
Introduction

Whitney A. Bauman, Richard Bohannon and Kevin J. O'Brien

Religion matters. In our world today, this is difficult to deny. The majority of the world's people still identify themselves as belonging to or shaped by a religious belief system; questions about the public role of religious morality in democratic societies remain hugely controversial; and threats of terrorism and violent extremism motivated by religious belief are increasingly becoming a part of contemporary life.

It is also difficult to deny that the non-human natural world matters. Modernity is in part defined by the biological assertion that human beings are a species like all others, emerging from and dependent on natural systems. Over the last 60 years, the Western industrialized peoples most shaped by modernity have also become increasingly aware that these natural systems can be endangered by our choices: that the air, the soil, the water, and the climate are changed – and degraded – by human beings.

This book is about religion and the natural world, but more specifically it is about the ways they matter to one another, about how the religious world influences and is influenced by ecological systems. The chapters that follow are meant to inspire questions about the relationship between religion and ecology and to help you think critically about the role of each in shaping one another and the world. Each one investigates the intersections of religion and ecology, introduces ongoing debates within the academic field that studies these intersections, and raises some of the important questions yet to be answered within the field.

Connecting religion and ecology in a context of environmental degradation

It is important first to examine two assumptions that are shared throughout the book: (1) there is an important connection between religion and ecology, and (2) this connection is particularly important today because of the reality of environmental degradation.

The connection between religion and ecology is unfamiliar for many, partly because of a widespread assumption that those who are devoutly religious

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focus their attention exclusively on a narrow set of cultural rules, on a heaven beyond this reality, or on a nirvanistic salvation from the cycle of rebirth in nature. At its extreme, this understanding of religion leads some to believe that people of faith must be antagonistic to ecological science and the natural environment. In a more moderate sense, this understanding leads many to assume that religion is simply a different sphere that does not interact with science and public policy, and so is not connected to studies of the natural world or claims to environmental responsibility.

However, when one looks closely at any religious tradition, one finds considerations of and connections to the natural world. The Buddha's enlightenment took place outdoors, under a bodhi tree; the Muslim Qur'an and the Hebrew Bible both repeatedly stress the importance of land in shaping and defining a community; the most sacred site on earth for many Hindus is the river Ganges, and many indigenous religious traditions are similarly centered on particular features of their local ecosystems; the parables of Jesus in the Christian scriptures frequently draw on images from the natural world, with mustard seeds, trees, seas, and wildlife featuring prominently. These brief examples are just a small taste of the many ways in which recognized, mainstream religions have long been concerned with and related to the natural world.

There are also connections between religion and ecology beyond these faith traditions. Many people, both inside and outside of traditional religious structures, experience a profound sense of something spiritual and holy in the natural world: gardeners, kayakers, anglers, trail runners, and surfers frequently describe their activities and passions in spiritual terms. The outdoors and the wilderness feel sacred to many people, whether they define this sacredness as a connection to a transcendent divine creative force or the immanent reality of ecological interdependence. While some might describe such experiences as "spiritual" rather than religious, we are less interested in this distinction than in the fact that this is further evidence of a relationship between the religious realm of human cultures and the nonhuman world that forms the context for all cultures.

This book thus assumes that religion and ecology are interrelated, and so that the scholarly study of religion must include attention to the ways religious and spiritual traditions relate to environmental issues and priorities. Religions do not simply appear and exist on their own, *sui generis*, but evolve in conversation with other social and natural forces. Religions and other cultural systems, in turn, shape how human beings choose to think about, relate to, and treat the natural world. In sum, human cultures matter greatly to how the very concept of "nature" gets constructed, and the natural world itself matters in how the concept of "religion" is constructed.

The second basic assumption of this book concerns a set of social and natural forces which are particularly influential upon and potentially influenced by religion in the 21st century: environmental degradation.

