An Act of God: Religion and Climate Change in Lydia Millet's *A Children's Bible*

by Claire Reynolds

> *ACT OF GOD. An act occasioned exclusively by violence of nature without the interference of any human agency. ... It is an accident which could not have been occasioned by human agency but proceeded from physical causes alone.*
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> —Black's Law Dictionary *(1968)*

> *I think, too, that we've got to recognize that where the preservation of a natural resource like the redwoods is concerned, that there is a common sense limit. I mean, if you've looked at a hundred thousand acres or so of trees — you know, a tree is a tree, how many more do you need to look at?*
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> *—Ronald Reagan, 1966*

"At that time in my personal life, I was coming to grips with the end of the world. The familiar world, anyway. Many of us were" (Millet, 27). This is how we are led into Lydia Millet's *A Children's Bible:* not with a gentle tug, but with an abrupt jerk. Millet uses this tone throughout the novel; our narrator, Eve, prefers to speak of the story's issues in blunt terms, and the "end of the world" she speaks of is our current climate crisis. Throughout the novel, Eve and many other characters learn how to handle the climate disaster through study of a Christian Bible gifted to her younger brother. Despite claims that Christianity has an overall negative effect on the environment, the characters in this novel successfully distill it down to an ideology that ultimately can be used as a guide for how to acknowledge and combat climate change. *A Children's Bible* shows us that Christianity doesn't have to be a contributor to climate change, and can instead be used very effectively as a tool for change—change that is not only necessary, but inevitable, in the face of the current climate emergency.

Religion manifests in *A Children's Bible* fairly differently to the real world. There is no church, no prayer, no singing of hymns; rather, the focus is placed almost entirely on what

Martin Luther called "the Law." In his article "Theology and Climate Change," Jakob Wolf defined the Law as "our obligation to take care of one another, to take care of the vulnerable in life, both human beings and other living beings" (131). We see ample evidence of this concept in *A Children's Bible;* in fact, one could say this sums up Jack's entire world-view and subsequent teachings. Everything about Jack's philosophy centers on treating other living creatures with decency and respect. For Jack, this is exhibited mainly in his attempts to care for animals, but for some of the older characters, the underlying ideology of conservation and care extends, notably, to the people around them.

It has been posited that Christianity has an overall negative effect on the environment, and is therefore a contributing factor in our current climate crisis. In his 1967 article "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," historian Lynn White, Jr. argues that Christianity's assertion that human beings are superior to all other beings, living or otherwise, has contributed mainly to the climate crisis. He states that this belief leads to man taking advantage of nature rather than conserving it: "God planned all of this explicitly for man's benefit and rule: no item in the physical creation had any purpose save to serve man's purposes" (White, 1205). Using this logic, one could choose to view the climate disaster—an obviously man-made emergency—as stemming from the Bible's decree that God made man in his own image, and therefore superior to all other beings.

Yet we see numerous examples of the very antithesis of this concept. White himself mentions in his article that Saint Francis of Assissi "tried to depose man from his monarchy over creation and set up a democracy of all God's creatures" (1206). Saint Francis's belief in the equality of all beings is, White believes, the key to changing Christianity from an engine of climate disaster to a tool for preserving the environment. This concept, again, is reminiscent of

Jack's philosophy in *A Children's Bible;* indeed, we can view Jack as a somewhat more successful incarnation of Saint Francis. Their beliefs are the same: all beings deserve the respect afforded to humans.

This belief is more common amongst Christians than White assumes, however. In her article "Christians and Climate Change: A Social Framework of Analysis," Janel Curry tells us the idea that non-human beings exist only to be used by humans is a concept unique to dispensationalist branches of Christianity. Dispensationalists, she says, "teach that believers will be removed from this physical earth at the time of the return of Christ" (Curry, 158). As a result, many dispensationalists believe there is no need to preserve the physical world. While dispensationalism may lead to hindering views on climate change, Curry reminds us that many Christian sects do not adhere to this creed. She provides several examples of Christians of various denominations asserting their belief of the importance of respect for the earth and all its inhabitants. While this assertion may have been revolutionary for Saint Francis of Assissi, for many present-day Christians, this idea corresponds with the tenets they have been taught their entire lives.

The Franciscan concept of the preservation of non-human life forms is known by many names; among Christians, it is referred to as stewardship, and Martin Luther called it the Law, but outside the world of theology, this idea is known as the ethical demand (Løgstrup, 208). We can see the effects of the complete eradication of the ethical demand in William Golding's 1954 novel *Lord of the Flies*. Showcasing a similar premise — a group of children facing a sudden and complete absence of societal management — *Lord of the Flies* can serve as something of an alternative route by which to access Millet's novel.

The absence of society in *Lord of the Flies* is what leads to the characters' eventual departure from their humanity. The novel concerns a group of British schoolboys whose airplane crashes on an island. Separated from any civilization, the boys attempt to form their own institutions, but their unwillingness to engage in simple endeavors designed to benefit them leads to the collapse of these meager attempts at a surrogate society. As they become further separated from societal belief systems and institutions, the boys slip deeper into savagery, until finally, they succumb completely to barbarism and lose all vestiges of their humanity.

