

# Religion and Ecology

Roger S. Gottlieb

- *Worldly Wonder: Religions Enter Their Ecological Phase*, by Mary Evelyn Tucker. Open Court, 2003.
- *Faith in Ecology*, by Martin Palmer. World Bank 2003.
- *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, edited by Bron Taylor and Jeffrey Kaplan. Continuum International, 2005.
- *The Paradise of God: Renewing Religion in an Ecological Age*, by Norman Wirzba. Oxford University Press 2003.
- *Islam and Ecology: A Bestowed Trust*, edited by Richard C. Foltz, Frederic M. Denny, and Asisan Baharuddin. Harvard University Press/Center for the Study of World Religions 2003.
- *Christian Environmental Ethics: A Case Method Approach*, by James Martin-Schramm and Robert L. Stivers. Orbis Books 2003.
- *Environmental Ethics, Ecological Theology and Natural Selection*, by Lisa H. Sideris. Columbia University Press 2003.



a leading voice of the new ecotheology, wrote in 1988 that “After dealing with suicide, homicide, and genocide, our Western Christian moral code collapses completely: it cannot deal with biocide.... Nor have church authorities made any sustained protest against the violence being done to the planet.”

All this has changed. Indeed in 1986, two years before Berry’s own groundbreaking book *The Dream of the Earth* was published, the World Wildlife Fund convened a meeting of five major world faiths to discuss their relation to ecology. Comprehensive statements

and an organization, the U.K. based Alliance for Religion and Conservation, emerged. The member faiths have since grown to nine, and the organization—often in partnership with local governments, environmental groups, developmental programs, and even (surprise) the World Bank—has projects throughout the world. In recent years the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has committed resources to a special campaign linking children’s health and environmental pollution. The Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life (COEJL) has worked to save redwoods in California and researched environmental racism in Boston. The Interfaith Climate Change Network, an ecumenical working group concerned with global warming, has chapters in eighteen states. And all this is just the tip of the iceberg. Dozens of single-religion and interfaith organizations, proclamations, letter-writing campaigns, and public demonstrations have focused on virtually every key environmental issue—from species extinction and urban sprawl to toxic waste and the economics of sustainable development.

Similar developments are happening in academia. The Forum on Religion and Ecology and Harvard University have co-sponsored a comprehensive series of conferences, subsequent publications, and an enormously rich website ([www.environment.harvard.edu/religion/](http://www.environment.harvard.edu/religion/)) on the connections between ecology and virtually all of the world’s religious traditions. An academic journal (*Worldviews*) focuses on the topic; courses, conferences, and lectures on the subject have grown exponentially; and the University of Florida now offers a Ph.D. concentration in religion and ecology. My book, *This Sacred*

“A comprehensive collection on religion and ecology,” I said to the owner of a small bookstore when she asked about the subject matter of a book I was working on in 1994. “How interesting,” she replied, though her skeptical tone suggested that rather than “interesting” she might have said “arcane” or “obscure.” More significantly, Catholic priest Thomas Berry, himself

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ILLUSTRATION BY RYAN INZANA

## READING SPIRIT

*Earth: Religion, Nature, Environment*, which came out in 1996, was used in enough courses to warrant a second edition in 2003.

The books discussed here show that in a time of darkening environmental prospects, frightening religious fundamentalism, and moribund liberalism, the remarkable and historically unprecedented rise of religious environmentalism is a profound source of hope. Theologians are recovering marginalized nature-honoring elements of traditional religions and forging bold new theologies that connect devotion to God with love for God's creation. And these innovative ideas are giving rise to far-reaching political action.

For those who feel a bit like my bookstore-owner friend, the books by Mary Evelyn Tucker and Martin Palmer provide excellent starting points. Tucker is the cochair of the Forum on Religion and Ecology mentioned above, and along with her own expertise on East Asian religions, has been internationally active in a host of contexts helping, as in the subtitle of her book, “religions enter their ecological phase.”

