

Article

Beyond Sacred Texts: Religions, Historical Mediation and the Environmental Question

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Abstract

This article reconsiders the relationship between religions and the environment from a historical and methodological perspective. It argues that the ecological orientation of a religious tradition cannot be deduced directly from its sacred texts, since texts become socially effective only through a range of mediating processes such as interpretation, preaching, ritual, education, institutional authority, devotional practice, and political use. This is especially evident in ancient and medieval societies, where most believers encountered Scripture through mediators rather than as individual readers. The article discusses the influential paradigm inaugurated by Lynn White, the critical contribution of ecofeminism, and recent theological genealogies linking Christian doctrines to ecological and colonial violence. While recognising the importance of these approaches, it stresses the need to avoid anachronism and overly linear explanations. Concepts such as “nature” and “environment” have changed over time, and the environmental question, as currently understood, belongs to the modern and contemporary world. The article also criticises the public tendency to rank religions according to their supposed ecological value. Religious environmentalism is interpreted as a contemporary process of reinterpretation, in which inherited symbols, doctrines, and practices are resemanticised in response to the ecological crisis. In doing so, it proposes mediation as a central category for studying religions and environmental thought historically.

Keywords: religions; environment; historical mediation; religious environmentalism; ecofeminism; Christianity

1. Introduction

In recent decades, the relationship between religions and the environment has become a very important field of inquiry [1]. Scholars of religion, theologians, historians, activists, religious authorities and journalists have increasingly asked whether religious traditions can support ecological awareness or whether, on the contrary, they have contributed to the exploitation of the natural world. The question is legitimate and urgent, especially in the context of the present ecological crisis. Very often, however, it has been formulated in a way that risks simplifying both religion and history. We are frequently invited to ask which religion is the most ecological, which sacred text contains the most respectful vision of nature, and which religious tradition can be considered most compatible with contemporary environmental ethics.

Such reasoning is problematic. It assumes that the ecological orientation of a religion can be extracted directly from its sacred texts, as if those texts acted by themselves, passing from the written page to the minds and behaviours of believers. This premise is historically



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fragile. Sacred texts become socially effective through a series of mediations that may add, transform or subtract meanings, such as preaching, liturgy, ritual performance, education, images, legal norms and devotions. This is particularly evident in ancient and medieval societies, where access to writing was limited and where most believers did not encounter Scripture as individual readers. They received religious instruction largely through mediators who interpreted doctrine, moralised experience and promoted socially defined forms of behaviour. In short, these mediating strata helped produce the scales of value that informed practice.

For this reason, a historical approach to the relationship between religions and the environment must pay attention to the mediations through which sacred texts were made active within specific societies. A biblical passage, a Qur'anic verse, a creation myth, a cosmological narrative or a theological doctrine may have very different historical effects according to the ways in which it is explained, ritualised, institutionalised and connected to social practices. The historian must therefore ask how religious meanings were transmitted, by whom, in which contexts, with which authority and with which effects on ordinary life.

By mediation, this article does not mean an attenuation or corruption of the authority of sacred texts. It refers to the historically situated processes through which texts become intelligible, authoritative and socially operative. These processes include interpretative mediation, exercised by exegetes, theologians, jurists and preachers; institutional mediation, exercised by Churches, schools, monasteries, tribunals and missions; and practical or communicative mediation, enacted through liturgy, ritual, images, catechesis, devotion, law and customary behaviour. From a theological perspective, interpretation belongs to the internal life of a religious tradition and participates in the production of doctrinal meaning. From a historical perspective, the same interpretative activity must also be studied as a socially situated practice, exercised by particular actors and institutions and capable of producing different effects in different contexts.

Although the methodological argument advanced here may be relevant to the historical study of different religious traditions, the article develops it primarily through the case of Western Christianity, which has generated the most influential modern debate on the religious genealogies of the ecological crisis. References to other traditions are therefore not intended as comprehensive analyses, but as examples of the risks involved in attributing fixed ecological identities to religions. Chronologically, the discussion moves between premodern forms of religious mediation and the modern and contemporary emergence of environmentalism; geographically, its main historical focus is Europe and the Christian West, with broader references to contemporary global religious discourse.

