

BOOK REVIEWS

THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF RELIGION AND NATURE (2 volumes). Edited by Bron R. Taylor, Editor-in-Chief; Jeffrey Kaplan, Consulting Editor; and Laura Hobgood-Oster, Adrian Ivakhiv, and Michael York, Executive Editors. London: Thoemmes Continuum, 2005. xlv + 1,877 pp. \$450.00 cloth.

If ever there was a reference work that belongs in the personal libraries of scholars of religion, this one is it. It is presumably available by now in most reputable academic and public libraries, but given the extraordinary richness of its diverse and often unanticipated entries, and the urgency of the ecological issues that many of them address, this collection of well-written and often engrossing essays should be kept readily at hand for frequent and sustained browsing. This work most obviously provides a detailed overview of the broad field of religion and nature as it has been shaped in recent decades by a diversely trained group of international scholars and a remarkable array of dedicated practitioners. At the same time, these essays together constitute a veritable liberal education in the natural, cultural, political, and religious histories of the world as they have become interwoven with one another through the centuries. For any scholar of religion who cares about the worldwide ecological crisis we face—should that not be all of us?—these volumes will be of great interest. For the researcher who hopes to illuminate it still further and to work toward its amelioration, they will be essential reading.

Unlike almost any other encyclopedia, this one is grounded in a fundamental narrative. Although the story told here has roots that go deep into human history, through centuries of philosophical and religious reflection and the still deeper layers formed by nature religion, the apparent turning point came only in the 20th century, with the publication in 1967 of a now-classic article in the journal *Science*, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” by the American historian Lynn White. In his brief, five-page essay, White locates the origins of Western technological development, and the environmental degradation that followed in its train, in certain broad elements of the Judeo-Christian tradition and specific features of Western monasticism. If religion is mainly responsible for our ecological crisis, White argues, then it is also the case that the remedy must be essentially religious. As Elspeth Whitney remarks in her encyclopedia entry on White’s thesis, a confluence of factors—including the dawning realization, in the 1960s and 1970s, of the growing ecological crisis and White’s seeming attack on Christianity if not also on religious belief in general—gave to the widespread debate over White’s thesis an explosive force that still reverberates today.

In America, environmental degradation, especially the rapid destruction of forests, had already raised concerns by the mid 1800s, prompting the conservation and National Park movements. Nature-related spiritualities, including Romanticism, that arose in Europe soon also found proponents in the United States, including such persons as Henry David Thoreau, Ansel Adams, and Edwin Church, whose writings, photographs, and paintings fostered deeper appreciation of the American landscape and helped establish a “wilderness cult” as a potent force in American environmental politics. Wilderness religion maintained its momentum in succeeding decades, eventually spreading around the globe and triggering bitter disputes over the principles by which the use of land should be governed. As Bron Taylor points out in his retelling of this narrative in the encyclopedia’s introduction (upon which I am largely relying here), these disputes inevitably became entangled with others related to ethnicity, class, and nationality, and they often eventuated in the displacement of peoples from their original habitats if not in outright genocide.

The story is even more complex, however, for interest in the interrelation of religion, nature, and culture antedates the modern conservation era. From the late 18th century onward, scholars of various kinds, including philosophers, anthropologists, and, in due time, comparativists of religion, were intrigued by indigenous nature religions. Proponents of Western monotheistic traditions tended to view nature religion in general and paganism in particular as primitive, if not evil; representatives of Romanticism saw them, on the other hand, as noble—models for a kinder, more constructive and harmonious way of living. Darwin’s theory of evolution sharpened this divide by providing grounds for arguing that religion springs from misperceptions of natural forces as animated by spirits. Sir James Frazer, for one prominent example, concluded that all religion is rooted in the personification and worship of nature. Over time, he postulated, as polytheism and then monotheism gradually supplant nature religion among civilized peoples, nature becomes progressively despiritualized. Later scholars, on the other hand, such as Mircea Eliade, Victor Turner, and Mary Douglas, have been more positive in their evaluations of religion, including nature religion, and have underscored the religiously symbolic value, for various peoples and their cultures, of the entities and forces of nature. They in turn prepared the way for the contemporary explosion of interest in religion and nature, which is fed by deep concern over the fate of our shared environment.