Tucker's *Worldly Wonder* focuses on the three basic questions posed to ecological religion. First, in her words, “Can religions situate their stories within the universe story? Can religions open up their traditions to embrace the planet as home and hearth?” For Tucker, as for Thomas Berry, Sallie McFague, Holmes Rolston, and many other ecotheologians, cultural historians, and ethicists, religious narratives must now integrate themselves with scientific accounts of cosmology, ecology, and evolution. We should see ourselves as part of a 14-billion-year-old universe, a 3.6-billion-year-old earth, a marvelously creative process of the development of life, and an intricate and finely tuned ecological balance. The grandeur of this story will help us see its divinity—whether as the product of a God who is both transcendent and immanent, or as an autonomous

process inspiring awe and reverence. Second, our newfound (or newly recovered) sense of the value of life will lead us towards new ethical values: a sense of responsibility to the earth and the joining of environmental concern with more familiar concerns such as equal rights and poverty. Third, ecological religion enters the public sphere as a “liberal,” pluralist faith committed to dialogue with other faiths and human rights for all. The transcript of a lecture, including commentary and Tucker's response to questions, *Worldly Wonder* is a marvelously clear and highly intelligent introduc-

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tion to this area, written primarily from the standpoint of what religion is and what it should be.

Martin Palmer, long-time chair of the Alliance for Religion and Conservation (ARC), has written another short introduction to this subject, addressed less to the religious community than to environmentalists who are doubtful that religion can be of much help. Religion, he forcefully argues, has deep cultural roots, widespread legitimacy, enormous financial clout, and a long-term view of what it is doing. It can motivate the faithful, influence politicians, and shape the policies of the financial institutions in which its hundreds of billions of dollars are in-

vested. Promoting the same pluralist, liberal view as Tucker, Palmer not only argues against dogmatic religious fundamentalism, but against dogmatic secular fundamentalism as well. He believes, correctly in my view, that human beings have not lost the need for religion's sense of the sacred, myth, and rituals. Religious environmentalism, in other words, is not just the handmaiden to secular environmentalism, but has its own distinct contributions to make to the movement.

To me, the most interesting parts of Palmer's book are his many examples that show the power of religion to aid environmentalism in traditional societies. In Madagascar, fishermen were convinced to stop dynamiting the ocean for fish—a practice with disastrous long-term results—when local Islamic authorities ruled that the practice violated the Qur'an's injunctions against wasting God's creation. In ecologically devastated Lebanon, Maronite Christian authorities agreed to protect a sacred forest for perpetuity when the argument was made to them in religious terms rather than terms based on concerns for “biodiversity.” The world's Sikh communities have committed themselves to focusing on environmental issues for the next 300 years. Palmer's strongly articulated arguments and fascinating examples—as well as his inclusion of the lengthy statements on religion and ecology from the nine faiths that work together in the ARC—makes this book a sparkling addition to the literature.

If Tucker and Palmer make good bird's-eye starting points, *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature* covers the entire field with, well, encyclopedic scope. Comprising two very large volumes, 1.5 million words, and a hefty price tag, the ERN is not the kind of thing most people will pick up and read from cover to cover. However, it is a breathtakingly valuable, truly multicultural reference work, indispensable for libraries, religious institutions, and environmental organizations. In it you will find nearly one thousand de-

tailed, scholarly, and surprisingly well-written essays on everything from “Abbey, Edward” (one of America’s premier fiction and nonfiction radical environmental writers) to “Zulu Culture.” The ERN’s editors have cast a very wide net, interpreting “nature” to include all aspects of contemporary environmentalism and ecology and “religion” to encompass a wide variety of moral, political, social, aesthetic, and traditional perspectives. Many of the contributors are themselves highly distinguished (in the interests of full disclosure I must admit that one entry, or about 1/20 of 1 percent of the work, is my own). Authors of the many selections on Christianity, for instance, include pioneering ecotheologians and ethicists Jürgen Moltmann, H. Paul Santmire, Jay McDaniel, and James Nash, environmental journalist and activist Bill McKibben (author of the classic *The End of Nature*), and a brief excerpt from John Calvin.

