



4-2016

## Carson's Christianity and Environmental Crises

Andrew Wadsworth  
andrewgwadsworth@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/criterion>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

### BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Wadsworth, Andrew (2016) "Carson's Christianity and Environmental Crises," *Criterion: A Journal of Literary Criticism*: Vol. 9 : Iss. 1 , Article 12.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/criterion/vol9/iss1/12>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Criterion: A Journal of Literary Criticism* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact [scholarsarchive@byu.edu](mailto:scholarsarchive@byu.edu), [ellen\\_amatangelo@byu.edu](mailto:ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu).

# Carson's Christianity and Environmental Crises

*Andrew Wadsworth*

In her book, *Silent Spring*, Rachel Carson masterfully address the urgent matter of “man’s assaults upon the environment” through the “contamination of air, earth, rivers, and sea with dangerous and even lethal materials” (20). Today, climate change and pollution are generally seen as political issues. And although Carson does mention the government’s neglect to properly monitor and regulate pollutants and poisons, she attempts to paint environmental crises as more than just politics. Carson reminds readers that “man, however much he may like to pretend the contrary, is part of nature” (231). Environmental crises transcend any single political party’s ideology. They are human crises. The apocalyptic consequences of pollution and environmental neglect reach far beyond the scope of political debate. If man destroys nature, he destroys himself. And while Carson’s ecology may appear entirely secular, much of her writing resonates with Christian beliefs regarding the sacred nature of life, man’s stewardship over the earth, and man’s relationship with his fellowman.

However, despite Carson’s attempts to depoliticize environmental issues, crises such as climate change continue to be politically divisive today. Democrats contest that they are “committed to curbing the effects of climate change, protecting America’s natural resources, and ensuring the quality of our air,

water, and land for future generations,” saying that “republicans, for the most part, don’t believe climate change is man-made, or even exists” (Democratic). Although Carson attempts to depoliticize the issue, her idea of nature appears to be restricted to a solely secular view. That is to say, Carson primarily sees nature through a scientific lens of cause and effect. She does not directly link her claims with Christian beliefs. But why does linking environmentalism to Christianity matter? It matters because “the United States remains home to more Christians than any other country in the world” with “roughly seven-in-ten” Americans identifying “with some branch of the Christian faith” (Ritchey). But the Christian community is more than simply a community of faith; it is also a politically conservative community. In fact, “59 percent of self-identified conservative Republicans” said they “don’t believe that climate change is happening,” and “70 percent” said “they don’t believe humans are responsible for it”—verifying what democrats have claimed (Sola). As a result of secularizing nature, the environmental movement remains victim to political debate, and conservative Christians fail to see their duty in relation to the earth.

Many critics have analyzed Carson’s work, recognizing that “not only does *Silent Spring* [mark] the moment of emergence of the modern environmental movement,” but it also established a “new form of environmental writing” (Lockwood 124). However, while Carson succeeded in making ecology, “which was an unfamiliar word” in her day, “one of the greatest causes of our time,” critics have not addressed the circumstances which brought about Carson’s failed attempt to depoliticize environmental issues (Waddell 17). They have not addressed the factors that have caused her work and environmentalism as a whole to appear secular. In other words, critics have completely disregarded any notions that resonate with Christianity that Carson’s work may have.

The true secularization of the environmental movement was born from the religious and societal upheaval of the ’60s, which has cast a bleak shadow over environmentalism in the eyes of conservative Christians and which persists to this day. Once individuals begin to see nature as a gift to all mankind, rather than a resource to be mined and subdued, people will begin to see the abuse of nature as a threat not only to themselves, but also their fellowman. Once man begins to view the environment through a Christian lens, he will begin to see himself not as a dominating force over nature, but as a steward entrusted with its care. He will not see climate change as a political issue, but as a human issue, repenting of the harm he has caused the earth.

The secularization of ecology is not a consequence of Carson's *Silent Spring*: rather, the secular perception of ecology is a product of the age in which it matured and garnered wide-spread awareness—the 1960s. Carson's work was the springboard from which environmentalism sprang into mainstream consciousness. Her portrayal of man's effect on the earth entered the public's subconscious, where it resonated with another major group of '60s—the hippies. Timothy Leary, an unofficial leader of the hippie movement, famously stated, "Hippies started the ecology movement" (*Timothy*). This notion still persists today. Although *Silent Spring* is widely credited in academic spheres with spurring the ecological revolution, the image of environmentalism is still closely tied to hippie origins in much of the public's view. It is easy to see why her ideas resonated with hippies when Carson writes that "there are ways to . . . preserve the forests and to save the fishes, too" (Carson 177). Although this is a simplistic reading, these are the sorts of preservations for which hippies passionately fought. And at the time, conservation of forest and oceans were new ideas not yet clichéd by sitcoms and movies. Frustrated with the lack of government initiative towards cleaning up the environment, hippies organized protests against corporate polluters. Hippies "were the first to promote biodegradable products and the use of natural ingredients in everything from fabrics to shampoo . . . [They] boycotted companies: [sic] whose products polluted the environment, used animals for testing, were prowar [sic] or very reactionary; [sic] or manufactured dangerous chemicals or weapons" (Stone). When the National Environmental Policy Act was enacted in 1970, the first Earth Day was declared. This landmark event, involving twenty million people, raised awareness about how humans were treating the planet and ways to mitigate the impending dangers to the environment. This aligned hippies with the environmental movement and ecology. As a result, the environmental conversation Carson began was both augmented and overshadowed by the noise of the hippie movement.

