

## CHAPTER 1

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# Environmental Values in Christian Art

### ST. FRANCIS IN THE DESERT

A glorious day in Umbria. A farmer lazily gathers his flock in a sun-cured pasture. The river below Assisi pours under a bridge and flows undisturbed between shrub-covered banks. The walled town, standing self-confident above the welcoming landscape, looks down on a patchwork of light golden fields. The hills fade into the bluish haze. Today, as every day, the scrawny monk stands on the rock ledge in front of his isolated cell, stretches out his hands, and gazes skyward. A gray heron and a donkey patiently observe the strange man who lives in the cave, as he greets the sun. Yet the hermit doesn't look toward his animal neighbors. His face says there is something or someone above him. Someone else is there, just outside the frame of the painting.

*St. Francis in the Desert*, attributed to the Venetian painter, Giovanni Bellini, is an entrancing portrait of this nature-loving monk (Fig. 1.1). The large panel, now housed in the Frick Collection in New York City, demonstrates the skill with perspective and detail that characterizes a Renaissance masterwork. Dated circa 1480, the landscape is clearly dedicated to a Christian subject. Human interest is, however, balanced with natural interest.<sup>1</sup> Rather than filling the tempera panel, Francis and his cell in a rocky cave occupy about a quarter of the frame. The rocky cliff face and the surrounding countryside comprise the other three-quarters of the scene. Bellini and his workshop have carefully twined vines around the cell and filled the cracks in the rocks with realistic "weeds." Despite the drought of their stony habitat, green herbs grow at the saint's feet. Nature surrounds and embraces the saint.

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Fig. 1.1. Giovanni Bellini, *St Francis in the Desert*. St. Francis appears as a small figure in a friendly landscape. The environment itself is representative of Francis's spiritual state. The tempera on wood panel associates the wealth of nature, rather than material possessions, with righteousness. The landscape is not that of Umbria, but of northern Italy, where Bellini resided. Copyright, The Frick Collection, New York, NY.

In the growing literature on religion and the environment, Christian art remains an underutilized assemblage of primary sources. Students of regional religions, such as those of American Indians or Australian aborigines, make extensive use of ritual objects, rock painting, and totem poles in analyzing the relationships between culture and environment. For the Peoples of the Book, including Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, environmental historians and ethicists have concentrated on sacred texts, such as the Bible and the Koran, and academic theological works. The purpose of this volume is to correct this deficiency and to explore the evolution of environmental values through Christian history by investigating trends in religious material culture.

This approach can ask old questions using new sources, such as how did the emergence of Christianity, with its concomitant displacement of pre-Christian religions, modify ancient European valuation and treatment of nature? Inventory of natural imagery or human–environmental relationships depicted in Christian art also suggests new inquiries, such as why are hunting scenes and horses rare in the Roman Christian catacombs and on early Christian sarcophagi?

This volume reviews examples of Christian art and architecture from the late second or early third century in Rome to the seventeenth century in the Netherlands, and explores four major questions:

1. How did the relationship to nature change in the transition from Roman and Celtic (pagan) religion to Christianity? Did disregard for nature or human dominance over nature become more prevalent themes?
2. What is the relationship between Christ and nature? What is the meaning of the Passion and the Eucharist for all living creatures? And how does this relationship change from the early church to the Renaissance and Reformation?
3. How does Christian art depict animals and plants, and what spiritual roles do nonhuman creatures play in religious art? How do themes like hunting change through time?
4. How does Christian art represent the ownership, economics, and management of natural resources? Are peasants and non-Christians, such as Jews, part of the productive landscape? Is resource sharing a continuing Christian theme?

The literature on environment and religion too frequently assumes a single concept of a creator deity through Christian history. There is, however, no a priori reason to assume that the first Christians confronting Imperial Rome had the same attitudes toward nature as Giovanni Bellini and his Renaissance associates. Further, early Christianity drew images and ideas from other religious cults. During different periods, one or another of these questions will come to the fore. Yet this analysis centers on related aspects of Christian cosmology and ethics, important to all eras. In terms of Christian belief, what is the purpose and meaning of nonhuman cosmos? How do death, renewal, and creative processes in nature relate to Christian concepts of Creation, Salvation, and Resurrection? What, from a Christian perspective, constitutes ethical treatment of the environment and management of environmental resources?