A second problem concerns anachronism. The environmental question, as we understand it today, belongs to a precise historical configuration. It is connected to many factors that are, however, specific to the contemporary world. Some of the most evident may be recalled here: industrialisation, the capitalist order, technological acceleration, colonial extraction, demographic growth, fossil energy and the scientific capacity to measure planetary degradation. We should certainly not forget that sacred texts were composed in worlds in which nature was often experienced as a powerful and dangerous reality, marked by events of very high impact, from floods, for example, to the sharing of vital spaces with wild animals, also in relation to the defensive technologies then available. In many historical contexts, human communities had to protect themselves from nature before they could imagine protecting nature from themselves. The idea of the environment as a fragile object to be protected is a modern and contemporary construction, born from a long transformation of historical conditions.

This does not mean that ancient and medieval societies were indifferent to the world around them. They developed complex ways of understanding it, giving rise to rituals

intended to act upon adverse climatic conditions, prohibitions concerning the sphere of food, regulations concerning common resources, and reflections and beliefs about creation and divine providence. These elements cannot be translated immediately into modern ecological categories. Rather, they must be understood in their own historical grammar.

The aim of this essay is to contribute to a more cautious and historically grounded discussion of the relationship between religions and the environment. The path opened by Lynn White in the late 1960s remains fundamental, because it forced scholars to consider the possible links between religious beliefs, technological development, and attitudes toward nature [2]. Ecofeminist reflections have further deepened the analysis by showing how domination over nature is connected to wider systems of domination over bodies, women, labour, and colonised peoples [3–7]. More recent theological and historical works, such as Whitney Bauman's reflections on *creatio ex nihilo*, have renewed the debate by connecting Christian doctrines, colonial violence, and ecological violence [8]. These interpretations are important because they have made a crucial problem visible. At the same time, they require historical verification. Religious doctrines do not generate social behaviours in a linear way. They are interpreted, used, contested, forgotten, reactivated, and transformed.

The problem becomes even more evident when scholarly theories circulate in public discourse. Complex historical and theological arguments are often simplified into rankings of religions: Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism or Indigenous traditions are presented as more or less 'green', more or less respectful of nature, more or less responsible for environmental damage [9,10]. Such classifications may be attractive for journalism and public debate, but they produce a distorted image of religions. Religions are historical worlds, not abstract containers of ecological values. Their relationship with the environment must be reconstructed within history, not deduced from a few selected passages in canonical texts.

2. Lynn White and the Birth of a Paradigm

The modern debate on religion and ecology is usually traced back to Lynn White's famous article, 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis', published in *Science* in 1967 [2]. White's essay was brief, brilliant, and provocative. It became one of the most influential texts in the field because it connected the ecological crisis to the long history of Western Christianity. According to White, modern technology and science had developed within a cultural framework deeply shaped by Christian dogma. The biblical idea of human dominion over creation, in his interpretation, generated a worldview in which nature existed to serve human beings. Western Christianity, especially in its Latin medieval form, would therefore have contributed to the emergence of an exploitative attitude toward the natural world.

White's formulation was powerful because it placed religion at the center of a debate often dominated by technology, economics and politics. His famous statement that 'human ecology is deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny' opened a new interpretative path [2]. Religion was no longer treated as a secondary element, but as one of the deep structures that shape civilisations and their attitudes toward the material world. In this sense, White's essay remains a foundational text.

At the same time, White's use of medieval history raises several questions. His interpretation of Francis of Assisi as an environmental hero defeated by official Christianity has had enormous influence, but it also shows the risks of actualising the past too rapidly [11]. Francis certainly developed an extraordinary language of fraternity with creatures, and his *Canticum of the Creatures* gave poetic form to a vision of creation as a community of praise. However, presenting him as a kind of modern ecologist means transferring

twentieth-century categories into a thirteenth-century religious experience. Francis lived within a historically determined theological, liturgical and penitential universe.

