



RELIGIONS AND ENVIRON- MENTS

A READER IN
RELIGION, NATURE
AND ECOLOGY

RICHARD
BOHANNON

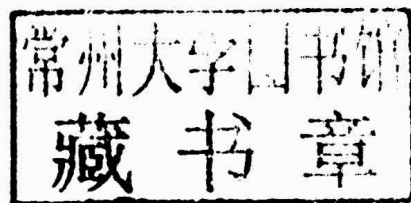


B L O O M S B U R Y

Religions and Environments

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nature and ecology

RICHARD BOHANNON



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For
Otto Maduro
(1945-2013)

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Introduction

Richard Bohannon

Overwhelming and frightening environmental crises confront us today; the litany of environmental ills before us is familiar to most people who would pick up this book. We continue to lose species at a rate not seen since the extinction of the dinosaurs, as rain forests rich in biodiversity in the global south are felled to raise livestock and plant crops intended for the global market. We blow up the tops of mountains in Appalachia to get at the coal seams buried underneath, filling neighboring valleys with the toxic debris, while further north we strip-mine remote, boreal forests in Alberta to extract oil from the dirty, bituminous sands underneath. The climate is changing, potentially disrupting ecosystems on a massive scale and creating existential risks for low-lying countries like Bangladesh and the Maldives. Poor and minority communities throughout the world frequently face the burdens of living on land compromised by industries, by unsustainable farming practices, and by toxic wastes.

We have nonetheless successfully begun to address some problems. When Aldo Leopold wrote his “Marshland Eulogy” in *A Sand County Almanac*, he imagined that his was the last generation to know the greater sandhill crane, of which fewer than one thousand individuals remained at the time. Hunting restrictions and habitat restoration since then have allowed the population to grow by a hundredfold, however; their calls are now heard throughout the spring and summer in central Minnesota, where I write these pages. Likewise, after Rachel Carson chronicled the demise of the American bald eagle in *Silent Spring*, it too has returned from the brink of extinction. Despite recoveries and victories like these, other problems, both large and small, remain bleak, urgent, and largely unaddressed.

This anthology is a collection of writing on the environment and *religion*, of course, and so it is worth asking: what is gained by looking at religion and the environment? In what ways can religion help address our situation?

Environmentalism is commonly thought of as a secular affair, quite apart from the otherworldly concerns of churches, synagogues, mosques, temples, and other places where the faithful gather for worship. If you follow environmental news, you might be forgiven for assuming that there is even an explicit antagonism between religion (and particularly Christianity) and environmentalism—in the United States, for instance, evangelical Christians and Mormons are much less likely than the rest of the country to believe that humans are causing climate change, and there are well-known political pundits who mix a conservative Christianity with an antiscience agenda.

Popular perception does not always reflect reality, however, and there is quite a lot at play at the intersection of religion and the environment. To begin with, religious environmental activism is becoming increasingly commonplace—both emerging out of traditional religious communities as well as from mainstream environmental organizations. In the United States, for instance, some religious groups—including Jews, Buddhists, and Unitarian-Universalists—outrank the average US citizen in environmental concern, and environmentalists and conservative Christians have recently started to work together on a significant scale. We now have organizations like the Evangelical Environmental Network working to promote “creation care” among their fellow believers, interfaith organizations like GreenFaith and Interfaith Power and Light who rally religious communities around environmental issues, mainstream environmental organizations like the Sierra Club reaching out to faith communities, and grassroots environmental justice activism organized around churches.

This activism shows that people are making a connection, but it also begs the question of what religion is bringing to the table. What does the study and practice of religion have to contribute to understanding and addressing the myriad environmental crises we face?

There are at least a few possibilities. First, at least in some countries, religious organizations and institutionalized religion provide a third space in society that lies outside of the sphere of the state and of corporations, where people work together and share ideas on a large scale. Religions, certainly including but not at all limited to Christianity, have certainly been used to justify political orders and commercial interests; nonetheless, in countries that have created a relative degree of separation between religion and the state, religious organizations form a unique social space that allows for conversation, dialogue, and organization to happen outside of the direct interests of the state or of global capitalism.