The narrative so briefly reiterated here is told in far greater detail in the compass of the two volumes of this encyclopedia, the richness and complexity of which resist any brief summing up. The multitude of articles, ranging in length from one double-columned page to a dozen or more, vary in compass

from single actors in the narrative to broad areas of the world that constitute the stage. Major religious traditions and organizations, along with less-well-known religious or spiritual movements, are examined in terms of their teachings, attitudes, and practices in relationship to nature. Indigenous peoples and societies throughout the world, but most conspicuously in Africa, are also represented here, along with a variety of spiritually-oriented organizations dedicated to conservation or to ecologically sensitive living. Listed, too, are various educational and professional organizations whose programs are spiritually and ecologically attuned.

Gods and goddesses, along with various ceremonies and practices, come into discussion when their relation to nature is conspicuous. Natural entities or substances that have come to possess religious or spiritual significance—caves, fire, mountains, the sky, stones, the sun, volcanoes, water, but especially animals, including mythic ones—are explored in a number of entries. Plants, including trees, are also among these entities when they are associated with supernatural beings or are conceived of as themselves possessing souls; when they serve as symbols and metaphors or as sacred objects appropriate for ritual offerings; or when they are sources of entheogens, psychoactive substances particularly important for facilitating shamanistic states.

Many of the encyclopedia's articles are dedicated to individuals who have played significant roles in the religion-and-nature movement. Included are philosophers, theologians, and spiritual leaders; naturalists, environmentalists, and conservationists; biologists, cosmologists, and historians; founders of various ecology-related movements; champions of social justice and environmental ethics; poets, artists, and musicians; essayists, novelists, and ecofeminists; and many who fit under more than one of these categories if not others as well. Individuals of a more generic type are also found here: astronauts, oracles, plastic medicine men, shamans.

If this ambitious work may be said to have an intellectual core, it lies in a series of essays that lay down the field's conceptual foundations. These include, in addition to Taylor's valuable Introduction, Deep Ecology; Ecofeminism; Ecological Anthropology; Ecology and Religion; Ecopsychology; Environmental Ethics; Ethnoecology; Indigenous Religions and Cultural Borrowing; Knowledge, Knowing, and Nature; Nature Religion; Nature Religion in the United States; Radical Environmentalism; The Religious Environmentalist Paradigm; Religious Studies and Environmental Concern; Social Construction of Nature and Environmental Ethics; Social Ecology; Social Science on Religion and Nature; Wilderness Religion; and Wonder Toward Nature, if not still others.

Finally, though this listing of contents is far from exhaustive, there are articles that one might not expect to find in an encyclopedia on religion and nature but that nonetheless prove to be relevant: Au-

tobiography, Channeling, Complexity Theory, Dirt, Disney, Fascism, Fly Fishing, Globalization, Homosexuality, Media, Men's Movement, Motion Pictures, Mountaineering, Music, Perennial Philosophy, Raves, Rock Climbing, Sauna, Scouting, Surfing, and Theme Parks. These entries, along with a much larger number of far more esoteric ones, underscore the value of browsing through these volumes rather than merely consulting them on specific topics. The great majority of them would otherwise be missed.

There are two further classes of entries that require attention here: scholarly perspective entries and practitioner ones. The great bulk of the essays in this collection are written in the standard scholarly and balanced style of an encyclopedia entry; nearly all include a list of references for further reading and all were fully peer reviewed. Alphabetized along with these articles are some 60 entries demarcated as "Scholarly Perspective" entries, ones that offer more personal reflections on the religion-and-nature field by prominent contributors or that advance arguments in a manner that deviates from the standard disinterested encyclopedia entry. Thirty-five "Practitioner" entries are likewise integrated into the encyclopedia, essays that were written by persons engaged in one form or another of nature-related spirituality. These essays are typically more personal in style and advocacy, and portions are often written in the first person. Altogether, 520 individuals from around the world contributed to the writing of the 1,000 articles in these two volumes.

There is a single comprehensive index, combining subjects with the authors of the entries. Titles of articles appear in bold, both in the alphabetical listing and under their contributors' names. The Practitioner and Scholarly Perspective entries are listed separately at the beginning of the index, but they appear again in the general index that follows. In the encyclopedia's first printing, curiously, the second volume lacked a title page; this error was corrected, along with some other, minor ones, in the second printing. These hefty volumes, which are continuously paginated, are well designed and securely bound.

Taylor has established a website in conjunction with this project, www.religionandnature.com, which is intended to provide information about various events and organizations—including the International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature, and Culture, which was founded in September 2006—and to promote teaching and research in the area of religion and nature. Taylor anticipates offering on this website additional material related to the encyclopedia entries, including photographs, music, and new publications. It now provides information about the Society's quarterly *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature, and Culture*, the first issue of which is dated March 2007; Taylor is likewise editor-in-chief of this publication.