White's treatment of Bonaventure is even more problematic. The claim that Bonaventure attempted to suppress the early Franciscan accounts because Francis's ecological proposal was heretical is historically difficult to sustain. Bonaventure's intervention in Franciscan memory had to do with conflicts within the Order, the need to stabilise institutional identity, the tensions between poverty and ecclesiastical recognition, and the construction of an authorised hagiographical image of the founder. Reading this process as the defeat of a proto-environmentalist Christianity risks narrowing a very complex historical field.

White's essay therefore remains indispensable and, at the same time, methodologically risky. It showed that religious traditions can contribute to shaping attitudes toward the world. It also encouraged a model in which doctrine, mentalities and historical behaviours appear too directly connected. The historian must slow down this connection. Between a dogma and a social practice there is a series of mediators of meaning that must be considered carefully. A religious idea may legitimise domination in one context, support resistance in another, remain marginal in a third, or be rediscovered centuries later with a meaning that would have been unrecognisable to earlier believers.

This point is central to any discussion of Christianity and the environment. The biblical language of dominion, creation, blessing, fertility and curse has never had a single historical meaning. It has been read through a series of interpreters, from exegetes to experts in canon law, and through devotional practices, catechisms, and many other forms of intermediate communication. At different times these mediations have interpreted the text in ways that legitimised concrete and contingent needs, such as imperial expansion, symbolic readings of animals, sacramental visions of matter, colonial violence, missionary agriculture, conservationist discourses and contemporary ecotheologies. The historical problem lies precisely in these mediations.

White's argument identified a religious and anthropological genealogy of ecological exploitation, but it largely treated 'Western Christianity' and 'humanity' as internally homogeneous categories. Ecofeminism widened this framework by asking which human subjects exercised dominion, whose bodies and labour were subordinated, and how the domination of nature intersected with patriarchy, capitalism and colonial power. The following section therefore moves from a critique centred on anthropocentrism to one concerned with the interlocking structures of domination.

3. Ecofeminism and the Critique of Domination

In the same years in which White's thesis began to circulate, ecofeminism emerged as one of the most original attempts to rethink the relationship between human beings, nature, bodies, and power. Ecofeminism did not limit itself to reflection on the environment. It connected ecological destruction to patriarchy, capitalism, colonial violence, and the marginalisation of women. Its central intuition was that domination over nature and domination over women belong to the same symbolic and social order. The exploitation of land, the control of bodies, the devaluation of care, the invisibility of reproductive labour and the reduction of life to economic productivity were interpreted as different expressions of the same historical process [3–7].

This perspective is important for the present discussion because it shifts attention from isolated doctrines to systems of interpretation and practice. Ecofeminist theologians and activists have often criticised Christian traditions for having produced male images of God, hierarchical cosmologies and moral systems that deprived women of full agency. Mary Daly's radical critique, for instance, insisted on the need to deconstruct traditional images of the divine and the symbolic foundations of patriarchy [3]. Other ecofeminist

thinkers, such as Rosemary Radford Ruether, Ivone Gebara, Mary Judith Ress, Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies, worked in different contexts and with different vocabularies, but they shared the conviction that ecological injustice and social injustice had to be analysed together [4–7].

The ecofeminist contribution is therefore methodological as well as political. It teaches that religious language becomes historically effective when it is embodied in social relations. A theological image, a metaphor of creation, a doctrine of authority or a ritual practice may sustain structures of domination, but it may also be reinterpreted in order to contest them. For this reason ecofeminism has never been only an academic field. It has generated communities, created networks and given rise to groups that shaped spiritual practices and political activism. The Con-spirando collective, founded in Santiago de Chile in 1991 by Mary Judith Ress and Ute Seibert, offers a significant example. It created a space in which women could reflect on spirituality, ecology, social justice, and the meaning of life through shared practices and collective experiences [7].

