

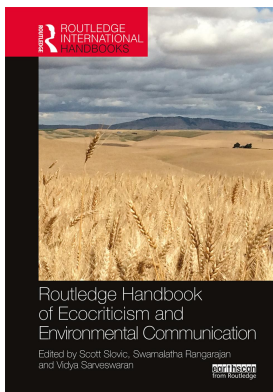
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Eco churches, eco synagogues, eco Hollywood

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3

ECO CHURCHES, ECO SYNAGOGUES, ECO HOLLYWOOD

21st-century practical responses to
Lynn White, Jr.'s and Andrew
Furman's 20th-century readings of
environments in crisis

CA Cranston

Raising the red flag

In 1942, Lynn White, Jr. commented on the relationship between history and religion, saying that “we stand amid the debris of our inherited religious system” (1942: 156). Later, he was to carry this thought further, attributing ecological crisis to “the Judeo-Christian dogma of creation.” Fifty years on, his essay, “The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis” (1967), remains a compelling, if controversial, example of how readings of semi-historical texts such as the Bible can direct ideas and behaviour that impact future events. In particular, White points to the “dogma of creation, which is found in the first clause of all the Creeds” (1206).¹

Selective, and exploitative

Time and again, the Biblical evolutionary chronology that appears to peek with the arrival of man² sees, in Genesis 1:26 to 1:28, man supposedly given “dominion” over all that was previously created. That one word “dominion” appears, historically, to justify man’s God-given relationship with the world. This has conveniently, and catastrophically, led to a belief that humans “are superior to nature”; and that we are “contemptuous of it, willing to use it for our slightest whim” (White 1967: 1206). There are an estimated 930,243 words (in the King James Bible);³ this kind of disproportionate emphasis has prompted academic theologians such as Richard Bauckham to ask “Why have we placed so much weight on three short passages when Chapters 38–39 of the Book of Job are the longest passages in the Bible about the non-human creation?” (2010: 38). (Indeed, why have we ignored Genesis 6:6: God “was sorry that he had made man on earth”?). Bill McKibben calls the Book of Job “the first great piece of

modern nature writing” (qtd. in Bauckham 2010: 38). Meanwhile, Eric Katz, inspired by McKibben’s research, suggests a reason for the textual preference of Genesis rather than Job: “The Lord is reminding Job that humanity was not present when God created the universe. The world was not created *for* humanity” (2001: 154; original italics).

In other words, readings of selected Biblical texts have exacerbated the ecological crisis (a) by being self-serving interpretations of the Torah, and the Old (and New) Testament,⁴ (b) by building on those self-serving interpretations, which reinforce Western thinking (specifically the marriage and rise of science and technology in the West) and (c) by applying – and justifying via Biblical sources – anthropocentric interpretations that have had little regard for the organic world, its creatures, and the biosphere.

White’s essay elides differences between the Christian and Jewish Old Testament;⁵ its concern lies mainly with specific readings embedded in the language of the creation creed, common to what he calls the “Judeo-Christian” tradition. Consequently, the second half of this chapter looks at the Jewish aspect of the Judeo-Christian tradition. There we turn our attention to Andrew Furman’s ecocritical essay, “No Trees Please, We’re Jewish” (2000), a title that promises to be a woeful endorsement of the charges levied by White. So, too, Furman’s startling comment that “Jewish American fiction writers in this century [20th] have, by and large, created a literature that either ignores, misrepresents, or, at its most extreme, vilifies the natural world” (4).

Assessing the audience: religious responsibility

White states that “since the roots of our trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious, whether we call it that or not” (1967: 1207). He calls for us to “rethink our axioms” (1204). Since his death in 1987, indications of axiom rethinking include the rise of environmental movements in Christian settings, the very settings that bear the brunt of White’s criticism. Richard Bauckham cites the Evangelical Environmental Network, Plant with Purpose, the Au Sable Institute of Environmental Studies, the Evangelical Ecologist blog, and the cross-cultural ecological ministry, A Rocha (2010: 208–9). He notes that indeed, the church (let us add also synagogue) is a “largely untapped resource” for getting the environmental message across. On 27 January 2016, A Rocha launched the eco church project at St Paul’s Cathedral, London, UK. A Rocha is in partnership with Christian Aid, which is chaired by Dr Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury. Williams spoke at St Paul’s about the “tectonic shift in the Christian mind”; in the changing “DNA of our churches”; of churches having the “leverage to bring about change that is good for all of us”. White, who claimed that “Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen” (1205), would have been cheered to hear Williams urge the church to be “faithful to the wider creation” (Eco church launch 2016).

Prefacing some difficulties for ecocritical exegesis: translation, and translating values

Lynn White, Jr.’s article has been “rightly criticized as overly simplistic” (Burbery 2012: 196) and found to be “deceptively simple but profound” (Nelson 2016). It stirred detractors and concessionists, among them biblical scholars Moncrief (1970); Santmire (1985), and Habel et al. (2011). It stimulated discussion about embedded hierarchical dualisms where historical prejudices of classic civilisation are carried through into Christianity (Bookless 2014); it energised and broadened (eco)feminist positions by interrogating the conceptual apparatus of

sexism, naturism and speciesism (Plumwood 1993). And, conversely, it brought out those who thought the concern of the Bible was not with the organic world, but with faith, social justice issues, and human history (Derr 1973). Indeed, that environmental movements are open to charges of anti-humanism (Derr 1992).

In the jargon of yesteryear, we could say that the Bible is a contested text. It is also rich ecocritical territory. Lawrence Buell notes that those opening chapters in the Bible “blamed as the root cause of western technodominationism” also “call attention to the antiquity and durability of environmental discourse” (2005: 1). Those in the humanities are well aware of the foundational importance of Biblical, Roman and Hellenistic pantheons in informing the literature, past and current, of the English-speaking world. Whether the Bible is perceived of as a metaphysical text, as is the case with Australian farmer poet Les Murray (who dedicates all his work “To the glory of God”); or – as in the case of philosopher poet, Judith Wright – as a prodigious but secular text, a work of art,⁶ Westernised Christian readers are exposed to Biblical ideas and allusions without necessarily having read the Biblical text (though they have probably seen the movie). In fact, few are able to read the primary text except in translation.