HYPOTHESES AND HISTORY

Possibly due to Christianity's own teachings emphasizing conversion, environmental commentators often depict the transition between pre-Christian religions and Christianity as if it were a radical remaking of individuals, nations, and cultures. This snapshot view is a historiographic fault of the now notorious Lynn White essay "Christian roots of our ecological crisis," published in *Science* in 1967.<sup>2</sup> White begins with the modern love-hate relationship with industrialization and then plunges through roughly 4000 years of Jewish and Christian religious history, recognizing no long-term cosmological development of the Hebrew concept of deity, much less any real difference between ancient Hebrew and modern Christian concepts of God. He proposes an environmental model of monotheistic Christianity's displacement of pre-Christian religions—specifically that Christianity removed the protective spirits associated with natural objects—without providing any evidence that this actually occurred during the early Christian period.

Chapters 2 through 5, ideally improving on White's lack of concrete cases, explore how Christianity modified or selected environmental or natural themes found in pre-Christian Imperial Roman and Irish religious art. These chapters provide examples of the earliest specifically Christian artistic products and descriptions of works from around 220 C.E. to Romanesque period, which ends as the Gothic begins in the twelfth century. Chapter 2, for example, aligns Christian Roman art, from the second through the fourth century, with works of the same era associated with other religious cults. If Christianity displaced pagan respect for nature with a highly anthropocentric or human-centered worldview, then early Christian art should display a radical change from pre-Christian representation of natural objects and place more emphasis on control or domination of nature. These chapters find that, from the perspective of late antiquity, the foremost cosmological issue was not the question of the origin and evolution of the universe but of an appropriate and effective sacrificial system. Christian ritual is a response to an environmental resource crisis posed by commodification of nature and urbanization.

Chapters 6 through 9 investigate changes in cosmology from the early Middle Ages through the Gothic, and examine their implications for environmental economics. From the ninth century onward, the crucifix grows in importance as a symbol of natural regeneration, eventually replacing the metaphors of natural renewal preferred by the Romans, such as perpetually flowering plants. The green cross, in which Christ's blood pours forth regenerative power, is a common Gothic icon, pre-

senting the death and suffering of Christ as necessary to the continued existence of the living. As Christianity consolidates its cultural and political influence, the cathedral becomes a symbolic home for all Creation as a medieval version of Noah's ark. Chapter 8 explores medieval Christian representation of the peasant economy. Wealthy art patrons often preferred scenes idealizing the natural resources status quo, while Franciscan-funded commissions critiqued the accumulation of wealth by a few. In chapter 9, a dualistic Gothic cosmology, splitting the world into natural and unnatural spheres, fuels Christian hatred of Jews. Critical to the survival and regeneration of the cosmos, the suffering Christ dying on the cross becomes both an argument for Christian ministry to the poor and a justification for interreligious violence.

Chapters 10 and 11 explore paintings of the Italian Renaissance and the Dutch Golden Age, and the impact of the emerging scientific worldview on the spiritual meaning of landscapes and natural objects. Renaissance masters improve landscape technique, and introduce a cosmology based in natural process. Dutch Calvinists reduce the association of the Crucifixion with the landscape of Creation, while an immanent Creator omnipresent in nature infuses polders and meadows in nationalistic landscapes. Dutch painting distinguishes, however, between raw resources harvest, which is spiritually beneficial, and ownership of material possessions, which inhibits spiritual growth and insight. Chapter 12 synthesizes these findings and summarizes the evolution of key themes such as the predominant personae of the deity, the form of sacrifice, and the relationship between the coming kingdom and the physical earth.

#### METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Throughout, the selection of works favors the artistic mainstream or trendsetting examples of a change in themes, motifs, or style. The Good Shepherd and Christ Pantocrator, of chapters 2 and 3, are among the most common personae of Jesus in late antiquity. The Ahenny high crosses, in chapter 4, are relatively early and well-preserved examples of this type of monument, and the *Book of Kells* is the best known and most studied illuminated manuscript of its era. The Cathedral of St. Denis, discussed in chapter 7, has an innovative architectural design that influenced dozens of other Gothic churches. Chartres Cathedral retains many of its original stained glass windows, while Naumburg Cathedral has both a critical modification in the relationship between the holy and human in its west choir, along with one of the few remaining intact Gothic altar screens. The anti-Semitic motifs in chapter

9 can be traced from church to church across the face of Europe. Giovanni Bellini's *St. Francis in the Desert* makes the landscape a dominant element in a portrait of a saint, breaking from medieval conventions that emphasize the human form. The landscape paintings of Cuyp and van Ruisdael are the best-executed examples of a genre typical of Reformation Holland. This research is not intended to be a complete overview of Christian art history, and thus the inventory of periods and artists is based on major transitions in Christian representation of nature.