Experiences of this kind are useful for a historical discussion because they show how religious traditions are transformed through communities of interpretation. Ecofeminist women did not simply read sacred texts in search of ecological passages. They reinterpreted religious symbols from a different scale of values and thus invented new practices, new languages and new forms of spiritual authority. In this sense, ecofeminism helps us understand that the relationship between religions and the environment is produced in the interaction among different subjects.

This point helps avoid reducing ecofeminism to an anti-Christian or anti-religious discourse. Ecofeminism has certainly criticised traditional Churches and patriarchal theologies, often with great radicalism. Its broader significance, however, lies in the critique of all systems that naturalise domination. Its deepest contribution is the attempt to dismantle the symbolic order that makes domination appear natural, inevitable or divinely sanctioned, and not, as has often been said by trivialising the issue, the simple reversal of a hierarchy, as if women or nature had to replace men or culture in the position of authority.

From this perspective, ecofeminism can be placed in dialogue with White's thesis and, at the same time, correct some of its limits. White's argument tends to identify Christianity as a deep cultural root of ecological exploitation in the West. Ecofeminism enlarges the field and makes visible the connections between theology, economy, gender and power. It shows that religious ideas become dangerous when they enter systems of domination, and that they may become liberating when they are reinterpreted within practices of justice. This distinction is important. Historical responsibility lies in the uses, interpretations and institutions that make religious language socially active.

This enlargement of the field also reinforces the need to examine how religious meanings become effective. If domination is produced through interconnected symbolic, social and institutional systems, sacred texts cannot be treated as self-executing causes. The analysis must therefore turn from genealogies of ideas to the mediations that connect texts, authorities, communities and practices.

4. Against Textual Immediacy: Sacred Texts, Mediation and Ordinary Believers

A further methodological problem concerns the presumed immediacy of sacred texts. Many interpretations of the relationship between religions and ecology seem to imagine a direct passage from the sacred page to the mind of the believer. According to this implicit model, a religion can be judged favourable or unfavourable to the environment by selecting some passages from its canonical texts and then attributing to those passages a long-term social effect. The model is seductive because it is simple. It allows one to move rapidly from

doctrine to behaviour, from Genesis to the Western exploitation of nature, from Qur'anic verses to Islamic environmental law, from Buddhist texts to compassion toward living beings. Yet history rarely works in such a linear way.

Sacred texts act in history through the mediations recalled so far; therefore, a text may be canonical and at the same time remain unknown to most believers in its literal form. This point is decisive for the historical study of the connections between religions and the environment. If we want to understand how a religious tradition shaped attitudes toward the environment, it is not enough to ask what its sacred texts say on these matters. We must reconstruct how those texts were made socially operative. Which passages were selected? Who interpreted them? In which institutions? For which audiences? Through which ritual forms? With which social effects? A verse on creation may have one meaning in a monastic commentary, another in a sermon addressed to peasants, another in a princely ideology of conquest, and yet another in a modern ecological encyclical. The text remains recognisable, but its historical life changes.

This approach also helps us rethink the role of ordinary believers. In premodern societies, the majority of men and women lived within religious worlds shaped more by practices than by individual reading. These practices transmitted ideas about divine providence and could influence behaviour toward animals and land, but through embodied habits rather than through direct textual reflection.

The same consideration applies to the transmission of religious authority. Sacred texts are never alone. They are surrounded by interpreters: bishops, monks, jurists, theologians, imams, rabbis, preachers, confessors, teachers, missionaries, elders and ritual specialists decide what is relevant, what is dangerous, what is orthodox, what must be repeated, what may be forgotten. In many cases, the environmental implications that modern readers find in a sacred text were not those emphasised by past religious authorities. The historian must resist the temptation to privilege the passages that appear significant today simply because they resonate with contemporary concerns.