Take David Bookless’s point, above, regarding the historical prejudices of classic civilisation. He demonstrates how the translation of the Hebrew phrase *nishmat chayyim* (נִשְׁמַת חַיִּים) suffers as a result of translation and of Greek dualistic thinking. For whereas God blows “the breath of life” into Adam as well as into animals and birds (Genesis 2:7; 2:19), the King James version and older Christian translations:

conceal this by translating the phrase “living soul” for humans and “living creature” for animals, but the Hebrew is identical. The Hebraic biblical worldview integrated material and spiritual reality but in contrast Greek philosophy, which heavily influenced translation and interpretation, was deeply dualistic.

(Bookless 2014: 2)

Assuming that Bookless is correct, the above translation reveals the values of its translator, values that are pre-existing, cultural and self-interested. The value hierarchies that follow include an assumption that the soul exists, that humans have souls, but that animals do not.⁷ Hence, the *idea* of the soul’s existence has had long-term ethical consequences for non-human creatures. (The idea that women, like animals, do not have souls (and other misquotations and mistranslations) is discussed in Nolan’s “The Myth of Soulless Women,” (1997).) The preceding recalls an earlier observation, that for White the ecological crisis stems from self-serving translations of the Hebrew and Old Testament texts. So that although Rabbi Yogi Robkin (who *can* read Hebrew) presses the point that “only the human being [is] created with a divine soul,” he reasserts the humanimal’s dualistic existence – for without the soul, Robkin argues (quoting Ecclesiastes, 3:19), “the superiority of man over beast is nought, for all is vanity” (Robkin 2018).

As Bookless implies, the value-laden concept of the soul has proven useful in setting up hierarchical dualisms. It does so by furthering speciesist, sexist, racist – Otherness discourses – dualisms which are absolutely contrary to holistic, ecologic connectedness. So too, the possession of speech can be divisive; it can be used to discriminate between what has value (i.e. humans have speech) and what has not (Derr 1992: Ch. II). White’s concern is with the application of anthropocentric interpretations of the Bible as justifications for disregarding the health of the organic world.

One Old Testament story, an animal studies parable you might say, offers a critique of anthropocentric legitimations of superiority through the device of anthropomorphism. It is

the story of Balaam, the diviner, so-called because God speaks through him. Balaam, however, is shown to be less numinous than the donkey he rides. When the donkey refuses to move because there's an angel in her path, Balaam beats her. It's only when the donkey is given the power of speech and rebukes Balaam that Balaam, too, sees the angel. If we entertain the idea that possession of a soul and the power of speech is proof of humanity's claim to superiority, we must ask what is being suggested in this text when a donkey can see an angel; can act as an intermediary for the Lord's voice and, critically, is deemed worthier of being spared from the Angel's sword than is Balaam? (Numbers 22:21–32).⁸ Texts champion values and moral equivalences (or not) that, unexamined, can impact significantly on the nature-culture world.⁹ According to Greg Garrard, one of the key challenges for future ecocriticism is its relationship with animal studies. Another is “understanding and translating *native naturecultures*” [my italics], given that value-embedded tropes in a Western worldview are likely to be understood differently in different geographies (Garrard 2012: 203).

Further questions of value: ecocriticism and assessing unfamiliar, and ancient, landscapes

Biblical landscapes and seascapes are necessarily representative. Wilderness, famines (desertification), plagues (invasive species), floods – suffer from contextual colouring, and risk being rendered metaphorically by critics with little or no knowledge of Middle Eastern environments or ecology.¹⁰ Then again, this is what ecocriticism does: it examines “the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (Glotfelty and Fromm 1996: xix). Roderick Nash claims the portrayal of “wilderness as a cursed land” is pervasive in the Old and New Testaments (Nash 1989: 91); Robert Leal holds that there is a “widespread biblical attitude” to wilderness as “the realm of chaos, lawlessness and evil” (qtd. in Bauckham 2010: 103). The negative values ascribed here to wilderness tropes demonstrate how the natural world has been translated and interpreted through foundational texts that are instrumental to Western thinking. Biblical vestiges inform aesthetics, civilisation, and value responses to the biological and geological world, a world that is constantly shifting. Similarly, White notes “All forms of life modify their contexts” (1203). And, as with the polysemic Biblical texts, it follows that the organic world is subjected to multiple interpretations as a result of lived and textual influences. The connotations of “wilderness” in a Middle Eastern context might, in an Oceanic context, denote “sacred space.” Bauckham insists that not only wilderness (an imagined desert) but also forests are perceived as “wild nature” in the Bible (116). This interplay between culture (human productions such as text) and representations of the organic world is again the remit of “ecocriticism.” Ecocriticism is here additionally defined as criticism of the creative arts, consciously driven by current real-world responses to environmental crises. Ecocriticism apprehends the arts through chemical integers – CO₂, NaC₁, PCBs, CFCs¹¹ – their very excess the product of exploitative and negative values acted upon the natural world. The ecocritic acknowledges conscious anthropocentrism in the critiquing process and, since White's critical approach to the Judeo-Christian impact on ecology, the passage of time has produced collections such as *The Routledge Handbook of Religion and Ecology* (2016), essays such as Joan Latchaw's “Shudder for the Covenant Broken” (2018), and Timothy J. Burbery's “Ecocriticism and Christian Literary Scholarship,” which finds common ground in the “inherent goodness of Creation” (2012: 189). Burbery proposes “ecocriticism as a viable theory for Christian scholars” (189) and addresses White's criticism with a volte-face, suggesting that Christian scholarship can enrich ecocriticism (190). Clearly, the clergy has not been deaf to entreaties such as White's.¹²

Raising the green flag: introducing the concept of eco churches

The eco church concept originated in 1983, the initiative of A Rocha,¹³ an international NGO that is “intentionally international” with missions in 20 countries. A Rocha (Portuguese for “The Rock” – a replacement of the symbolic with the material and organic) advertises its concerns consonantly, as “Christian, conservation, community, cross-cultural, and cooperation”. Significantly, it aims to change the *anthropocentrism* of church culture, in order to take into account “the wider creation”. Its logo, “Conservation and Hope”, demonstrates resistance to apocalyptic readings of the environment. “Hope” – a faith-based trope¹⁴ – is supported by research and science, with a number of A Rocha’s directors employed in the environmental sciences, but volunteering under a Christian framework.¹⁵ In 2015, A Rocha established two eco church projects in Australia, both in New South Wales: Capernwray, in the Southern Highlands, and Tahlee, Port Stephens, a para church organisation supporting the work of churches.