Norman Wirzba’s *Paradise of God* summarizes and extends ideas developed over the past two decades—ideas all the more important because they pose a positive response to the often made (and in many ways accurate) claim that Western religions, by making God transcendent and giving human beings dominion over the earth, have provided a religious warrant for environmental destruction.

Wirzba’s response is that traditional biblical religions offer powerful resources for environmentalism. “Viewed in terms of the popular scientific understanding,” he tells us, “nature is simply matter in motion guided by impersonal laws. Viewed economically, nature is a resource ready for us to be appropriated at will.” As *creation*, however, which is how Western religions have traditionally seen it, it is “an expression of God’s joy and love.” Further, the oft-maligned passages in which humans are given “dominion over the earth” can be read as conferring on us not special privileges, but special responsibilities—to function,

as God does, by caring for creation. Wirzba develops his case with a judicious and well-organized use of Jewish and Christian resources—including humanity’s charge to “dress the garden and keep it” in Genesis, Holmes Rolston’s image of constantly dying and constantly reborn nature as “cruciform,” Abraham Joshua Heschel’s anti-consumerist idea of Sabbath, and the New Testament claim that in Christ all things, including nature, are reconciled.

What Wirzba does for biblical religion, *Islam and Ecology*, one of a series of books stemming from the Forum on Religion and Ecology conferences, does for Muslims. Like the other books in the series, its essays are sophisticated, clearly written, and deeply committed to wrestling with important issues. The most important of these issues for anyone doing ecotheology from within an established religion, is that while the world faces an environmental crisis of unprecedented proportions, up to the very recent past religions have ignored or contributed to the crisis. However, much of the world, and the Muslim world in particular, is unwilling to jettison its religious traditions. Therefore a delicate balance is needed between recovering ecological resources that are clearly in the tradition and reforming a tradition which was created before industrialization, science, the modern state, consumerism, and fossil fuels existed. Many of the essays in *Islam and Ecology* reveal a strong basis for environmentalism in Islam—including the basis of a serious stewardship ethic and the recognition that nonhumans have their own purpose and community. Yet as two authors point out, the “vital and accessible Islamic ecological tradition” has been overridden by “intoxication with modern technology and the received imperatives of the nation-state system.”

The recovery efforts of Wirzba and the authors of *Islam and Ecology*, however admirable, face a difficult question: If the original tradition has what

we need, why did it fail to prevent the crisis? If the tradition as it stands is not adequate to the crisis, then we must admit that something new—in how we read texts, in which texts we find authoritative, in our actions in the world, and in the alliances we form—is needed. We will need to make changes dictated not by a familiar revelation, but by the contemporary social, political, and ecological realities.

The question of practical ethics—or, we might say, politics—is only briefly touched on by Tucker, Palmer, Wirzba, and *Islam and Ecology*. This defect is remedied by *Christian Environmental Ethics*, a superb account of the technical, political, and moral dimensions of nine environmental problem areas. The Protestant religion scholars who have written the book situate each problem—e.g., storage of nuclear waste in a Native American reservation, the potential phase-out of chlorine production, logging old-growth forests—in a narrative structure, imagining how a particular person might respond to a variety of opposing beliefs and interests. While scripture or resolutions by religious groups are appealed to occasionally, the authors’ positions center on values which can be widely shared: justice, sustainability, participation (a broad democracy), sufficiency (modesty in consumption), and solidarity across races, genders, and nations. Their “ecojustice” perspective integrates concern with nature and concern for human beings, an integration often lost in the early years of ecotheology.

Along with the accessible but highly detailed factual information, the sensitivity to a variety of social perspectives in each area makes this book particularly valuable. Is it environmental racism, for instance, for white society to ask Native Americans to store nuclear waste on their reservation? Or is it racist to expect them to turn down the money from such storage when white society produces and profits from the nuclear industry already? Is the increased safety we’d get from

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phasing out all chlorine based products worth the potentially painful economic consequences to the people who work in the chemical industry? As a staunch, not to say fanatical, environmentalist, I know that I (like many of my comrades) often act as if there is only one sensible answer to such questions. I am indebted to *Christian Environmental Ethics* for its ability to combine a solid and sophisticated environmentalism with a real respect for different perspectives about concrete problems.