This does not mean that sacred texts are irrelevant. On the contrary, their authority matters enormously. They offer symbolic repertoires and powerful languages of legitimisation, but their power lies precisely in their capacity to be reactivated in different contexts. A passage may remain marginal for centuries and then become central in a new historical moment. A verse once used to justify human superiority may be reread as a call to responsibility. A cosmological myth may support ritual care for the land in one society and political domination in another. The historical problem is the plurality of these uses.

This also means that the historian should avoid treating 'religion' as a single block. Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism or Indigenous traditions cannot be reduced to their canonical texts, nor to official doctrine, nor to the declarations of contemporary leaders. They are lived through a plurality of subjects that produce meaning, and each of them requires its own historical explanation.

5. The Historical Instability of Nature and Environment

A second difficulty concerns the words we use. 'Nature' and 'environment' appear obvious only because they are familiar to us. Their meanings have changed profoundly over time. The word 'environment', in its contemporary moral and political sense, belongs to a relatively recent historical horizon. It refers to the awareness that human activity can damage the planetary conditions of life and that such damage requires public responsibility, scientific measurement, legal intervention and ethical transformation. This awareness is inseparable from contemporary reality and from the features that structurally define it.

Earlier societies certainly had intense relationships with the natural world. Yet the environment was not usually imagined as a fragile system threatened by human action on

a planetary scale. The main problem was often the opposite: how to survive in a world perceived as powerful, unstable and dangerous, as noted above.

This difference matters. When a medieval community prayed for rain, blessed the fields, interpreted a flood as divine punishment, protected a forest because it belonged to a monastery, or regulated the use of common pasture, it was certainly developing a relationship with the natural world. It was not necessarily formulating an environmental ethic in the modern sense. Translating these practices into the language of ecology may be useful for contemporary reflection, but it becomes historically misleading when the translation erases the original grammar.

The same caution applies to the idea of protecting nature. In many historical contexts, human intervention in the landscape was perceived as a sign of civilisation. Clearing forests, draining marshes, controlling rivers, cultivating land and defending settlements from animals could be understood as necessary, beneficial or even providential actions. These practices may appear destructive from a contemporary ecological point of view, but they often responded to concrete needs of survival. The historian must hold together these different temporalities: the long-term ecological effects of human action and the immediate necessities of historical communities.

The semantic history of 'nature' is revealing [12]. In different periods, nature has meant birth, essence, order, matter, instinct, the created world, the non-human world, the visible universe, the opposite of culture, the object of science, the source of authenticity, the fragile victim of industrial society. Its value has also changed: the positive value attached today to 'nature' is itself a historical product. The more environmental degradation becomes evident, the more nature is imagined as good, pure, threatened and morally superior to the artificial world.

Religious traditions participated in these semantic transformations by offering ways of thinking and attributions of meaning. These ideas, however, were constantly reinterpreted in relation to changing historical needs. A community threatened by famine may read abundance as a divine gift. A colonial society may read land as available for occupation. A monastic community may read cultivated land as the fruit of disciplined labour. A contemporary religious movement may read the same creation as a fragile network of interdependence to be protected. The sacred text is still present, but the historical situation changes the question addressed to it.

For this reason the search for an ecological essence of religions is fragile. It assumes stability where history shows movement and risks transforming complex traditions into moral labels. It is impossible to overlook the fact that contemporary religious environmentalism is itself a historical response to a new condition. Today religious leaders speak of climate change, biodiversity, pollution and environmental justice because these are the problems of our time. Their discourse may be rooted in ancient texts, but the selection and interpretation of those texts belong to the present.

6. Theology, Genealogy and the Risks of Historical Extension

The methodological issues just discussed become clear when we consider some recent theological and historical interpretations that connect specific doctrines to ecological violence. Whitney Bauman's *Theology, Creation, and Environmental Ethics: From Creatio Ex Nihilo to Terra Nullius* offers an important example [8]. The book proposes a genealogy linking the Christian doctrine of creation out of nothing to a logic of domination over human and earthly others. It seeks to trace how a theological concept may enter historical processes of legitimation and thereby contribute to colonial and environmental violence.