“Tahlee Centre for creation care”, NSW, Australia

I’m at Tahlee to see if and how Biblical interpretations and practice have changed since White’s pointed disapproval of Westernised thinking and its ensuing ecological damage. It’s summer 2018, and I’m “ground truthing,”¹⁶ checking out the physical side of A Rocha’s website, walking the ground on the lookout for signs of creation care. Aerial images of Tahlee’s 170-acre secluded settlement show it to be neatly organised amidst native and ornamental trees. A rectangular swimming area bites into the waters of the Karuah estuary that lies within the Port Stephens–Great Lakes Marine Park. Off-site but online, I’ve learned that historically, the environmental impact of this modest settlement is Australia writ small. It was here, in 1824, that the Australian Agricultural Company (AA Co.) laid its foundations, the result of a grant from the British Parliament, entitling it to a million acres for a million pounds (Bairstow 2003).

It is contextually ironic, then, that in his essay White should signal the technological advance of the plough as the tool that “profoundly changed” humans’ relation to the soil, stating “[f]ormerly man had been part of nature; now he was the exploiter of nature” (1205). Asking rhetorically “What did Christianity tell people about their relations with the environment?” (1205), White questions the commonly held position at that time, that humans were supreme and “no item had any purpose save to serve man’s purposes.” This appears to have been the mindset of the 19th-century coloniser in Australia. Not only was the impact of the plough on Australia’s light top soil a contributing factor in soil erosion and drought, but the axe cut swathes through the NSW forests (described as “interminable” by AA Co.’s Commissioner Robert Dawson (qtd. in Bonyhady 1998: 76)). Forests were transformed into pasture for the Company’s importation of sheep and then cattle. Although the head office of AA Co. long ago shifted to Brisbane, the company still operates 18 cattle stations, or 400,000 cattle – human food and goods resources – throughout Australia (Australian Agricultural Company n.d.).

But as I said, I’m ground truthing; the company has moved on, the grounds have changed hands several times, beginning with what was originally Worimi Country.¹⁷ I’m here to meet Tahlee’s director, Reverend John Anderson. I park up and notice that there are Nissan huts as well as Grade 2 listed buildings. I am ambivalently fond of Nissan huts, having lived in similar corrugated half-moons on military bases and at the migrant camp at Altona (Victoria) as a Ten Pound Pom. Sure enough, the photos in the main hall inform me that I am encountering the vernacular remnants of the Greta Army Camp, built during World War II. After the war, the camp was assigned to the Department of Immigration, which went on to process thousands of

migrants. The buildings, auctioned off in 1980, were transported from Greta to Tahlee – irrefutable proof of social and material recycling in action. Reception, located behind the proscenium of the transported Greta camp movie theatre, raises funds for the mission by offering holiday and conference accommodation, history tours, and English language training by TESOL accredited teachers.

John walks me up to where morning tea is held, a ballroom in a Grade 2 listed building, its pine-clad interior replaced after a white ant invasion. Rainwater tank levels are down to the bottom rungs. Under fans, beside open windows, staff and students share food and the morning's lesson. John offers up a prayer for rain. The students are primarily Asians, here for the three-month TESOL term. Mostly urbanised youth from wealthy families, they are open to the anxieties of being in a country that Big Notes the dangers to humans of even its smallest creatures. And in rural Australia there's no escaping "nature." John's wife, Jacinta, recounts the ordeal of a student, fresh from her flat on the 18th floor in Hong Kong, and her response to antipodean moths pummelling night lights. According to the CSIRO, there are more than 20,000 moth species in Australia, but such moments probably aren't the right time to drive home a lesson in diversity. The moths' phototaxis contrasts with what Jacinta calls "nature blindness" among the students. Understandably they seem initially disconnected from the wilder community of their unknown landscape. Which is why they take the unit "Living with Dangerous Neighbours," its textual cue taken from the New Testament, Matthew 22:39, "love thy neighbour as thyself." Students go bush, make campfires, and learn about the littoral zone of the Karuah, the relationship between tides and the moon, the habitats of jellyfish, blue-ring octopuses, sharks. They learn about the creatures of the air and those that creepeth upon the earth – from frantic moths to fearless goannas (*Varanus*) strolling predatorily towards the camp's chicken shed.

Teachers utilise Bible stories in the classroom to instruct in grammar and vocabulary. Outside the classroom, it is hoped that the environmental encounter confronts and transforms fear of the unknown into an appreciation of the Community of Creation. John's handout, "The Biblical Basis of Creation Care", references Psalm 104, the second longest biblical account of non-human creation, after Job (Bauckham 2010: 64). Animals, their habitats, their behavioural characteristics, are presented alongside a "pervasive sense of the world as God's gift to all living creatures" (67). The students' anxiety regarding their place in nature bears little resemblance to man's assumed dominion over "every living thing that moveth over the earth." There's the account of one Japanese student's understanding of neighbourly equivalence, when she attempted to engage a red-bellied black snake in a non-aggressive pact, repeating reassuringly "You peace, me peace."

Jacinta, born in Bolivia to Australian missionary parents, is a passionate bird-watcher. Concerned about biomagnification in the food chain, she is in domestic negotiation with John about how to get rid of the Tahlee mice. Mice are an introduced species with no natural predator, reaching plague proportions and decimating crops, on average every four years ("The Bizarre Mystery of Aussie Mouse Plagues" 2015). John, who lived through house mice plagues in Humpty Doo, in the Northern Territory, in this instance tends towards a less forgiving view of creation care. I ask John how Christianity, as practised at Tahlee mission, intersects with conservation. John, a preacher for a number of years in Queensland, is an agriculturist and an agronomist. With Oxfam, he worked with Punjabi farmers in Pakistan under the Green Revolution (also known as the Third Agricultural Revolution), planting high-yielding varieties of quick-growing dwarf rice. Then, in East Indonesia, he worked on a project involving Brahman Cattle (*Bos Indus*) with the World Bank. There he discovered that local farmers relied on the straw from the tall rice for their cattle. And that the tall rice could

survive monsoonal floods that decimated the dwarf varieties. Shaking his head, John acknowledges that disconnects between Christian intentions and ecological practices do happen, referring to his part in it as “first-hand knowledge of the folly, if not danger, of isolating aspects of the environment” (23 February 2018).