Because Carson's ecology was inadvertently absorbed by the counterculture hippie movement and its promotion of drugs and promiscuity (in addition to conservation of the environment), a division between Christianity and environmentalism formed. Hippies took an overall more radical approach than Carson. They, like Carson, believed in an "intricate web of life whose interwoven strands lead from microbes to man"; however, in order to truly be connected to that "web of life," hippies promoted especially unchristian lifestyles (Carson 98). Timothy Leary, a well-known and highly controversial psychologist-turned-hippie

leader at the time, was once labeled “the most dangerous man in America” for fiercely advocating psychedelic drugs in the ’60s (Mansnerus). He was the ultimate challenger of authority: terminated from his professorship at Harvard for controversial drug experiments, arrested so often he saw the inside of twenty-nine different prisons world-wide, stood as an ally of the remnants of the Black Panther Party exiled in Algeria. He and the thousands upon thousands of hippies who worshipped him championed drug culture and the sexual revolution. Whereas Christianity teaches self-control, chastity, and adherence to God’s commandments, hippie’s had a different slogan: “If it feels good, do it!” (Stone). This meant loving “whomever you pleased, whenever you pleased, however you pleased” (Stone). In turn, this free love philosophy “encouraged spontaneous sexual activity and experimentation,”—including group sex, public sex, and homosexuality—all “under the influence of drugs” (Stone). It was hard to conceive a system of beliefs that more directly opposed the teachings of traditional Christianity. Because hippies promoted environmental reform in addition to recreational drug use and sexual promiscuity, their radical voices polluted the sphere in which Carson’s ecology operated. Her voice became guilty by association in the eyes of conservative Christians, and environmentalism became outlandish in the eyes of conservatives.

Carson further secularizes nature by drawing on the rhetoric of World War II and the Cold War era in an attempt to unite individuals and convey the immediacy of the biocides’ dangers. Carson repeatedly refers to insecticides as “artillery” or “weapons” and their usage as a display of “brute force,” an “assault,” even a “holocaust” (303, 330, 26, 310). Spawned from the post-World War, Cold War era in which she lived, Carson’s word choice succeeds in giving gravity to her argument. The image of the holocaust, the mass genocide horror that nearly annihilated an entire race of human beings, is especially powerful in portraying the seriousness of biocide’s effect on living organisms. It suggests we are unwittingly committing genocide not only against ourselves, but also against nature itself. Additionally, Carson “deliberately employ[s] the rhetoric of the Cold War . . . to persuade her readers” that the effects of the biocide crisis on the environment are “analogous to the threat of radioactive fallout” (Lear 428). Such imagery reminds readers that “we are dealing with life,” not only plant and animal life, but human life as well. (Carson 354). By pairing the imagery of World War II, the holocaust, and nuclear fallout with the biocides, Carson raises awareness to the battle taking place directly on American soil—a battle of which the general public at the time was not even conscious.

The battle was escalating and claiming many American lives. By drawing on the rhetoric of World War II and the Cold War, Carson imbues readers with a sense of patriotic duty, the responsibility to defend life and freedom. Her use of war rhetoric serves not only to resonate with the conservatives who made up much of the rural areas affected by biocides, but also liberals and everyone in-between on the political spectrum. However, while war can unite citizens to set aside political differences and support the cause of defending life and liberty, it is also extremely divisive. Shortly after *Silent Spring* was published, the United States saw an anti-war movement never before seen. The nation nearly tore itself apart and the intended unification of Carson's war rhetoric was lost in the commotion.