The question is important. Doctrines of creation have certainly shaped Christian cosmologies, and the concept of *creatio ex nihilo* has had a long and complex history. It

is legitimate to ask whether certain theological formulations contributed to hierarchical visions of the world. It is also legitimate to ask how theological language was used in colonial contexts to justify them.

The historical difficulty begins when the genealogy becomes too extensive. Human domination, conquest and violence existed in many societies that did not share the Christian doctrine of creation out of nothing. The Roman Empire expanded long before Christianisation. The Tang dynasty developed forms of imperial power within a very different cosmological and religious world [13]. The Mongol conquests were carried out by peoples among whom several religions coexisted [14]. These examples do not absolve Christian traditions from historical responsibility. They remind us that domination has multiple genealogies, all oriented toward its legitimation and justification.

A theological concept may therefore illuminate a specific form of legitimation, but it cannot explain the history of domination by itself. The historian must ask when, where and by whom that concept was mobilised. Was it central in preaching, law, political discourse, missionary practice, colonial administration or education? Was it known to the actors involved? Did it directly shape their behaviour, or was it used later to interpret their actions? These questions are necessary in order to avoid transforming theology into a hidden engine of history.

The same doctrine may generate divergent meanings. *Creatio ex nihilo* may support a vision of divine sovereignty that places the created world in radical dependence on God. It may also support the contingency and value of creation as a free gift. It may be used to emphasise the distance between Creator and creatures, or to insist on the goodness of everything that exists because it comes from God's will. Its historical effects depend on the interpretative networks into which it is inserted. A doctrine certainly does not pass through history unchanged. This does not weaken the importance of theological critique. The problem, in fact, is not whether theology matters, but how it matters. A theological idea becomes historically effective when it has deep effects on the public sphere by entering into institutions, pedagogies, political languages, legal structures, devotional habits and social conflicts. The genealogy of environmental violence must therefore follow these passages, reconstructing the concrete mediations that connect a doctrine to a practice.

In any case, it is necessary to distinguish between theological interpretation and historical explanation. A theologian may legitimately reread a biblical text or a doctrine in the light of the ecological crisis. Catherine Keller's work, for instance, offers a contemporary theological reading of apocalypse, climate change, democracy, and ecological devastation [15]. Such a reading belongs to a creative hermeneutical practice. It asks what a sacred text can unveil today. Historical analysis has a different task. It asks how texts and doctrines were understood and used in specific periods, by specific communities, under specific conditions.

Both approaches are valuable but confusing them produces weak arguments. A contemporary ecological reading of a sacred text may inspire ethical and political action. A historical explanation must account for distance, discontinuity, mediation, and conflict. The historian can learn from theology, especially when theology reveals the symbolic power of religious language. Yet history must preserve its own discipline: chronology, context, sources, institutions, practices, and social actors.

7. From Scholarly Discourse to Public Discourse: The Ranking of Religions

The risks of simplification become even stronger when scholarly theories circulate in public discourse. Complex arguments about religion, ecology, domination, creation, or interdependence are often transformed into easily recognisable formulas. Newspapers, websites, and popular magazines ask which religion is the greenest, which spiritual tra-

dition is closest to environmentalism, which sacred text teaches respect for nature. These questions respond to a real public need. Many people are searching for ethical resources in a time of ecological crisis. Religious communities themselves are increasingly involved in environmental education, climate activism and public campaigns. Yet the language of ranking produces significant distortions.

At this point the discussion broadens from the article's principal Christian case study to the comparative language used in contemporary public discourse. The purpose is not to offer parallel histories of the traditions named below, but to analyse the mechanism by which highly diverse religious worlds are reduced to stable ecological profiles.