Connecting the local: small mob motivation

Contextually, White’s “Historical Roots” essay springs also from the Green Revolution period, when technology transfer, irrigation, pesticides, and hybridized seed distribution contributed to a worldwide increase in agricultural production and biotechnology in an effort to offset the spike in starvation due to human population increase. John was also involved in the breeding programmes of triticale, a hybrid of rye and wheat. It was during this period of high activity that Rachel Carson recorded the backlash resulting from large-scale applications of agricultural pesticides on food crops (a case of ecological damage in pursuit of social justice) in *Silent Spring* (1962). The title refers to the projected scenario of chemical bioaccumulation in the food chain and eventual extinction of bird life. As John Anderson notes, there’s danger in “isolating aspects of the environment.” In confirming its anthropocentrism, the church admits to a creation care that previously isolated the human from the environment. Influential figures such as Dr Rowan Williams along with the eco church movement actively teach an ecological consciousness, to be “faithful to the wider creation.”

Tahlee hopes to do this on a practical level by developing a sanctuary for koalas, which are currently diminishing due to road kill, bushfire, and the spread of the chlamydia virus. The material evidence of Tahlee’s attempts to assume responsibility and live lightly on the earth includes the installation of 100 solar panels (a savings of over AUS\$60,000 per annum, says John); 20 rainwater tanks of varying capacity; grey water and septic tank irrigation; food waste recycling to an off-site pig farm; and their own timber mill. Students’ technological experience is restricted by default due to poor satellite communication. They share a smart phone to talk to parents and their multi-media experience is limited to a video clip on how to operate a vacuum cleaner.

At the end of our conversation we return to John’s interpretation of Genesis 1:26 to 1:28 and man’s supposed dominion over all that was previously created. John chooses the language of Tahlee’s predecessors, the Worimi, preferring their phrase “custodians” of the land. Whereas indigenous lore/law arises from a worldview of interconnections between theism, humans, non-humans, plants, the topography, the biome – the cosmos, Tahlee is a Christ-centred community, applying theoretical and practical aspects of Christian teaching to their immediate environment. It is a good example of small mob motivation.

A global response from the city of 0.17 square mile

In his 1967 essay, Lynn White, Jr. wrote that “What we do about ecology depends on our ideas of the man-nature relationship” (1206). Given that, it is fair to say that there are significant attitudinal shifts, as with the founding of the A Rocha eco church movement in 1983 (Blanch 2017), which takes up the appeal for a caring relation with “the wider creation.” Similarly, an accessible Christian overview of ecological disquiet on a global scale is to be found in Pope Frances’s Encyclical Letter, “Laudato Si”, subtitled “on care for our common home”.

Importantly, the Encyclical Letter (published in 2015) builds on the concerns of previous Popes, thus demonstrating a sustained concern with ecological issues. The Letter cites Pope Paul VI’s 1971 warning that “[d]ue to an ill-considered exploitation of nature, humanity runs the risk of destroying it and becoming in turn a victim of this degradation” (Apostolic Letter, pp. 416–17, qtd. in Frances “Laudato Si,” p. 4). Included also is Paul’s earlier speech to the

United Nations, stressing “the urgent need for a radical change in the conduct of humanity” (Apostolic Letter 1970, p. 833, qtd. in Frances pp. 4, 5). Pope John Paul II, in 1988, urges respect, not only for the human person, but also for “the nature of each being and of its mutual connection in an ordered system” (Encyclical Letter, p. 559, qtd. in Frances p. 6). And respect for the environment, according to Benedict XVI, can only be reclaimed by “eliminating the structural causes of the dysfunctions of the world economy and correcting models of growth” (Address to the Diplomatic Corps 2007, p. 73, qtd. in Frances p. 6).

These Papal readings that address the lived world are commensurate with environmentalist concerns and signal the need for ethical human agency. Benedict’s statement that “the book of nature is one and indivisible” goes on to include the environment, family, social relations and so on; nature/culture boundaries begin to fade in his warning that “the deterioration of nature is closely connected to the culture which shapes human coexistence” (*Caritas in Veritate* 2009, p. 73, qtd. in Frances p. 6). The comment that “[s]ince the roots of our trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious” (White 1967: 1207) is being met by a growing number of religious communities who are engaging, through action and education.¹⁸ Though, in an echoing of White’s title, in what appears to be a papal riposte, “The Human Roots of the Ecological Crisis” (Ch.3) returns agency to the human collective, not just the religious. The role of the Church today is “not only to remind everyone of the duty to care for nature, but at the same time ‘she [the Church] must above all protect man-kind from self-destruction’” (Benedict 2009, p. 687; Francis, p. 58). Here, the religious rationale behind the ecological politics coincides beneficially towards what Eric Katz calls a blending of “anthropocentric self-interest of humans with the ecocentric interests of entities in the natural order” (2001: 16).

Typology and plurality: ultra-orthodoxy and liberal Ashkenazim

The passages above are from a Roman Catholic encyclical (public record). It would be egregious to assume that all Christians are Roman Catholics just because they share common texts. Similarly, a corrective of Judaic representation is required for the second part of this chapter, with its enquiry into the taken-for-granted “Judeo-Christian” nexus. The title of Andrew Furman’s “No Trees Please, We’re Jewish”, an ecocritical essay on Jewish-American writers and their preference for urban settings, assumes a homogenous Judaism. Furman does, however, point out that the writers he discusses are mostly Ashkenazic (of Eastern European origin), descended from the rationalist, or *Mitnagged*, tradition (51).

Differences within Ashkenazic communities, both Israeli and diaspora Jews, were highlighted recently when ultra-Orthodox parties reneged on the 2016 plan to end apartheid at the Kotel (Western Wall) in Jerusalem (Sherwood 2017). The plan would have allowed men and women to pray together, removed the ban on women praying aloud, reading from Torah, wearing the tallit (prayer shawl) and other perceived male-only apparatus.