The Vietnam war delivered the final blow to Carson's attempt to depoliticize ecology and unite Americans in the cause to fight for the environment; the war pitted liberal and conservative ideologies against each other in a vehement tone, which still persists today. Believing the economic cost too high, many Americans—conservative and liberal, Christian and non-Christian—pragmatically opposed amplifying the United State's role in Vietnam. However, as the war persisted, with no end in sight and countless American boys being sent home in body bags, still more “admitted that involvement was a mistake, but military defeat was unthinkable” (USHistory). Simultaneously, “most disapproved of the counterculture that had arisen alongside the antiwar movement”: the “clean cut, well-dressed” individuals “who had tied their hopes to McCarthy” and his promise of ending the war were “subordinated” by hippies as leaders of the antiwar movement (Barringer 3). Part of the decree under which the hippies protested was that “American planes wrought environmental damage by dropping their defoliating chemicals” (USHistory). Soon, the once peaceful protests turned violent. No one likes war. As a consequence, conservative Christians further distanced and distinguished themselves from any ideology claimed by the hippies. Christians tended to see the struggle as regrettably necessary in order preserve freedom. Those Christians who did openly oppose the war took an approach similar to Gandhi, organizing a nationwide “fast for peace” (History). But Carson's ecology and the environmental movement to which it gave birth had already fallen victim to the labeling of *liberal ideology*, being largely rejected by Christian Conservatives. The Vietnam War polarized liberals and democrats like never before, and “man's assault upon the environment” with “lethal materials” continued to take on new shapes while politicians bickered for votes, refusing to consider the opposing party's views and efforts.

Despite the many historical factors that have caused environmentalism to remain a hotly contested political issue, much of what Carson writes resonates deeply with Christian doctrine concerning the sanctity of life and our responsibility to our fellowman. Carson writes that “life is a miracle beyond our comprehension, and we should reverence it even where we have to struggle against it” (331). Carson’s word choice, defining life as a *miracle*, paints a deeply religious image. The notion of *reverence* is also innately imbued with religious connotations. Reverence is more than respect. To truly reverence the miracle that is life implies acknowledging God and expressing appreciation for His creations. Carson contests that humanity has forgotten the wondrous divinity that is inherent in life itself. People have desecrated life in their craving for shortcuts to solve problems. Humans have tainted the very source of life on which they depend: they have violated the earth. It is in this vein that Pope Francis echoed Carson, saying: “We have forgotten that we ourselves are dust of the earth (cf. Gen 2:7); our very bodies are made up of her elements, we breathe her air and we receive life and refreshment from her waters” (Bergoglio). Viewing man’s relationship to the earth and the life it supports through a Christian lens will not resonate with all. But there can be no doubt that we as human beings depend upon the earth’s elements: her air, water, and soil to sustain ourselves, to sustain life. The notion of life’s sacred relationship with the earth resonates with individuals of faith outside of the Christian sphere—Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists. Even the atheist and agnostic recognize the wonder that is life. And life hinges on the state of a wondrous planet. When individuals contaminate the earth, they also inflict harm on their fellowman. Although Christianity teaches that men are to love their neighbors as themselves and care for the poor, Pope Francis acknowledges that “the gravest effects of all attacks on the environment are suffered by the poor” (Pope). If it is a Christian’s duty to succor the poor, in order to protect the impoverished, it therefore becomes every Christian’s obligation to prevent further environmental harm. Christians must broaden their view, learn to look outside their immediate sphere of living, and recognize the far-reaching effects of pollution and environmental damage. To reverence life is to recognize the responsibility to not only persevere the earth for the benefit of oneself, but for others as well—for friends and family, for future generations, for the poor, and even for strangers.

To reverence life and the earth, Carson contests that one must shift his or her perspective away from seeing oneself as a ruler over nature to recognizing and fulfilling his or her role as a steward over the earth. Carson writes that “the

‘control of nature’ is a phrase conceived in arrogance”—a sense of entitlement born from the notion “that nature exists for the convenience of man” (355). By acknowledging that nature was not created solely to serve mankind, Carson connects ecology to Christianity. The question arises: for what purpose does nature exist then, if it is not for man? The Bible teaches that man, God’s crowning creation, was given dominion over the earth. However, this does not imply that nature was created for men to consume and use however they see fit. Man’s dominion is the responsibility to govern. It is to look after the Earth as God himself would—with love, patience, and wisdom. It is a righteous dominion. Dominion is the responsibility of the Christian steward. Carson promotes “the central concept of deep ecology, that humans are not central to the universe of creatures; she preserved the concept of stewardship: what we as humans brought about, we must correct as much as possible” (Waddell 122). God’s design for human beings is for them to collaborate with Him in the work of creation, redemption, and sanctification. It is not too late for humanity to redeem itself and the earth through its efforts. The fulfillment of this monumental responsibility requires correcting the course, refocusing efforts on fulfilling the mandate of stewardship.