The ranking of religions gives the impression that religious traditions can be placed on a scale according to their ecological value. Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism, or Indigenous traditions are compared as if each possessed a stable environmental identity. This way of speaking is attractive because it is quick and communicative. It is also dangerous because it transforms historical worlds into abstract moral profiles. It encourages the selection of a few passages, a few statements, a few contemporary leaders, and presents them as the essence of an entire tradition.

The problem is also political. Ranking religions risks producing new hierarchies and new stereotypes. A religion may be celebrated as naturally ecological, another accused of being naturally exploitative. Labels of this kind can easily feed apologetic and polemical discourses, identity conflicts and cultural simplifications. They do not help us understand how religious communities actually behave in relation to the land. They obscure differences within each tradition, differences between social classes, gendered practices, local histories, political regimes, and economic conditions.

A more useful question concerns the historical conditions under which religious communities develop environmental practices. Which institutions promote them? Which interpretations support them? Which social groups participate? Which economic interests resist them? Which rituals, educational programmes and legal norms make them durable? Which authorities translate environmental concerns into religious language? These questions move the discussion from ranking to historical analysis.

Contemporary examples show this clearly. When Pope Francis writes about integral ecology, he does so within a Catholic tradition that includes biblical exegesis, social doctrine, Franciscan memory, critique of technocracy, concern for the poor and global awareness of climate change [16]. In doing so, the encyclical also reactivates Romano Guardini's critique of modern technological power and integrates it into a broader account of ecological and social crisis [17]. When Islamic scholars formulate environmental ethics, they may mobilise concepts such as stewardship, balance, justice and prohibition of waste, but they do so in relation to contemporary legal, political and educational contexts [9]. When Buddhist leaders speak about compassion for all sentient beings in ecological terms, they too are responding to modern environmental crises. In all these cases, ancient resources are reactivated by present needs.

Religious environmentalism is therefore one of the most interesting phenomena of our time. It shows the capacity of traditions to reinterpret themselves. It also shows the importance of institutions, networks and public communication. The question is not to decide which religion has always been ecological. The question is to understand how religious actors today produce ecological meanings, how they justify them, transmit them and then transform them into practices.

8. Religious Environmentalism as a Contemporary Response

Religious environmentalism, in the strict sense, is a contemporary phenomenon. This does not mean that religious traditions did not previously have ways of thinking about

nature or cosmic order; rather, it means that the articulation of environmental protection as a global task belongs to the contemporary world. Climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution, deforestation, extractivism, waste, environmental racism and planetary limits have created a new field of responsibility. Religious actors have entered this field by reinterpreting inherited languages in response to unprecedented problems.

The meeting held in Assisi in 1986 offers a significant turning point. Representatives of the major world religions gathered with the World Wide Fund for Nature and presented statements on the teachings of their traditions concerning nature and ecology [18]. The importance of the event lay not only in the content of the declarations, but also in the very form of the initiative. Religious authorities were invited to reflect publicly on the environmental crisis as religious authorities. Their traditions were mobilised as sources of moral education and social responsibility. This was a new form of public religious action, deeply shaped by the ecological consciousness of the late twentieth century.

The foundation of the Alliance of Religions and Conservation in 1995 further developed this approach by encouraging religious communities to use their institutions, educational systems, lands, buildings, rituals, and moral authority in favour of conservation [18,19]. Its activity shows very clearly that religious environmentalism is not simply a matter of doctrine. It depends on networks of intermediate actors: religion becomes environmentally relevant when it is organised as a field of action.

This point is crucial. Contemporary religious environmentalism often presents itself as a return to ancient wisdom. Yet this return is itself a contemporary operation. It selects, orders and gives new meanings to inherited materials. A biblical text on creation, a Qur'anic verse on balance, a Buddhist teaching on compassion, a Hindu reflection on sacred rivers or an Indigenous cosmology of kinship with the land may become ecological resources today because present communities ask new questions of them.