The Netanyahu cabinet decision to maintain the *status quo* banning women from the Kotel was, in effect, a ban on Jewish diaspora communities such as Reform and Liberal Jews. This is because Liberal Jews follow the secular social move towards inclusivity and egalitarianism, allow interfaith marriages, recognise Jewish descent not only through the mother, but also through the father; carry out *bat mitzvah* (female), as well as *bar mitzvah*, ceremonies; recognise mixed- and same-sex marriages performed by male or female rabbis, and (as with modern nuns) have a relaxed dress code (see Rigal and Rosenberg 2004). Although it is no longer possible to identify a Jew through the grammar of garments,¹⁹ Orthodoxy, or Rabbinic Judaism, adheres to a code of conduct for all aspects of life, the *halachah* laws,

codified in the Middle Ages (Goldberg and Rayner 1987: 10, 11). Consequently, the imagology of “a Jew” is often that of the Orthodox individual dressed in the Hebraic vernacular of black, who considers Liberal Jews “to be second-class Jews who ordain women and gay people and are overly inclusive toward converts and interfaith marriages.” (Sherwood 2017).

“People of the book”: a text-centred worldview

All observant Jews, however, identify as “People of the Book” (עַם הַסֵּפֶר, *Am HaSefer*).²⁰ This can be problematic when considering religious interpretations of the “man-nature relationship” (White 1967: 1206), especially given Furman’s comment that “the natural world rarely muscles its way into the margins of the Jewish-American imagination” (49). The “People of the Book” have declared sides. The Book – the Torah – is regarded as proof of God’s special Covenant with Israel (Goldberg and Rayner 1987: 18). And as Creator of the universe “God is necessarily different from, and greater than, any of its parts” (237). Says Furman, Jewish text-centredness has ensured Jewish survival, but has “bolstered a Jewish ethos wary, if not downright hostile, to the natural world” (52). That statement, along with the incident at the Kotel where women continue to be segregated, demonstrates ecofeminists’ contention that “women’s and nature’s liberation are a joint project” (Tong 1998: 247). And that worldview, given its egalitarianism and pluralism, is why UK Reform/Liberal Judaism, not UK Orthodoxy, has initiated the eco synagogue movement.

Another potential sticking point in motivating a Jewish response to environmental crisis is the Law, derived from oral and written Torah. Furman goes so far as to say that from the Talmudic era Jews have been compelled “to regard the natural world as a dangerous threat to the Law that has sustained them” (54). A solution to the impasse might be to emphasise those Laws that identify environmental issues, so that duty to the Law rather than biophilia shapes environmental response. Those other books (the Mishnah, the Gemara) contain extensive critiques of the Law and divergent opinions stand side by side (Rayner and Hooker 1978: 10). Thus, they offer interpretive flexibility, but with the codicil that flexibility be confined within the unshakeable belief in the Covenant of the Torah. It follows, then, that a Jewish response to “the natural world” can never be ecocentric, “it is a theocentric view” (Katz 2001: 164; Goldberg and Rayner 1987: 307).²¹

A theocentric view – a God-centred view of nature at one remove – intervenes, like text and film, as a distancing mechanism, a protective barrier between the self and the “threat” of nature.

For instance, the perceived threat of nature-immersion can be seen by critiquing the autumn festival of the week-long *Sukkot*. Temporary outdoor huts, roofed by palms, festooned with fruit, symbolise the wilderness experience of the slaves freed from Egypt. The *sukkah* is a kind of ersatz camping experience except one does not have to sleep outdoors if it is cold, or if it rains.

Shifting focus: Hollywood, ecocriticism and ecomedia

The editors of this “Ecocriticism and Environmental Communication” collection state that the “new emphasis in ecocriticism indicates a potential rapprochement between ecocriticism and environmental communication studies” and that the objective “is to reinforce the common concerns and methodologies of the sibling disciplines”. To that end, this section extends Furman’s premise regarding resistance to natural world representation in the Jewish-American imagination by investigating how that statement holds up when applied to environmental communication in the visual arts.

For instance, cinematography is well represented by Jewish creativity. In *Motion Picture Biographies* (2015), John Cones reiterates his early statement published in *Who Really Controls Hollywood* (1996) that a “small group of politically liberal, not very religious Jewish males of European heritage” controls Hollywood (3). The observation that the Jewish males are “not very religious” (how does he know?) suggests Cones’s disappointment with Jews who are not performing to type (i.e. the observable rituals and dress of Orthodox Jewry). Twenty years on, a similar, less judgemental, observation is made in Lisa Klug’s tongue-in-cheek article, “Who said Jews run Hollywood?” (2016). It is not this study’s aim to argue either way who “controls” or “runs” Hollywood; it is enough to establish that the Jewish contribution to the industry is sizeable, allowing opportunities to influence environmentally-themed contributions. But according to media critic Phil Hoad, Hollywood films appear unsuited as the medium for popularising environmental concerns (and motivating community). Hoad notes: Hollywood – “loyal to its eco-sceptic audiences in middle America – has always been frosty towards environmental movies” (2017). Hoad’s and Furman’s observations hold water when considered alongside the “7 must-see films” from the 2017 Environmental Film Festival in Washington, DC (D’estries 2017), where no Jewish directors were represented;²² and the 27th Annual Washington Jewish Film Festival (17–28 May 2017),²³ where directors are Jewish, but thematic concern lies primarily with history and cultural identity.²⁴

Jewish Hollywood and ecology

The contribution of diaspora Jews in raising environmental awareness through the medium of film does not look promising. Nevertheless, *Soylent Green* (1973), set in 2022 and directed by Richard Fleischer, portrays the elderly Solomon Roth, seeking to escape a degraded world in exchange for a good death, via assisted suicide. That is, to die watching a film featuring wildlife and landscapes that haven’t existed for decades. In the closing chapter of his life, Solomon chooses the comfort of visual representations of the organic world rather than “The Book”. The final revelation is apocalyptic: “Soylent Green” refers to pellets fed to humans in a resource-depleted world. Ecological disconnect within the film – the loss of the haptic natural world now reduced to representation, the rise of denatured humans transformed into industrial commodities – is over-ridden by horror, with the realisation that (quote): “Soylent Green is people.” The film is a graphic turn on Pope Paul VI’s 1971 warning that “[d]ue to an ill-considered exploitation of nature, humanity runs the risk of destroying it and becoming in turn a victim of this degradation” (Apostolic Letter, pp. 416–417 qtd. in Frances “Laudato Si” 4).