At one point early in the novel, the boys have become convinced there is a terrible beast living on the island. The novel's protagonist, a boy named Ralph, calls a meeting to try to restore some semblance of order to their group, to no avail. The other boys refuse to perform their assigned tasks or follow the rules during their meetings. They decide they will hunt the "beast." The lone voice of reason in the novel, a boy the others call Piggy, asks, “What are we? Humans? Or animals? Or savages?" (Golding, 91). This illustrates the perspective of the boys; at best, they see themselves as something entirely different and better than nature and animals. This lack of respect for their surroundings, living and non-living, is where their disregard for one another stems from.

We see evidence of this earlier in the novel, when the boys successfully hunt their first pig. Jack, the leader of the hunting party, is particularly happy with his first kill:

> "His mind was crowded with memories; memories of the knowledge that had come to them when they closed in on the struggling pig, knowledge that they had outwitted a living thing, imposed their will upon it, taken away its life like a long satisfying drink" (Golding, 70).

The extent of the gratification Jack gains from killing a living being is indicative of his potential to become the cold blooded murderer we see him develop into later in the novel. His ability to take pleasure in the killing of an innocent creature derives from his belief that he, as a human being, is superior to other beings; this is a belief that, as we see from Piggy's exclamation at the meeting, all of the boys have been indoctrinated with. Golding would like us to believe this is because humans are all inherently evil, but I believe it's more complex than that. There are plenty of good people in the world; one's response in any given situation is due less to an inherent human nature than it is to one's social programming.

We see confirmation of this idea in *A Children's Bible.* In Millet's novel, despite the children's struggle with apathy and hopelessness, they ultimately come together to help one another. Certainly they behave in many ways as any teenager might—their system of giving one another demerits for perceived "lame" behavior comes to mind—but when all is said and done, the children look out for one another. We see evidence of the ethical demand in their behavior at the beginning of the novel, with the way they do their best to help one another, and Burl, in the wake of the hurricane. And as Jack's teachings, a form of social programming, permeate the group, we see the ethical demand blossom from an obligation to a desire; they go from caring for a select group of people out of feelings of duty to caring for everyone out of a newly-accessed knowledge that it is simply right.

This is most evident in Eve's summation of the parents during her accidental foray into hallucinogens; she notes: "they'd always wanted to be more than they were" (Millet, 139). Eve's ability to look at the parents with pity is a skill undoubtedly taught to her by Jack; later in the novel, when she asks Jack why he would help Red, who killed one of Jack's goats and threatened Eve, Jack replies simply that Red was hungry, and thirsty, so they took care of him. Jack is

guided entirely by the ethical demand. It doesn't matter to Jack if he likes Red; he needs help, so Jack helps.

The unmistakable presence of the ethical demand in *A Children's Bible* puts its distinct absence in *Lord of the Flies* into sharp relief. Where is Saint Francis on this island, with these boys? Certainly Golding implies in his novel that, rather than an ethical demand, what lies within all of us is an instinctive depravity. But why does that depravity rear its ugly head amongst these boys? It becomes clear throughout the novel that the forfeiture of the organizational nature of society is what ultimately causes the boys to give in to their savagery. If the boys had been able to maintain societal structure, would that savagery have been kept at bay? If, perhaps, these boys had a children's Bible at hand, would a prophet have emerged among them to lead them from barbarism and toward decency and respect for one another? Conversely, if the children in Millet's novel had no prophet and no credo, would they have descended into brutality in the same way Golding's boys did? Was presence—or absence—of the ethical demand, that concept of stewardship, the deciding factor for both of these bands of adolescents navigating a dystopian world?

We see the idea of Christian stewardship featured prominently in Paul Schrader's 2017 film *First Reformed.* The film centers on Reverend Ernst Toller, the pastor of a small church called First Reformed. Toller is asked to counsel a radical environmental activist who believes bringing children into the world in the midst of our current anthropogenic climate disaster is irresponsible and morally wrong. The activist eventually kills himself, leaving Toller to ponder how his faith intersects with climate change, and what he can do prevent imminent catastrophe. Ultimately the knowledge of the worsening climate emergency and his own feelings of futility cause Toller to take drastic—and perhaps fatal—action.

As Toller becomes better acquainted with the true state of the climate crisis, he becomes more convinced that the proper Christian response to climate change is to embrace the call to stewardship. In a pivotal scene, Toller responds to a wealthy financial backer of the church imploring him to "leave politics out" of the upcoming anniversary service by asking him, "Will God forgive us for what we're doing to his creation?" *(First Reformed)*. This is a reiteration of a question asked of Toller by the activist earlier in the film, and it sums up the perspective Toller has adopted throughout the course of the film. The church's backer insists that climate change is a "complicated matter," but Toller maintains that it is not: "Besides the Biblical call to stewardship, who profits when we soil our own nest? What's to be gained?" *(First Reformed)*. Toller deftly weaves the Christian idea of stewardship in with the secular concept of the ethical demand in this scene, in an attempt to appeal to a man who thinks only in terms of capital and earnings.

