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground" (1:26). As the image or reflection of God on earth, it is not mankind's duty to subjugate and trample all of its creatures, but to exist in harmony with them and admire them as God's creation from within creation - two fundamentally different perspectives. To rule over the earth is not to imply domination, but simply to describe a vertical axis of communion with God as He intended.

Thus, two different interpretations of creation can be made from *Genesis*. The first is the commonly (mis)understood anthropocentric view: the idea that humans are the center of the universe and the crown of creation, and the world and everything in it exists to please humanity. The second is the ecocentric view of creation, in which nature and the environment are central, which includes humanity as part of its divine plan.

Another (mis)interpretation of Christianity can be seen in the works of Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), another Italian theologian. Thomas Aquinas believed in the principle of eternal

laws and that everything that exists should live in accordance with them. He especially commented on man's relationship to animals, which has become a contested source of environmental ethics in Christianity. At first glance, Aquinas seems to mirror Aristotelian beliefs that humans are the masters of this earth, and should govern over all of its creatures. According to the *Summa Theologiae* of St. Thomas Aquinas, "[F]rom the order observed by nature the imperfect are for the use of the perfect; as the plants make use of the earth for their nourishment, and animals make use of plants, and man makes use of both plants and animals. Therefore it is in keeping with the order of nature, that man should be master over animals" (ST I, q. 96 a. 1). One can interpret an anthropocentric, hierarchical perspective from the revered priest, but similar to *Genesis*, further contextualization is required. Thomas Aquinas also states that, "the entire universe, with all its parts, is ordained towards God as its end" (ST I, q. 65 a. 2). Therefore it can be seen that the animals and plants of the earth exist not for mankind, but for God, once more putting the hierarchy of nature into a new perspective.

As can be seen from a closer look at *Genesis*, Aquinas, and the mystical praisings of St. Francis, the hierarchical nature of orthodox Christianity is not an expounding of systematic power and authoritarian structure, but rather a recognition of spiritual progression of imperfection to perfection. Seen in this light, Christian scripture can uphold an inclusive defence of the environment. If all is for God, then so is this earth; even the lowliest creature deserves the devotion, protection, and praise of man as its steward.

Works Cited

Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*. The Advent. <https://www.newadvent.org/summa/>

Earthcare: An Anthology in Environmental Ethics. Edited by David Clowney and Patricia Mosto.

Lowman and Littlefield Publishers. 2009.

Genesis. Bible Gateway.

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis%201&version=NIV>

I pledge my honor that I have abided by the Stevens honors system.