Fulfilling one’s stewardship over the earth by viewing and responding to environmental issues through the Christian lens of repentance offers more hope for recovery than Carson conveys in *Silent Spring*. Carson believes that the build-up of pollution in the environment “is for the most part irrecoverable” and that “the chain of evil it initiates” in living organisms “is for the most part irreversible” (26). But if the environmental damage has permanently been done and the effects of our fathers’ sin will be passed on from generation to generation, then what is the point of trying to correct the course? The outlook seems bleak. In Carson’s view, the compounded destruction of adding additional pollutants to the environment, and the effect that doing so would have on life, can only be lessened. Conversely, Pope Francis calls on individuals all across the globe to “repent of the ways we harmed the planet” (Bergoglio). The notion of repentance is far more powerful than Carson’s prescription. Repentance is more than simply ceasing to commit an act of sin. In the Bible, the concept of repentance is derived from multiple words—the Hebrew verb “*shuv*, meaning to return, and *nacham*, meaning to feel sorrow,” in combination with “the Greek word, *metanoia*, connoting a ‘change of mind and heart’” (Taylor 54). With these definitions, compounded together and applied to the earth, repentance connotes a new way of thinking of man’s relationship to the environment. It

connotes sincere attempts to repair the damage that has been done. It connotes a struggle to return the earth to its former glory. True repentance requires the examination of one's life, the complete abandonment of prior practices, and replacing them with good works. And once the mote is removed from one's eye, it is possible to see clearly how to help one's fellowman, preaching with love and patience what is practiced. Naysayers have always protested that the seemingly impossible cannot be accomplished, only to be proven wrong by hardworking men and women. To approach environmentalism through Christianity is to not only abandon current harmful practices, but to truly regret and repair the damages done. By adopting a truly Christian view of the earth and the sacred life it supports, striving to care for the poor affected by pollutions, and practicing the principles of repentance, political barriers preventing progress and healing can be overcome.

# Works Cited

- Barringer, Mark. "The Anti-War Movement in the United States." *Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War: A Political, Social, and Military History*. 1st ed. Vol. 1. Illinois: U of Illinois, 1998. 1-3. Print. 17 Nov. 2015.
- Carson, Rachel. *Silent Spring*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962. iBooks.
- Democratic Party. "In Light of Damage Climate Change Has Caused to Northeast, State Democratic Parties Decry GOP 2016 Presidential Field's Backwards Views on Climate Change." *Democrats.org*. The Democratic Party, Spring 2015. Web. 16 Nov. 2015.
- History Place. "Vietnam War 1965-1968." *Historyplace.com*. The History Place, Fall 1999. Web. 18 Nov. 2015.
- Jarausch, Konrad Hugo., and Michael Geyer. "Chapter 14 The President Decides to Use Greater Force." *Shattered Past: Reconstructing German Histories*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2003. 554. Print. 16 Nov. 2015.
- Lear, Linda J. "Rumbblings of an Avalanche." *Rachel Carson: Witness for Nature*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009. 428-56. Print. 17 Nov. 2015.
- Lockwood, Alex. "The Affective Legacy of Silent Spring." *Environmental Humanities* (2012): 123-40. DOAJ. Web. 08 Nov. 2015.
- Mansnerus, Laura. "Timothy Leary, Pied Piper Of Psychedelic 60's, Dies at 75." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 31 May 1996. Web. 09 Nov. 2015.
- Pope Francis. "Encyclical Letter Laudato Si' of the Holy Father Francis: On Care for Our Common Home." *Vatican.va*. The Vatican, 24 May 2015. Web. 19 Nov. 2015.
- Ritchey, Katherine. "New Pew Research Center Study Examines America's Changing Religious Landscape." *Perform.org*. Pew Research Center, 12 May 2015. Web. 09 Nov. 2015.
- Stone, Skip. "Sex, Love and Hippies." *Hippies from A to Z: Their Sex, Drugs, Music, and Impact on Society from the Sixties to the Present*. 1st ed. Silver City, NM: Hip, 1999. 52-63. Hippies From A to Z. Hip Inc., 05 Mar. 1999. Web. 09 Nov. 2015.
- Sola, Katie. "Most Conservative Republicans Still Don't Think Climate Change Is Happening, Poll Finds." *The Huffington Post*. TheHuffingtonPost.com, 22 Apr. 2015. Web. 09 Nov. 2015.
- Taylor, James C. "Repentance." *The Gospel [A Discussion of Christian Beliefs]*. 1st ed. Vol. 1. Raleigh: Lulu, 2015. 53-60. James C. Taylor (eBook). Lulu.com, 19 Apr. 2015. Web. 16 Nov. 2015.
- Timothy Leary: The Man Who Turned On America*. Dir. Dia Richards. Perf. Neil Pearson. *Youtube*. BBC, 17 July 2011. Web. 10 Nov. 2015.

UShistory. "The Antiwar Movement." *Ushistory.org*. Independence Hall Association, Spring 2015. Web. 18 Nov. 2015.

Waddell, Craig. "The Reception of Silent Spring." *And No Birds Sing: Rhetorical Analyses of Rachel Carson's Silent Spring*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2000. Print.