This is a key scene in detecting the sense of uselessness that saturates Toller over the course of the film. His attempts to preach the call to stewardship fall on deaf ears, disregarded either by those who cannot face the reality of the climate emergency, or by those who see climate change as a political matter rather than a fact. Again, the image of Saint Francis hovers before us; Toller's unsuccessful attempts to preach of stewardship call to mind Francis's many struggles to reach others with the word of God.

Of course, if we compare Toller to Saint Francis, it follows that there is a comparison to be made between Toller and Jack. Whereas in *Lord of the Flies* we note a distinct lack of a figure reminiscent of Jack, in *First Reformed* this character is our protagonist. The conflict in this film comes not from a lack of societal and ethical guidance, but rather from an inability to convince others of its importance. Again we are led to wonder how Millet's novel might have played out if

her prophet character had dealt with a similar issue; what if Jack and Shel were unable to deliver their philosophy to the other characters? Would we see a similar breakdown in their morale and psyches? Would they eventually lose all hope and give up? Toller's obsession with his own futility eventually overcomes him, rendering him useless as a tool to ward off climate disaster. It is eminently possible that the same fate would have befallen Jack, were he not given the platform he had in the novel to preach to the other children. Of course, if Jack does not preach his philosophy, the other children do not adopt it, and once again the possibility of a descent into depravity arises.

Obviously the question of the ethical demand and the importance of the concept of Christian stewardship play a vital role in all of these stories, but particularly in *A Children's Bible*. Notably, these concepts can also be linked to Marxism. Marxism is built upon the idea of the ethical demand; the pursuit of economic equality is motivated by the conviction that everyone deserves that equality. Wolf's definition of Luther's concept of the Law, "our obligation… to take care of the vulnerable in life," seems like a clear parallel to Marxist belief. Indeed, Marxism and the idea of Christian stewardship are closely related, despite Marx's famous claim that religion is the opiate of the masses. Both are led by the belief that protecting the vulnerable and offering respect and decency to all, rather than to a select few, are crucial to the betterment of ourselves and society. Marx himself spoke of a division between man and earth caused by extensive agriculture under capitalism. He gave an example of this in *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* when he stated that a "blind eagerness for plunder" had "exhausted the soil" in England (Marx, 166). Here, Marx draws a clear link between Marxism and stewardship.

This raises an important question: is a Christian's philosophy of either dispensationalism or stewardship decided by their economic status? Certainly we see this illustrated quite clearly in *First Reformed:* in the aforementioned scene, Toller, who lives only on his meager earnings as a pastor, fully embraces stewardship, while the wealthy financier aggressively espouses dispensationalism. The only other character present in the scene, a pastor of a megachurch also financed by First Reformed's backer, presents a point of view that is what some may call a happy medium between the two extremes.

The characters in *A Children's Bible* are mainly the children of fairly wealthy parents. This, then, could explain their initial failure to follow through with the philosophy of stewardship taught to them by Jack and Shel. The latter part of the novel sees the children ensconced within the walls of Juicy's family's mansion, walls erected specifically to prevent others from accessing the safe haven they have created within. They are, as Eve's mother notes in the final part of the book, cultivating their own garden. What the children fail to—or refuse—to realize at this point, is that they are very fortunate to be able to cultivate a garden at all; outside the walls of their mansion, it is certain that many are struggling to survive.

But the novel doesn't end with this apparent desertion of Jack's philosophy. After the parents have disappeared from the mansion, taking their self-centered ideology with them, the narrative focuses predominantly on Eve's attempt to comfort Jack in what may be his final days. She expresses hope for the future; when Jack tells of his hurt at not knowing what will happen in the future, Eve tells him, "The comets and the stars will be our eyes…" (Millet, 224). She even fills in the final piece of Jack's philosophy, telling him that one of the most important aspects of life is the art people make. Such an idea could certainly come from a newfound understanding of the importance of other people, and subsequently, a desire to care for them. Indeed, we can view

Eve's telling of Jack's story as an act of love, not just for Jack, but also for future readers. To present us with Jack's philosophy is to give us a way forward, a handbook for how to survive. Eve's blossoming respect for others is what prompts her to transcribe Jack's story, in hopes that future generations can use it to their advantage.

The climate disaster no longer looms before us; rather, it walks alongside us every day. It is with us during our daily commute, when we shop for groceries, as we watch the news and take out the recycling. It is not just a threat anymore; it is reality. As present-day readers of *A Children's Bible,* we are familiar with the sense of impending doom portrayed in the novel because we live with it every day. It is fortunate, then, that Millet seems to be presenting us with clear instructions on how to proceed in a world where our response to the climate emergency simply must take precedence in our lives. Rather than telling us that the solution is to eradicate our society's ties to Christianity, Millet demonstrates a method of transforming Christianity into a vehicle for change by embracing and giving new life to the concept of Christian stewardship. At the end of the novel, Millet's message is clear: to tend to one's own garden, and one's own garden alone, is not just a moral offense, but an unforgivably shortsighted misstep in the grand scheme of life. Presented with an alternative course, we are left with a decision: to take the beaten path of our elders, or to blaze a new one, with new understanding at our fingertips.

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