We may hope that these resources will draw more social scientists into the field of religion and

nature. Short of that, the encyclopedia could by itself do much to extend their understanding of what religion and spirituality may be thought to be—yet another reason to keep these remarkable volumes close at hand.

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ESALEN: AMERICA AND THE RELIGION OF NO RELIGION. By Jeffrey J. Kripal. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007. vii+575 pp. \$30.00 cloth.

In 468 pages of text, Jeffrey J. Kripal examines the foundational spiritual philosophy grounding the Esalen Institute, a retreat center, spa, arcane think tank, and small intentional community on the central California Coast overlooking rugged cliffs at Big Sur. He focuses primarily on the think tank segment of the Institute that shelters theorists and esoteric scientists, the Esalen Center for Theory and Research.

Kripal explicates and elaborates the foundational philosophy influenced by Michael Murphy, Esalen's co-founder, who has published nonfiction works and also a number of occult novels, the two most popular dealing with the mystical dimensions of golf. Murphy characterized golf as "yoga for Republicans," and this phrase nicely captures his commitment to synthesize and popularize somewhat cerebral Asian spiritualities like Zen and Integral Yoga and also to encourage experiential spirituality in a contemporary American context.

During its first decade, beginning in 1962, Esalen attracted media elites and academic stars like Harvey Cox and Robert Bellah, who helped publicize its potential contributions to the lives of affluent Americans. More mainstream psychologists and academics readily adopted many of Esalen's lasting innovations, and competing retreats and pilgrimage centers also sprang up.

By 1971, there were over 90 "Little Esalens" in North America, and a handful survived along with the flagship Institute. Moreover, a network of health spas with spiritual spins and other retreat centers grounded in specific religious groups sprang up across the United States. Over the past three decades, the combination of cultural incorporation and many types of competition diminished Esalen's distinctive status. However, the Institute remains the historic center of the human potential movement and the varied spiritual practices associated with it.

Emphasizing Esalen's unique, abiding theological contributions and enduring cultural influence, Kripal traces four decades of its history, from its founding through the beginning of the 21st century. In the 1960s and the early 1970s a variety of well-known psychologists, body workers, and philosophers passed through Esalen. The Institute served

as a hub for the development and dissemination of influential theories and practices about culture, psychology, education, and lifestyles, as well as spirituality. During its first, most colorful decade, Esalen's sponsorship brought a number of relatively marginal individuals and their ideas into the spotlight as public intellectuals: Abraham Maslow's self-actualization, Fritz Perls's American gestalt therapies, Ida Rolph's somatics, Will Schutz's encounter groups, and most spectacularly, Timothy Leary's and Richard Alpert's (Ram Dass) sacramental psychedelics.

These and hundreds of lesser known theorists and practitioners soaked in Esalen's famed hot springs and led seminars for visitors, who were playfully called "seminarians." Kripal vividly describes Esalen's early, brief notoriety to underscore Murphy's and his colleagues' lasting importance. He views Esalen through the lens of his academic specializations in mysticism and the philosophies of colonial and postcolonial Hinduism. Formally appointed as a General Scholar for the Center for Theory and Research, Kripal had access to core members of Esalen, networks associated with the Institute, and documentary and historical materials housed in Big Sur.

Not surprisingly, his massive, informative work enthusiastically supports the philosophy elaborated by Murphy and his colleagues. Kripal asserts that Esalen extends two centuries of American religious traditions that posit a remote supernatural force connected to divine sparks of potential within every human. Beliefs in this amorphous, distant god, according to Esalen's doctrine, bridge divisions among the majority of important Eastern and Western spiritual traditions, whereas organized, institutionalized religions separate individuals from one another and from their best selves. Esalen's leaders, Kripal believes, have synthesized a unique spiritual model that goes beyond all religions. It is a "religion of no [organized] religion." Although Kripal never asserts it directly, Murphy's approach to spirituality extends and enlivens the ideas and values that define contemporary liberal American Protestantism.

Discussing the history and development of this spiritual path, Kripal emphasizes the healing possibilities of an approach that could both join and also invigorate dozens of liberal Christian and non-Christian religious traditions. Esalen's ideal of synthesis extends beyond theology to the elimination of mind-body dualisms. The doctrine also embraces direct emotional and ambiguously erotic aspects of spirituality. Esalen's "religion of no religion" might appeal to everyone from disillusioned mainline Protestants to enthusiastic members of channeling groups or even some activists on the Freudian left.

This book will interest readers already acquainted with Esalen or curious about the development and expansion of markets for novel religions. Kripal's work forges intellectual connections between Asian philosophy, humanistic psychology,