Two years later, again tapping into the apparently horrific idea that, outside of their constructed environment, humans are merely food,²⁵ Stephen Spielberg directed *Jaws* (1975). Displacing alleged human dominion over the animal kingdom and transferring so-called human traits (intelligence, vengeance, object recognition) to an Other animal, the great white shark, the film stirred up inadvertent, real-time, indiscriminate killing of sharks, regardless of type (Chapple 2005: 3). Described as “the piscine whipping-boy of individuals pandering to shark-attack paranoia”, with poor survivorship following capture, poached for jaws, teeth, fins for the black market, and suffering habitat degradation, the Red List authors recommend the great white (*Carcharodon carcharias*) “be removed from international game fish record lists, and needs consistently rational and realistic treatment by entertainment and news media to counter its notoriety and inflated market value” (Fergusson et al. 2009). The response confirms the film’s impact on the public, but demonstrates a misalliance between conservationists and Hollywood. Certainly not a “green” movie.

Also casting doubt on the effectiveness of film in general or rather, the effectiveness of the director to intentionally communicate environmental issues in a persuasive and motivational manner, is John Parham (2016).²⁶ Parham does, however, acknowledge the power of the documentary, crediting Academy Award Winner *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006), directed by Davis Guggenheim,²⁷ with being “one of the most iconic green media texts” (190). He also acknowledges the critics Nordhaus and Shellenberger’s “scathing analysis” regarding contradictions between Al Gore’s rhetoric and his over-sized energy footprint (2007: 125, qtd. in Parham 2016: 197). The disjunction between saying and doing makes for bad press, name-calling, and sets back the environmental movement (Parham 2016: 124). Parham contends that environmentalists are engaged in forms of rhetoric “that don’t engage the public” (122). In order for environmentalism “to be a popular movement, it has no choice other than to engage with, in the hope of re-shaping, popular media and popular culture” (Parham 2016: 266). In effect, this is what Fergusson et al. suggest above in relation to films like *Jaws* viewed as entertainment, but requiring corrective media engagement about the real-life counterparts.

The same would seem to apply to animated critters. As Parham’s chapter “The ‘Hope’ of Green Animation” intimates, the transformative politics of animation exceed the expectation of narrative realities. Animation allows the cute and funny to present their own stories in engaging ways that seldom alienates its audience in the manner of environmentalists armed with data. Furthermore, green animation addresses two audiences, parent and child, with the child potentially inducted into green messages as a result of repetitive viewing (primed for future green thinking), drawn into animated representations of the world through colour, song, humour, a world where a child can identify with the narrative joys and fears of an other-than-human, battling the environmental disasters of its particular niche. And there’s the attraction of quirky animated characters, be they deer, penguins, dolphins, clownfish or even a reconstructed male, the great white shark, named Bruce, in *Finding Nemo* (2003, co-directed by Lee Unkrich). But even animation cannot escape environmental backlash – this time against clownfish (*Amphiprion ocellaris/percula*) over-harvested for aquariums; again, hardly a “green” response (Militz and Foale 2017).

Becoming animated: green media and Jewish *tzedakah*

Parham balances animation’s ability to imagine ecological futures by looking at the actual-world context of its cultural production, the major animation studios, and their ideologies (230). He singles out Michael Eisner, who headed Walt Disney Studios between 1984 and 2005. Eisner is credited with releasing Disney from its right-leaning mainstream politics by “instigat[ing] an overt, pragmatic, and educational engagement with environmentalism” and co-founding the Environmental Media Association (EMA) in 1989 (Parham 2016: 231), along with Cindy and Alan F. Horn. The EMA encourages green production, public environmental awareness, and presents awards for productions with the lowest footprint. Notably, these projects are educational and pragmatic; they reveal their *Mitnagedism*, or rationalist roots, rather than the “Jewish-American imagination” that Furman discusses. They are materially green²⁸ and uphold the *tzedakah* (תְּדָקָה) or righteous behaviour tradition. This is one tradition that lends itself to engaging Jewish responses to environmental crises through “The Book.”

Alan Horn, EMA co-founder, worked with Fox (*The Simpsons Movie* in 2007 and *Avatar* in 2009, though Fox “avoids any real engagement with green issues” (Booker 2010: 124, 132, qtd. in Parham 2016: 231). Like Eisner, he too served as chair at Disney, in 2012. Admittedly, it’s cosy. Cones’s criticism that a “politically liberal, not very religious Jewish males . . . control[s] Hollywood” (Cones 1996: 3) misses the mark in the case of Steven Spielberg, who identifies as Orthodox. Spielberg, along with David Geffen, and Jeffrey Katzenberg co-founded

DreamWorks (SKG) in 1994. Katzenburg, who was brought to Disney (again by Eisner), was chair at Disney from 1984 to 1994, the year when *The Lion King* brought the ecological mantra “the circle of life” into popular culture. The musical track engaged adult and child, as did humour, with a bit of Zen thrown in. The co-animators, Robert Minkoff and Roger Allers, were Jewish.

The impact of leonine animation on real-world responses is critiqued by David Bennett, who questions the public outcry in 2015 over the killing of Cecil, an African lion, by Walter Palmer, a dentist. Why this one lion should be so mourned he attributes to “childhood linked memories” of *The Lion King* and *Madagascar* (2005, a DreamWorks Animation). Just as animation anthropomorphised Simba, Western media ascribed “a distinct personality” to Cecil, but “none portray[ed] him hunting, eating prey, fighting or in any situation that could cast him in a negative light” (Bennett 2017). This is a reversal of the *Jaws* response but is still a call for responsible media reporting (as per Fergusson et al. 2009). Western ownership of Cecil’s image contrasts with the unsentimental response from “most Zimbabwean communities [who] were left wondering what the fuss was all about” (Mutori 2015, qtd. in Bennett 2017).

From the representational to the material space of an eco synagogue

By extending Furman’s imaginative terrain, the text, to the imaginative terrain of cinematography we see that the man–nature world is there, it just isn’t always green. Furman attributes the preference for urban settings in writing to the immigrant Jew experience of making a living in “the gritty streets of New York and Chicago” (50), hence its frequency in work by Alfred Kazin, Irving Howe, Isaac Babel, Cynthia Ozick, Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, and Philip Roth.²⁹ Furman suggests the urban focus “merely betrays the sociological realities that have defined their experience” (50). The same could be said for diaspora Anglo-Jewry experiences of migration to London in the late 19th century.³⁰ The entanglement of Judaism, nature, and conurbation finds its practical translation at the urban eco synagogue, Finchley Progressive, in London. It exemplifies the back-handed assertion that non-Orthodox movements place “[e]mphasis of actions over belief system” (Frank 2012).