Yet ethically and politically oriented ecotheologians like Martin-Schramm and Stivers (as well as Tucker and Palmer) face a question they have not adequately addressed: whether capitalism, in anything like its present form, is compatible with ecological sanity. While *Christian Environmental Ethics* raises some critical points about capitalism in its introduction, and both Tucker and Palmer question consumerism, raise issues of justice, and would lessen corporate prerogatives, for the most part, all these authors seem to think political reform, economic moderation, and ethical exhortation can bring capitalism to its senses. Given the absence of any large-scale challenge to global capitalism at this point in time, their position may be the only realistic one. And given the fact that the majority of religious believers are not flaming socialists, it may make sense to soft-peddle the degree of control of capitalism that is needed. Yet to this unreconstructed radical, the question must sooner or later be faced head on. Ecological sanity is not, I believe, like the eight-hour day and social security. That is, it is not a reform which capitalism (at least in certain parts of the world) can live with. The dominant trend of capitalism is destructive—ask any devastated rainforest tribe or native fisherman whose traditional catch was wiped out by huge mechanized trawlers. And even if capitalism could learn to be ecological eventually, by the time that happens I wonder if anything will be left to save.

Lisa Sideris's excellent book raises a different kind of question: the moral meaning of nature itself. For Tucker, as well as many of the writers who have created the movement, the beauty, complexity, and interdependence of nature are a foundation for human ethics. For example, since we depend on nature, we are obligated to treat it with care. Since all things are balanced in ecosystems, we should not unbalance our own. Since ecosystems have a place for every type of organism, we should model social relations accordingly. Sideris's criticism is that this position ignores the realities of evolution, pain, predation, parasitism, and death. Nature is not all panda bears, dolphins, and birdcalls. It is mil-

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lions of species made extinct through the course of evolution, predators ripping their prey to shreds, and parasitic wasps eating their hosts alive from the inside. When writers like Tucker see ecological interdependence as the source of a religious environmental ethics, what they see *as* nature is too often unrealistically selective.

Many of Sideris's criticisms are well taken. It is not nature as we know it that we will be seeing if we expect to find the lion laying down with the lamb, even though a number of Christian ecotheologians believe that the best way to establish the value of nature is to show that our collective redemption in Christ leads us to a state beyond competition, conflict, or violence.

Yet while there is clearly death in

nature, there is also birth; if species eat each other, they also feed each other. Part of the essential point of ecotheology is that no scientific account will tell us what all this means, for part of the *meaning* of any fact is determined by what we *decide* to make of it. Just as earlier members of our species had to respond to the power of thunderstorms, the regularity of the seasons, and the inevitability of death, so we have to decide what to do with our vast scientific knowledge and our vastly polluted environment. Evolution, which creates and eliminates species by the million, can be seen as murderous competition and profligate waste, *or*, as Gary Snyder puts it, as a process in which different forms of energy call other beings into existence. Nature, so long a thing of unqualified awe, is now revealed as surprisingly fragile.

Sideris also argues that many ecotheologians too cavalierly assert that "everything in nature is of equal value." While this claim is meant to counter the arrogant anthropocentrism of religious and secular society both, ecotheologians typically find some reason why people are worth more than ants; or reflect, in their ethical discussions, that when they talk of the "value of nature" they typically mean species or ecosystems, but "the value of human beings" involves individual rights as well.

Which brings us back to politics, for it is social institutions that will decide when the sacrifice of a particular piece of nature is justified; how to distinguish between human need and human greed; and whether militarism, consumerism, and globalization are what we need or what threaten us the most. As in civil rights and feminism, the new values of ecotheology and ecojustice will have to be won through political struggle. We can now see that a significant part of world religion has committed itself to that struggle. This fact should give us, at a time when the resource is in terribly short supply, a little hope. □