The most widely publicized example of this degradation is climate change, which is considered by many to be the most urgent issue facing humanity in

the 21st century. The technology upon which our society depends and the ways we have decided to grow our food and transport ourselves emit tons of greenhouse gases like carbon dioxide and methane, which then persist in the atmosphere. These gases trap heat, thereby changing the interconnected and wildly complex climate system. The temperature in the atmosphere affects the temperature in the oceans, which affects the currents, which affect the breeding of fish, which affects the health of bears, which affects the health of forests. Scientific experts who study the subject have come to consensus that human industrial activity is changing the climate, and that the climate will inevitably change more severely and unpredictably in the near future.

Another example of environmental degradation is the destruction of biodiversity. As human beings in industrial cultures develop land and extract resources, we decimate ecosystems and habitats, leading to a rate of species extinction as much as 1000 faster than it would be without us. Biodiversity is threatened in rainforests as we use and burn trees, in prairies as we introduce invasive species, in rivers as we build dams and divert water, and in crop fields as we choose to grow only one species for cash while killing off all others as weeds.

The environment is also degraded by the pollution of air, water, and land as human beings create and distribute toxic chemicals and substances. While they may be less publicized than climate change and biodiversity loss, problems like acid rain and air pollution persist throughout the world, and the dumping of waste in rivers and oceans remains a dangerous and largely unmonitored problem. These trends also serve as a reminder that when the environment is degraded, the people who depend upon it suffer: fishers and those who eat fish are endangered by the mercury that enters the oceans from coal-fired power plants; urban populations suffer increased rates of asthma and other respiratory illnesses as they breathe more automotive and industrial exhaust; developing countries are increasingly treated as a dumping ground for the waste and wasteful industries of the developed world. Environmental degradation is a problem not only for distant environments and for exotic species, but for human beings and all of the earth.

This book assumes not only that environmental degradation is a real and complicated set of problems, but also that these problems form a vital context for discussing religion. If religion is to be relevant to our time, it needs to respond to the reality of degradation. If faith traditions and spiritual practices are to fulfill their role as moral guides, they need to reflect on the ethical implications of these trends and lead people of faith to more just and sustainable lives. Religion must respond to the reality of environmental degradation.

The academic field of religion and ecology

These two assumptions – that religious traditions are related to the natural world and that this contemporary relationship is particularly shaped by

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environmental degradation – are not unique to this book, but rather emerge from an academic field: religion and ecology.

This field has developed over the last 50 years, as scholars have explored the implications of religious ideas for responding to environmental degradation, proposed new applications of longstanding spiritual traditions to environmental questions, and developed new moral and religious models for relationships between human communities, other animals, and the rest of the natural environment. As a field, religion and ecology is deeply interdisciplinary, incorporating the work of philosophers, ethicists, theologians, sociologists, historians, and many others. In addition, the field frequently draws upon the natural sciences, incorporating the findings of environmental and ecological scientists as well as physicists, cosmologists, geneticists, and ethologists, all of whom offer important lessons about the interconnectedness of reality, the origins of human cultural systems, and the character of the world to which religion responds and relates.

Partly because it is always learning from developments in other disciplines, religion and ecology is constantly evolving. As scholars understand more about the natural world, study the history and range of religious ideas and practices, and expand our views of what counts as “religion” and “ecology,” the academic study of these topics changes. Even more importantly, the field develops as the world itself changes. Environmental degradation is an ongoing process, and human understanding of it continues to develop. There is no static “environment” or “ecology.” There is also no static “religion”: spiritual beliefs and practices are part of ever-changing human cultures, and all religions reflect internal debates and adaptations to new experiences. So, the study of religion and ecology is about the intersection of two ever-changing concepts, making it a complicated and always interesting pursuit.

This complexity makes even naming the academic field difficult. The editors of this book have chosen “religion and ecology,” but many of our colleagues refer to it as “religion and nature.” They assert – with many good reasons – that “nature” is a broader category than “ecology,” allowing for more two-way reflection (from sciences/nature to religion and from religion to nature). They also argue that religion and ecology has focused too exclusively on a static list of world religions. “Religion and nature” signals, for some, a more inclusive perspective that also attends to less-recognized religious movements such as neo-paganism or spiritual environmentalism and minority viewpoints within all traditions. Still broader is the newly emerging field of “environmental humanities,” within which “religion and ecology” and “religion and nature” both fit.