Finchley Progressive Synagogue (FPS) is situated on a battle-axe block off a side-street in London, where houses surrender their square-footage gardens to parking space. A security guard checks incoming cars. It is *Shabbat*, and a *Bar Mitzvah* is scheduled at the one-storey 1960s-era building that holds 350 people. Nature is *In Memoria* with commemorative rose bushes shouldering the boundaries of the shul. FPS states that it is founded on Jewish values of *tikkun olam* (repairing the world). Inside, there’s a drop-off box for their cold-weather night shelter; there’s a list of items required for the last of the co-sponsored Syrian families, an initiative of FPS Rabbi Rebecca Birk. Listed as one of “London’s most influential people”, it was her campaign that persuaded her local council to take in refugees (Welby 2016). A poster for Mitzvah Day (*mitzvah*: a commandment; religious duty) seeks volunteers to work with a local mosque collecting for the food bank and clearing weeds from the cemetery. Unsurprisingly, *tikkun olam* refers to social rather than environmental repair of the world. This is because Torah predates global environmental crises and its *halachah* laws, codified in the Middle Ages (Goldberg and Rayner 1987: 10, 11), have ossified as social concern. As Mitzvah Day demonstrates, to act in the interest of society is in line with religious duty. The shul’s *tzedakah* confirms a social and community ethos on a par with the socialist principles of *kibbutzim*.³¹ Environmental laws are plentiful,³² but the rereading and application of its precepts is only recent.

The new Green Team runs a seminar on climate change and clean energy, revealing that for many, the grasp of environmental issues is rudimentary. Despite information about plastic

waste in the shul's magazine *Shofar*, the morning's Bar Mitzvah *kiddush* features large plastic trays of food purchased from the supermarket. Yet on 30 January 2018, FPS was one of four synagogues that stepped forward to establish the eco synagogue project.³³ Piggy-backing on the eco church programme, the synagogues invited former Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams, to speak at the launch.

Joined by their wish for action, the anti-environmental dogma of the "Judeo-Christian" tradition that Lynn White, Jr. refers to, now emerged as a genuine Judeo-Christian melding of concerns about the environment.

Because of how recently FPS initiated the programme, it is too early to assess how effective environmental communication is within the synagogue, though initiatives are in place. The two main drivers are Prof Adrian Lister, a paleobiologist at the Natural History Museum, London, and Michael Lassman, Director of Equality Edge. The harsh responsibility of honouring the commandment "Repair the World" with its aleph-bet of catastrophes (Aral Sea; Bhopal; Chernobyl; Dioxin Cloud; Exxon Valdez) is made humanly bearable in the secular Jewish "Ethics of the Fathers", with its implied burden sharing: "It is not your duty to finish the work, but neither are you permitted to cease from doing it" (Pirkei Avot 2:21). So Lister runs *beit midrash* (adult education) programmes and delivers lectures at the shul on climate change. Lassman recycles food waste and, leading by example, washes dishes rather than using plastic. The eco synagogue survey (adapted from the A Rocha eco church survey to reflect Jewish festivals) includes questions about the integrity of buildings, land, food purchases, green teaching and preaching, and changing environmental behaviours in the congregation. Lassman changes at least one aspect of congregational behaviour by banning meat products in the shul, and is lobbying to change the shul's energy supplier: small, positive, domestic changes.

As Liberal Jews who respond to the contemporary world, and as People of the Book whose "man-nature relationship" is theological and indirect, the application of environmentally themed Biblical texts as *mitzvahs* to assist in change might help to bypass congregational resistance to "environmentalists and their data" as well as forestalling "obstinate displays of inertia" when it comes to climate change action (Boyce and Lewis 2009: 3, qtd. in Parham 2016: 148).

Conclusion

This chapter presents evidence of a slow movement towards hope – hope in the manner Bill McKibben means when he makes a distinction between hope that is wishing, and hope that "implies real willingness to change" (2007: 5). Two essays, Lynn White, Jr.'s "The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis" (1967), and Andrew Furman's "No Trees Please, We're Jewish" (2000), provide the ecocritical benchmarks by which to examine current changes in preaching and practice regarding the ecological crisis. The rise of action-focused eco churches and eco synagogues goes some way towards addressing and mitigating White's 1967 indictment that the crisis has its roots in "the Judeo-Christian dogma of creation".

The Hebrew Bible and Old Testament are mother texts informing transnational responses such as the eco church, "Tahlee" in rural New South Wales, Australia, the eco synagogue, Finchley Progressive in urban London, and the Hollywood industry. Both church and synagogue are shown to be theocentric in their approach to the environment, but now are less anthropocentric, with a wider approach to creation care than at the time of White's and Furman's writing. Furman's overall indictment of Jewish attitudes towards the organic world introduces the opportunity to compare small mob motivation with the Jewish contribution in Hollywood, beginning with the myth and typology of the homogenous Jew. The films discussed reveal their capacity for environmental backlash, whereas underlying religious obligations such as *tzedakah* (donations or duties arising from

ethical obligation) show a preference for real-world influence over representation, as with the establishment of the Environmental Media Association, and the Goldman Environmental Prize. Whereas the film industry plays to audiences who form a temporary community and then disperse, we ask if there might, after all, be hope for the climate-change cause with the rise of these international (eco)interfaith movements that target and support integrated long-term communities, rather than the transient Hollywood “masses”. As Bauckham notes, religious communities (whatever is meant by religious) are a “largely untapped resource” for getting the environmental message across.