In one of the earliest sociological studies of religion, for instance, W. E. B. DuBois (1899) observed how black churches in Philadelphia provided basic social services to the black community, a community which was largely denied those services by government agencies and ignored by the commercial white establishment of the time. This role echoes today in the church’s functioning as an organizational hub for environmental justice struggles (among other movements), and is parallel to the roles that synagogues and Muslim organizations have played in other countries. The implications of religion’s influence on the environment are not just organizational. Religions also help to structure the basic stories we tell about how the world is put together—a point to which we’ll return.

Second, some forms of environmentalism, along with some conceptions of nature, can themselves be understood as religious, even when divorced from any kind of traditional religious structure. Different forms of environmentalism certainly have many of the same aspects as organized religions: there are ethical norms (eat organic, recycle, use public transit), rituals (Earth Day, protests, club meetings), and a sense of community (both organized and informal), as well as an ultimate authority in Nature.

A few writers in the US media have used this trope to disparage environmentalism—Laurel Kearns (2007) has noted how climate science has been framed as a “religion” in an effort to disprove it, for instance—but many others have made more helpful arguments that are not dismissive of religion itself or of environmentalism. Catherine Albanese brought the term “nature religion” to the forefront in her 1990 book, *Nature Religion in America*. Albanese’s use of the term includes paganism, indigenous religious traditions, and religious or spiritual traditions that worship nature and/or divine beings that indwell the natural world, but she more often points toward groups who use nature as a moral authority. Like Western conceptions of God, nature (or Nature) is an external force outside of human history, on which people can rest moral claims. Thus Albanese observes how in the late eighteenth century Thomas Jefferson—hardly a pagan—grounded the authority of the US Declaration of Independence in “nature as an ideal and metaphysical principle” (1990: 63–64). This use of nature—as a moral authority—continues to be incredibly common in the modern world, especially within modern environmentalism, and will appear in various chapters throughout this text.

A third contribution of religion to thinking out environmental issues—and the most important one for how this present book is organized—is that religions and spiritualities provide ways of making meaning out of the world. This meaning-making activity includes narratives that tell us how humans and nonhuman nature relate to each other, and thus how we should act within the world.

The environmental crisis has been caused, at least to some unquantifiable but significant degree, by how we imagine the world to be—by the ideas we have about what constitutes those things we call “nature,” what makes humans human, and how we understand the relationship between peoples and the places within which they live. Lynn White, in his highly influential 1967 essay in *Science*, argued that the environmental crisis is, at its roots, a religious crisis. Religions have a strong influence on how we think about the world, White argues, and “what people do about their ecology depends on what they think about themselves in relation to things around them” (1205). Thus, the development of science and technology, and the ends to which they are aimed, stem from prior worldviews—specifically, White argues that the Christian narrative of mastery over nature is to blame for the modern environmental crisis and the inordinately exploitative technologies that have engendered it. At the root of the environmental crisis, then, is not a technological failure or a lack of scientific understanding, but a failure of our basic worldview. Speaking specifically of the West, White thus concludes that “more science and more technology are not going to get us out of the present ecologic crisis until we find a new religion, or rethink our old one” (1206).

In the nearly 50 years that have passed since White wrote those words, scholars from across the globe have been asking what role religion (and especially Christianity) played in causing the environmental crisis, and what role religions can play in shifting us toward a greener future. Regardless of whether or not White understood Christianity correctly, for this anthology, what is particularly important about White’s essay, and the generation of scholars that have followed him, is this more basic idea: the way we think about ourselves and our world affects how we live within in it. Ideas matter—and

especially religious ideas—because they are grounded in an ultimate reality, whether this be a god or nature.

There exists a long and global history of encountering and describing the natural world through a religious or spiritual lens, beginning with ancient creation stories and agricultural ethics. If we constrain ourselves just to the limits of what might be considered the modern environmental movement, religious language still abounds, though often in a less traditional manner. Many early environmental thinkers, such as Henry David Thoreau or John Muir, for instance, distanced themselves from orthodox Christianity but would fall back on religious language to describe their encounters with nature.

Religious narratives can give us different stories about the world around us—that humans are uniquely placed as the caretakers in charge of the world, for instance, or that humans are kin to the animals around them and guided by their spirits—and correspondingly there is no single way to understand the world or to understand “nature.” Social theorists have come to call this the social construction of nature. That is, the world is made up of a complex array of things and networks—rocks, animals, trees, grass, ecosystems, weather, etc.—but there is not a concept that inherently describes them. “Nature” is thus a social construction, in that it is a word we have fabricated to lump all nonhuman things into one category. And, of course, one could take this a step further and note that the words “rock,” “tree,” “grass,” and so on, as well as “human,” are themselves categories humans have placed onto things and not inherent to the things themselves.

