

University of Minnesota  
Consortium on Law and Values in Health, Environment, and the Life Sciences  
2011-2012 Graduate Research Grants

Project Report

**The Ecological Roots of a Religious Crisis:  
Holy Land Ecology, Religious Belief, and Environmental Policy**

Joshua Mabie  
Department of English

Project Description

Lynn White famously argued that the biblical concept of dominion has legitimated and encouraged centuries of ecological devastation and that western Christianity “bears a huge burden of guilt” for the environmental crisis now facing the earth. This research project reverses White’s logic to consider how environmental degradation has affected religious belief, practice, and political activism. The project uses archival descriptions of travelers’ and pilgrims’ responses to the ecologically devastated Holy Land to engage religion’s role in the climate change debate. The historical account uncovered by the project both challenges the foundations of religious hostility to environmental protection and provides a case study for the implementation (or imposition) of environmental reforms in an underdeveloped region.

Results:

In May 2011 I traveled to London, England where I completed primary source research at the Palestine Exploration Fund (PEF) library and archive, the British Museum, the Royal Geographic Society Library, and the Victoria and Albert Museum library. I gathered documents and images that provide a picture of more varied nineteenth century landscapes and ecosystems than are typically described in the imaginative literature of the period. Of special interest and exceptional value for my writing and future research were a series of unpublished water color sketches by the explorer and geographer Claude Conder as well as comprehensive photographic surveys of the Holy Land conducted by the PEF and its American counterpart, the American Palestine Exploration Society (APES). Also, the concentration of nineteenth century Holy Land guidebooks, trip reports and journals has proved invaluable for both my dissertation project and a planned book-length study of nineteenth century literary engagement with the environment of the Holy Land. By providing me with access to essential primary source material and time to write, this Consortium grant helped me complete and defend my dissertation "Modern American Pilgrims: Dwelling and Religious Travel in the Lives and Works of Herman Melville and T.S. Eliot" in June, 2012.

### Publications:

I am currently revising my article "Green Evangelicalism Revisited: 'Climate Change an Evangelical Call to Action' for submission to *The Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature & Culture*.

### Presentations:

I presented my paper, "The Ecological Roots of a Religious Crisis: Twain and Melville in the Land of Milk and Honey" at the biennial meeting of the Association for the Study of Religion and the Environment (ASLE) in June, 2011.

### Teaching

At the University of Minnesota in the fall of 2011, I taught English 3501 - Public Discourse: Coming to Terms with the Environment. I used many of the images and some of the documents that I brought back from London to teach a lesson on Lynn White and religious environmental discourse. I also presented portions of the material that I prepared for my article on evangelical climate change discourse. This fall I will revisit and refashion this material for English 260 - American Environmental Writing, a course that I will teach at the University of Wisconsin - Whitewater.

### Plan for continued research

I had initially envisioned an article-length project coming out of the paper that I presented at the ASLE conference, but the wealth and depth of unpublished material that I uncovered in London has led me to expand the project in scope. As a part of my new position as an Assistant Professor of English, I will be provided with a stipend to return to London to continue the research that I began with Consortium support. In many respects, my first trip last summer was a survey and fact finding trip. Now that I am familiar with the archive and its substantial collection, I look forward to returning with a more narrow focus.