What, then, do we consider to be explicitly Christian art? How do we identify it? Christian painters depict secular subjects, while Christian architects design civic buildings as well as churches. The personal philosophy and beliefs of an artist influence that individual's interpretations of a setting as simple as a cow pasture encircled by woodland. In the broadest definition, art by Christians, even when no obvious Christian icons are present, is still Christian art. On the other hand, not all artists producing Christian sacred art have necessarily been Christians themselves. Today, archeologists cannot be certain if early Christians carved the third- and fourth-century sarcophagi, in which the Christians of late antiquity were interred. Non-Christian entrepreneurs selling funerary goods may have gotten a stake in the "Jesus market" by adopting Christian symbols and acquiring a repertoire of biblical scenes. For the purposes of this book, Christian art is art by Christians, art commissioned for Christian ritual or devotional use, and art that deals with Christian themes and subjects. Credit may be shared, however, with another religion. If a devotee of the Roman gods carved a burial vault covered with biblical scenes for a Christian client and placed a rather Dionysian four seasons on one end, this is still Christian art.

Today's interpretations are limited by temporal distance and cannot completely reflect the perspectives of the Reformation, much less late antiquity. Although some artists, such as Leonardo da Vinci, left notebooks or interpretations of their own work, a majority of the artistic endeavors cited in this volume lack any contemporary written documentation that would directly inform the modern viewer about the churches' theological intents in the organization of the art or even their specific interpretation of obvious religious symbols. I will therefore present my hypotheses (and those of the art historians) as "probable." The theological battles of early Christianity certainly influenced the environmental values expressed in historic Christian art, yet it can be difficult to ascertain whose side an artist was on. New concepts

appearing in theological treatises may only slowly influence artistic convention. Or, conversely, art may purposefully convey specific theological statements. For the reader familiar with the intellectual turmoil of the early church, the approach taken here may seem vague. Definitely establishing the theological sources for the images present in early Christian art would require a major study on its own, and, given current documentation, is probably impossible to fully execute. In *Irish Jesus, Roman Jesus*, Graydon Snyder, for example, remarks on a possible relationship between Pelagianism (a theological position ultimately rejected by the early church) and the preference for representational images of Christ in early Irish Christian art.<sup>3</sup> Yet Roman Christian art, prior to the time of Pelagius, also preferred representational images for Jesus and the cross.

Where possible, I attempt to let the art speak for itself. For the Christian reader, the more horrendous ethical lapses may be jarring. The social violence embedded in sparkling stained glass can be difficult to acknowledge. Yet art focuses attention on the things of greatest value, and, at its best, attempts to see the cosmos through the eyes of God. Although the academic discipline of theology has the advantage in describing and categorizing love, art has the advantage in showing us what is worth loving. The reader is admonished to consider the complete gradient of Christian environmental expression—from the gentle Good Shepherd to the blatant injustice of portraying Jews with animal features. Historic accuracy and serious ethical evaluation require an analysis of a complete spectrum of works—and one row of windows or a single altar screen can range from the charming to the horrific. Contemplating the past can assist us in understanding our worst environmental misdeeds and our greatest achievements, and encourage objectivity in ethical self-perception.

#### LOCATING ART

To assist the reader in exploring other sources and in visualizing the historic imagery, several chapters conclude with suggestions for finding examples of relevant art on the Internet. Although the Internet is inherently unstable and subject to change in content, museums, churches, and educational institutions are increasingly placing color photographs of artistic treasures on their Web sites. To find *St. Francis in the Desert*, for example, search the Internet for either “The Frick Collection” or frick.org, and check under either “Bellini” or “Italian” in “Collections” for a full-color reproduction.

## 8 Environmental Values in Christian Art

### SUGGESTED READINGS

Bouma-Prediger, Steven, *For the Beauty of the Earth: A Christian Vision of Creation Care* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2001).

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