The Huaorani people in Amazonian Ecuador, for instance, use the same word to encapsulate people and groups of woolly monkeys, recognizing a similarity between humans and the monkeys not seen in other animals (see Peterson 2001). This is part of a broader worldview, typical of many indigenous traditions, that sees humans as one animal among many. This is not the same as saying all animals are the same, but rather seeing all animals (including humans), in their different capacities and abilities, as living in relationship with one another. For many, the strong Western linguistic dichotomy between humans and nature simply does not exist.

So, when we speak of the environment, of destroying nature, or of ecological integrity—what do we mean by words like “environment,” “ecology” or “nature”? What is the “environment” of the environmental crisis? Environmentalists themselves often assume (and continue to give) different answers to this question and hold different ideals. This is why the book you are holding is named *Religions and Environments* in the plural—we all know there are multiple religions (as well as multiple ways of defining “religion”), but there are also multiple ways of conceiving what counts as the environment.

These definitions and constructions matter because they influence how we interact with the world. Animals often serve as a stand-in for nature, for instance, and they get constructed in different ways: many people hold a clear distinction between wild and domesticated animals, or between what is a pet and what is food. Every semester I have students read a brief article about the farm at Green Mountain College in Vermont; one section of the essay highlights Oliver, a lamb that has been raised from birth by a student, and whom she will eventually have to shoot so that he can be slaughtered and

served as food in the school cafeteria (Carlson 2010). The majority of my own students say they would be unwilling to eat Oliver; the issue is often not that they are vegetarian, however, but that Oliver has a name. For them, naming the lamb confuses the boundary between companion and meat—between animals that are pets and animals that are food—and they don't feel comfortable eating a pet. Laws regarding the treatment of animals likewise often keep pets and food distinct from each other; there are several states in the United States, for instance, where it is illegal to eat a cat or a dog, but where it is legal to raise thousands of pigs (which are more intelligent than cats or dogs) in a confined and filthy space, and then kill them for food. The point at the moment is not to explore the ethics of eating animals, but simply to recognize that the categories through which we view the nonhuman world affect how we interact with it.

This book is organized by three of the different categories that environmentalists assume when we construct what we mean by words like “environment”: the *wilderness*, the *garden*, and the *city*. These categories group together ethical models for how to live in the world, and are intentionally quite broad. The structure is an artificial one—certainly many of the writings included in these pages were not penned with the intent of fitting into this rubric—but the wilderness, the garden, and the city serve as centralizing themes around which the readings revolve.

The first section covers the *wilderness*—places perceived as remote and untouched by humanity—as well as wildness more broadly. Readers will encounter ideas on preserving remote landscapes and the spiritual value of the wilderness, as well as writings that call us to embrace (or at least humbly accept) wild and untamed things. Other essays will sit in tension with these more traditional ideas, and argue instead for a more biocentric understanding of the world that displaces humans from the center of moral and spiritual concern, or even argue whether or not such a thing as the wilderness exists in the first place. What holds all of these writings together is a deep respect for the noncivilized, nonhuman world.

In the writings centered around the *garden*, which form the second third of this book, you will find models of environmentalism focused on caretaking and stewardship of the land. Gardens are, of course, human-created products—you won't find a garden out in the wild. Accordingly, several of these readings are noticeably and unapologetically more anthropocentric; that is, they are not trying to avoid human impacts on the land (a characteristic of many wilderness ethics) but instead explore life-giving and life-affirming ways of changing the landscape. A few of these essays are about gardening or agriculture itself, but all of them are trying to think out how human actions might have a positive environmental impact, either through how we grow food or through how we engender diverse and robust ecosystems and landscapes.

The word “environment” is sometimes derided by environmental scholars as either too vague or too anthropocentric. For our purposes, its vagueness is one of its assets, however: “environment” can refer to ecosystems and natural landscapes, but it can also reference *human* spaces. We can speak of the built environment, the urban environment, the classroom environment, and so on. The third and final section of this book is thus on *city* as an environment.