However, we editors nevertheless chose to stick with “religion and ecology” for three reasons. First, this name has the longest standing history and institutional structure: the group that studies these issues within the American Academy of Religion, the premier organization for scholars of religion in North America, calls itself “Religion and Ecology” with the support of the

highly influential Forum on Religion and Ecology. The second reason is more philosophical: while we appreciate the breadth of the term “nature,” we value the specificity of “ecology” even more. Ecology calls particular attention to systems of interconnection, to the energy and material exchange between organisms, and to the relationships between the living and non-living worlds (minerals, rocks, and other organisms; or atmosphere, oceans, and land, for example).

Third and finally, we worry that too many people in the Western world have unhelpful and misleading understandings of “nature.” On one hand, nature is frequently contrasted with culture, which problematically suggests that human beings are somehow separate from the rest of the world. At the same time, “nature” is often thought of as a pristine and perfect reality looked upon with an unhealthy nostalgia. We hope that naming our field “religion and ecology” will emphasize the interconnections between human cultures and the rest of the world, and the ever-changing nature of both. Nevertheless, many of the authors we cite in this book refer to the field as “religion and nature,” and we learn from them and the wider field of environmental humanities about the importance of broadening our attention and bringing as many voices into this scholarly pursuit as possible.

The methodologies of religion and ecology

In order to delve into the chapters that follow and the ways they raise and wrestle with difficult questions, it is important to understand how scholars in this field work with ideas and discuss their findings. It is important, in other words, to analyze the academic methodologies of religion and ecology, which we define here primarily as synthetic and activist.

Perhaps the core methodological commitment of religion and ecology is a synthesis of scholarly attention to religious worldviews and to lived religions. In other words, this field studies both the broad intellectual traditions of religions (the attitudes and views of religious leaders, sacred texts, and traditions) and the everyday reality of religion on the ground (the practices and actions of religious people in their day-to-day lives). Religion and ecology attends both to the intellectual frameworks for human life provided by religious beliefs and to the ways religious adherents live out and practice these ideas.

Some scholars of religion understand “worldviews” and “lived religions” as oppositional, and many suggest that we must choose between them, deciding whether we want to pay primary attention to ideas or practices. There are ancient roots for such a choice in debates between Platonic ideals and Aristotelian natural philosophy, and more recent precedent in the tension between Hegelian idealism and Marxist materialism. Such divisions separate the world of ideas from the physical world, demanding that scholars make a choice about which world they prefer. Religion and ecology refuses to make this choice, it is committed to understanding theory and practice, ideas and

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actions, worldviews and lived religion together, as complementary and mutually informative.

One cannot study religion without paying attention to worldviews. Religious people have spent thousands of years consciously and subconsciously developing intricate cosmologies, complicated stories about how things came to be and why, and controversial belief systems about the future of humanity in relation to the world around us and the gods and/or God structuring it. These worldviews represent the thoughts, emotions, ideals, and values of millions of peoples. Worldviews also have vital environmental implications: how we understand the relationship between human beings and the rest of the world will shape our decisions about how to treat other beings and one another. Whether we see the human species as a product of an evolutionary process or as a unique and distinct creation has implications for how responsible and related we will feel to the rest of the world.

However, the lived experience of religious people cannot always be explained by the broad worldviews of their tradition. The daily life of a devout Buddhist in contemporary China cannot be reduced to the Four Noble Truths and the sermons of the Buddha, but rather needs to be studied and appreciated on its own terms, in its own context. The attitudes of evangelical Christians toward environmental issues should not be derived solely by reading the Bible and their pastors' sermons, but should be discerned through talking to them and paying attention to their behavior. A study of the environmental impacts of religious belief cannot focus only on attitudes, beliefs, and feelings, but also on practices and behaviors, on what people do in addition to what they say and feel.