The same process can be observed in Christian contexts. The contemporary ecological reception of Francis of Assisi is a clear example. The medieval Francis was shaped by poverty, humility, penance, praise and imitation of Christ. Modern ecological readings have placed him within another horizon, that of environmental crisis, animal ethics and the critique of anthropocentrism. The result is historically understandable and religiously powerful. It shows how a tradition may be reactivated in response to a new emergency. It also recalls that such reactivation belongs to the history of reception, not to a timeless essence of Franciscanism.

The encyclical *Laudato si'* can be read in the same light: its force depends precisely on this combination, because it reorganises a long religious tradition around a contemporary planetary problem [16]. It connects ecological damage, social injustice, consumerism, technology, poverty and responsibility. It is a form of religious interpretation produced within the present, even when it speaks through symbols inherited from the past.

Without pretending to provide comprehensive accounts of other traditions, analogous processes can be observed in contemporary religious discourse. Muslim environmental thought may draw on ideas of balance, stewardship, justice, moderation and the prohibition of waste. Buddhist ecological discourse may emphasise interdependence, compassion and suffering. Jewish environmental reflection may reread Sabbath, land, covenant and limits. Hindu ecological activism may engage concepts of sacred rivers, divine presence and ritual purity. These examples are valuable only when they are understood historically, as contemporary interpretations produced by communities, scholars, activists and religious leaders. They become misleading when transformed into proof that a religion has always possessed a fixed ecological identity.

Religious environmentalism therefore confirms the central argument of this essay. Sacred texts and doctrines become historically effective through mediations, and contem-

porary religious ecological movements are among the clearest examples of this process. By selecting textual passages, reinterpreting ancient symbols, creating rituals and producing educational materials, they speak to institutions and shape public discourse. Their effectiveness, however, depends on the capacity to translate inherited religious languages into practices suited to the present crisis. It is a powerful system of continuous resemanticisation.

9. Conclusions: Religions, Ecology and the Work of Historical Mediation

The study of religions and the environment requires a method capable of resisting easy answers. The ecological crisis has made religious traditions newly visible as sources of ethical reflection and collective mobilisation, and this visibility is important insofar as religions continue to produce scales of values that generate behaviours. It follows that their contribution to environmental responsibility may be significant. Their role, however, can be understood only through historical mediation.

Sacred texts do not contain ready-made ecological programmes: their meanings, transmitted through exegesis and interpretation, have changed over time, and their effects have depended on those who actively transmitted them. For this reason, the historian must ask how religious meanings were produced, transmitted and incorporated into particular societies, rather than simply asking what a sacred text says about nature.

The same caution applies to the concept of environment. The modern environmental question emerged from a specific historical condition: reading the past through modern ecological categories may generate fruitful questions, but only on condition that historical distance is preserved.

Respect for historical distance also prevents the construction of rankings among religions. The question of which religion is the most ecological transforms complex traditions into simplified identities and thus helps generate competitions that are useless as well as risky.

The debate opened by Lynn White remains essential because it forced scholars to consider the religious roots of ecological attitudes. Ecofeminism enlarged the field by connecting environmental violence to patriarchy, capitalism, colonialism and domination over bodies. Recent theological genealogies have shown the importance of doctrines, cosmologies and images of creation. Each of these approaches has made an important contribution. Their strongest contribution emerges when they are read together with attention to mediation, reception and practice.

Our present needs new interpretative paradigms. The ecological crisis requires intellectual courage, ethical responsibility and collective transformation. Science is indispensable because it allows us to measure damage, understand processes and evaluate consequences; nevertheless, religious traditions can activate effective resources such as discipline, hope and moral language.

The task of scholars is therefore demanding. We must analyse the past without forcing it to answer only the questions of the present, and we must also recognise that the present poses urgent questions that cannot be ignored. The work of historical interpretation lies between these two obligations. Religions and the environment can be studied seriously only if we follow the paths through which texts become practices, doctrines become institutions, rites become formative patterns of everyday life, and ancient symbolism may be transformed in order to generate new worlds.

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