Notes

- 1 Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are the three major monotheistic religions following the Genesis creed.
- 2 “Man” is gender-specific. Eve had not yet arrived on the scene.
- 3 This word count includes the New Testament. The Five Books of Moses (or the Pentateuch) contain fewer words, being shorter. See www.artbible.info/concordance/
- 4 The New Testament is not under sustained discussion because it is not part of the Judeo-Christian tradition.
- 5 The creation creed occurs in the Christian Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible, and Quran. The Christian Old Testament contains additional books that are not in the Hebrew Bible (the TaNaKh, an anagram of Torah, Nevi'im, Ketuvim). Additionally, the canonical order in the Christian Old Testament is altered, creating further opportunities for differing interpretations.
- 6 Both poets are contemporaries of Lynn White, Jr. and both are from New South Wales, the state where this case study took place.
- 7 Selective reading is evident: The Book of Proverbs states “A righteous man has regard for the soul of his beast” (12:10).
- 8 An equivalent story is when an Inuk hunter disrespectfully laughs at a walrus when it speaks, causing the entire huddle to leave. See Joseph Bruchac, “Understanding the Great Mystery,” pp. 99–104. (Bruchac’s interpretation differs from mine.)
- 9 See the anthology *The Soul of Nature* (1996) for essays from the eco-spirituality movement.
- 10 Here I should state my reading position as a Westerner brought up in the Middle East.
- 11 Carbon dioxide, sodium chloride, polychlorinated biphenyl, chlorofluorocarbon: some of the chemical compounds involved in environmental degradation.
- 12 Indeed, Nash notes in his “Greening of Religion” chapter that by the 1980s the word “‘ecothology’ had not only become a new word but a compelling world view” (1989: 120).
- 13 Peter and Miranda Harris from the UK were working at a field study centre in Portugal, on an estuary threatened by development. They initiated eco congregation projects prior to the eco church initiative.
- 14 Perhaps “faith-based” is too harsh: Bill McKibben makes a distinction between hope that is wishing, and hope that “implies real willingness to change” (5). As such his position is closer to White’s than is Tim Flannery’s, where hope is aligned with technology – the “news of exciting tools in the making that could help us avoid climatic disaster” (2015). White’s argument considers reliance on science and technology of little use when addressing the ecology problem given that the problem is a *result* of the use of science and technology, saying “I personally doubt that disastrous ecologic backlash can be avoided simply by applying to our problems more science and more technology” (1206). The film *Geostorm* (2017) perfectly exemplifies technology-fix rebound.
- 15 For example, Roger Jaensch (natural resource management, wetlands); Jen Schabel (biodiversity); Anna Radkovic (environmental science); Philip Hughes (ornithology); Stuart Blanch (ecology of water plants, environmental law); Julia Brown (urban planning, environmental impact assessment); John Anderson (agricultural scientist, agronomist).
- 16 The “ground truthing” concept, less tricky than “authenticity”, is explored in Carter 2010.
- 17 Worimi lands extend over 1500 square miles (Tindale 1974: 201–202) and include the Stockton Bight Sand Dunes to the North, near Newcastle.
- 18 “Laudato si” implicitly addresses the kind of charges White makes regarding Judeo-Christian accounts of Genesis and man’s “dominion” over the earth. See Ch. 2, “The Gospel of Creation,”

- Article 67, p. 49. Indeed, Ch. 3, titled “The Human Roots of the Ecological Crisis,” focuses on the “technocratic paradigm”.
- 19 Isaac Bashevis Singer’s *Yentl the Yeshiva Boy* (1967) addresses the dualism still in play at the Kotel; it tells of a woman who must cross-dress in order to infiltrate the yeshiva to study the Talmud. Filmed as *Yentl* (1983).
 - 20 Several Christian denominations also identify with the term.
 - 21 Katz’s response when comparing Judaism and deep ecology is more ambivalent when measured against his own Jewish and environmental beliefs (164; 165–6).
 - 22 A director’s Jewish affiliation is often included as a driving factor in his or her biography. It is possible some directors chose not to include that fact.
 - 23 Neither did the “10 [must-see] things” from the 21st UK International Jewish Film Festival (London Library) include environmental communication as a topic.
 - 24 *My Hero Brother* (2016) directed by Yonatan Nir, about a group with Down Syndrome travelling in the Himalayas, and *Fanny’s Journey* (2016) directed by Lola Doillon, about children fleeing cross-country from Nazi-occupied Italy, lend themselves to ecocritical investigation but the primary concern of the directors is with human struggle.
 - 25 See Val Plumwood’s philosophical approach to her encounter with a crocodile, in “Human Vulnerability and the Experience of Being Prey” (1995), pp. 29–34.
 - 26 Parham engages in thorough examination of the complexities of green media, which this chapter cannot do justice to.
 - 27 Davis Guggenheim is the son of Jewish producer Charles Guggenheim, who directed the documentary *The Johnstown Flood* (1989).
 - 28 As is the Goldman Environmental Prize, or “Green Noble”, an annual award to grassroots environmental activists from the six geographic regions. Australian farmer Wendy Bowman won it in 2017, for her stand against Yancoal, in New South Wales. (Hunt 2017).
 - 29 A cursory look at the more than 80 books presented during London Library Jewish Book Week (3–11 March 2018) shows very little nature muscling in; thematic concentration lies mainly with national histories and biographies. The exception, a session titled “Gardens of Delight”, showcased Penelope Lively’s *Life in the Garden* (2007), and Charlotte Mendelson’s *Rhapsody in Green* (2016).
 - 30 Although Jews have been settled in England for over three centuries since the Expulsion, almost 150,000 Jew migrants arrived from Russia, Romania and Galicia between 1881 and 1914 (Lipman 1961: 108).
 - 31 To avoid homogenising the Liberal movement as nature-wary, we need only look at the Reform Kibbutz Lotan in the Negev Desert. Lotan is a member of the Global Ecovillage Network. Like “Tahlee”, it raises funds through tourism and educational initiatives with a focus on attracting overseas students. Subtitling itself “Where spirit and earth meet”, the community produces goats’ milk and Marjoul dates. Their Centre for Creative Ecology runs a strict recycling programme: plastic and tin cans are placed inside discarded tyres and transformed into adobe tyre-bale domes. Trash becomes somewhere for students to live, to house bird-watchers, to accommodate tourists.
 - 32 For instance, the Fourth Commandment requires rest for livestock as well as humanity on Sabbath (Exodus 20:10; Deut. 5:14); *shmita* – that the land rest every seven years (Lev. 25:4); the law *bal tash-chit* (do not destroy); the New Year for Trees festival of *Tu B’Shevat*, the planting of a tree; the preservation of trees even in wartime (Deut. 20:19); vegetarianism (Gen. 1:29); *tza’ar bal’alei chayim*, not causing suffering to animals; *Sukkot*, formerly agricultural harvesting, and so on.
 - 33 The others are Finchley Reform, New North London–Muswell Hill (United), and Alyth.

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