To study only worldviews would allow religious leaders and powerful spokespeople to exclusively define religion, ignoring the perspectives and practices of the marginalized within and outside traditional religions. At the same time, to study only lived religion, the "on the ground" practices and ideas of individual believers, would make it impossible to connect people within and across faiths. Some generalizations about worldviews are necessary in order to bring together the ways various people make sense of reality, in order to observe meaningful trends and distinctions in the stories people tell about the place of human beings within the world. Observations of lived religions need the connections made possible by worldviews, and worldviews need the details and differences provided by a lived religions approach. Thus, the methodology of religion and ecology is synthetic: scholars establish and build connections between thought and action, between ideas and practices.

A related aspect of religion and ecology's methodology is a commitment that activists need scholars and scholars need activists. This may surprise some people, particularly those who distinguish the scholarly world of academics from the "real" world of practical concerns outside it. Just as there is a reason to distinguish worldviews and lived religion, there is some validity to this separation of scholarship from practicality. The academic world is designed to

develop intellectual skills, to provide space and time for students and scholars to nurture the habit of critical thinking. In this sense, it is important that academia be somewhat distinct from other parts of the world.

However, this separation should not and cannot be absolute. The academic world is not just abstract and separate; it is also a key place for generating worldview- and behavior-changing ideas. It is a community that asks you to question every assumption and provides the tools of analysis needed for creative solutions to ecological and social problems. Furthermore, the academic world itself is a space of lived experiences: students and their teachers develop very specific habits of action and habitats for thinking, which can be instruments for social and environmental change in positive or negative directions, both on- and off-campus. In other words, the academic world is part of the real world, and so it has the chance to make a practical difference. This is particularly true if academics can train and inspire others to behave differently by thinking critically about their world and their interactions with it.

Similar to critical theories that deal with race, gender, sex, sexuality, and class, scholars in the field of religion and ecology seek to make a practical difference in the world. This field exists not just to develop theories and ideas, but also to contribute to a more just and sustainable world. Scholars of religion and ecology help people to think critically about how religion has been shaped by the natural world and can be shaped by environmental degradation. Writings in this field help readers to imaginatively consider how religion and/or the study of religion might positively impact the future of our species and our planet. This book, as a product of that field, is no exception: we invite you to study religious worldviews and environmental practices because we hope it will help you to live differently in the world and to make the world better.

Format of the book

There are many excellent texts that discuss the field of religion and ecology. Some take comparative approaches by analyzing the contributions of world religions, some develop constructive environmental proposals from a single religious tradition, and some focus on a particular environmental issue. This book is an attempt to complement that literature by offering a single volume that takes “religion and ecology” itself as the central topic and works through a series of key ideas and terms in order to nurture critical thinking about the intersection between religion and environmental degradation. This book is a “field guide” to religion and ecology because it is designed to help you more actively recognize and participate in this academic project.

The first section, on religion and ecology, features introductory overviews of these central terms followed in each case by a case study offering the chance to apply relevant ideas and tools to a specific situation. Section two is devoted to “Mapping Your Location,” examining the concepts of gender, racial, and spatial identity from which all of us interact with both religion

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and ecology. Section three then examines eight terms that help to complicate, enrich, and explore the academic field of religion and ecology: globalization, climate change, food, animals, technology, justice, sustainability, and economics. The book then concludes with a reflection on the interplay between despair and hope because coming to terms with the topics in this book can lead to an overwhelming feeling of helplessness, but religious studies and religious traditions offer paths to productively act on or act in spite of such feelings.

No field guide can possibly include everything you will encounter out in the world, and so this book cannot hope to cover every relevant issue, idea, or term in religion and ecology. Instead, the editors and authors have aimed to offer an introduction for students and a pedagogical tool for teachers, and we expect those who use it to continue thinking and applying the ideas here to other issues and terms. Above all, we hope that readers will continue the questioning and thinking essential for an academic study of religion and ecology.

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