WHOSE RELIGION? WHICH ECOLOGY?

Religious studies in the environmental humanities

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The field of “religion and ecology” investigates religious dimensions of ecological relations. What makes a dimension “religious” or a relation “ecological”? Lively debates contest the field’s two organizing concepts and ways of connecting them. Scholars argue over whose conceptions of religion illuminate the relevant phenomena, sometimes suggesting that “culture” or “spirituality” would be more fitting concepts. They also argue over which senses of ecology create the most important intersections, sometimes arguing that “nature” or “environment” would be more inclusive or more accurate.

Debates over method are a sign of intellectual vitality. Robust academic fields typically foster arguments about what deserves recognition as signal work, how much diversity a coherent field can accommodate, and what terms of inquiry should inform new scholarship. This essay sketches the field’s major methodological debates as a way towards interpreting the diversity in this volume and beyond it, as well as broader arguments over the intersection it represents.

Yet argument is made possible by implied agreement. Among the minimal assumptions that make debate possible across diverse research programs is at least this: humanity’s ecological relations have religious and cultural dimensions. Failure to recognize and interpret those dimensions impoverishes environmental understanding, whereas engaging them has the potential to connect environmental questions with fundamental human questions of meaning, value, and purpose.

Religious studies in the environmental humanities

The field of religion and ecology is part of a broader intellectual collaboration of culture-focused approaches to environmental topics, many of which gather under the rubric of “environmental humanities.” Inquiry in the environmental humanities takes many forms but is generally distinguished by humanistic practices; it employs historicizing methods, cultural memory, interpretive tools, evaluative skills, or critical dispositions in order to interpret environments and engage ecological questions.

The field of religion and ecology often (but not always) employs the methods and tools of religious studies. As it does, it extends central arguments in religious studies into new domains.
This chapter shows how perennial disciplinary arguments over conceptions of religion and over appropriate roles for constructive and normative scholarship appear within ecological domains, and then are changed by that extension.

Extending religious studies to environmental questions has sometimes encountered confusion from other religionists, who have wondered: is ecology really a proper arena for religious inquiry? Something like that confusion is encountered by all the environmental humanities. Humanistic practices were developed to interpret the human, so skeptics wonder whether they can legitimately be employed to interpret the natural world, which seems the province of the sciences. To answer skepticism, the various fields of the environmental humanities seem to devote their first generation of scholarship to establishing the coherence of their research program within their own discipline.

While each establishes itself differently, fields in the environmental humanities share a common tactic: they typically critique a key assumption of the skepticism by illustrating the social construction of the idea of nature and its supposed distinction from culture. If ever it made sense to bifurcate knowledge into humanities and sciences, pervasive anthropogenic ecological change renders defunct a separation of spheres. Environmental issues are “inescapably entangled with human ways of being in the world,” understanding them must include ways of studying the human (Rose et al. 2012, 1).

For religious studies, that thought carries two basic implications. First, however a scholar imagines religion, it is inescapably entangled with environments. Religion is ecological, at least in the sense that it is a significant part of humanity’s evolutionary history (Bellah 2011). Particular religious inheritances, traditions, communities, or practices cannot be fully understood apart from the environmental history from which they emerged and whose ecological relations they in turn influenced. Second, because environmental issues are entangled with human ways of being in the world, they are entangled with religion. Insofar as religion is involved in how people inhabit and interpret their world, it is involved in ecologies.

It is now standard to find tools of religious scholarship deployed to engage environmental questions. In addition to the ethical projects where one expects engagement with contemporary issues, environmental themes have begun to inform textual, historical, theological, and ethnographic studies of religion. Where once an anthology like this one would have argued for the very idea of connecting religion and ecology, this handbook can instead follow the many different research directions emerging from widely recognized entanglement. This volume therefore highlights transdisciplinary directions facilitated by the emergence of environmental humanities and underscores distinctive contributions of religious studies to environmental understanding.

Nonetheless, accounts of the environmental humanities sometimes omit religious inquiry. Even when it includes “underlying cultural and philosophical frameworks that are entangled with the ways in which diverse human cultures have made themselves at home in a more than human world,” an overview of environmental humanities may fail to recognize roles for religious studies (Rose et al. 2012, 2). Perhaps making a case for humanistic inquiry into environmental matters already seems tenuous without evoking religion (too far a trespass of modernity’s intellectual etiquette). Yet if ecological dynamics are “entangled with human ways of being in the world,” they are also entangled with all the ways that religion haunts, animates, influences, and interprets those ways of being.

In the first issue of the journal *Environmental Humanities*, the editors write that work in the area “engages with fundamental questions of meaning, value, responsibility and purpose in a time of rapid, and escalating, change” (Rose et al. 2012, 1). From its beginning, religion and ecology has attracted scholars from other disciplines, including the sciences, seeking a place to...
think about the fundamental questions of meaning involved in environmental change. So religion and ecology has been not only an arena in which scholars extend the disciplinary practices of religious studies, but also a transdisciplinary intersection where researchers, artists, and activists from many fields take up questions of meaning and purpose amidst changing ecological relationships.

Situating religion and ecology within the environmental humanities allies the field with a broad intellectual challenge to divisions of knowledge that continue to impede public understanding of complex ecological questions. In a context of pervasive anthropogenic change, everything that shapes human action—from imaginations and ideas to technology and economic policies—reverberates throughout ecological systems. Disciplines interpreting the human condition therefore bear renewed importance for understanding the changing human role in nature (Nye et al. 2012). How could one understand water or climate change without deep cultural analyses? The chapters on those two problems in this volume demonstrate not only what lacks in investigations that fail to include religious inquiries, but also how to begin assembling knowledges in ways that let researchers and students think about meanings, values, and purpose.

When research fields organize as environmental humanities, they underscore a shared epistemological claim: there can be no adequate ecological knowledge without understanding the culturally embedded humans who are changing ecological systems. Without environmental humanities, there can be no adequate understanding of environments. To that claim the field of religion and ecology adds the corollary: if there is no avoiding the human in attempts to understand Earth, there is no avoiding religious dimensions of the human experience.

**Whose religion?**

Any project in religion and ecology faces a version of the basic methodological question for religious studies: how to investigate religious dimensions of ecological relations when “religion” is a category that encompasses so much difference? Not only are there many self-identifying religious traditions with conflicts about how to interpret their differences from one another and internal arguments over boundary and meaning, there are also fields of personal experience, cultural creativity, and political life that involve dimensions apt for religious analysis. Attempts to gather all eligible phenomena into a theory of religion invite debates between theories, and those debates sometimes include suspicion of the very idea of religion. Religion is an irreducibly pluralist concept; any field that would anchor itself to it as foundation will find itself dropping into unfathomable waters.

So why stick with “religion”? The available alternatives seem less satisfying, as they do for the broader field of religious studies. This volume employs sections named “traditions” (a very short list of world religions and two emerging traditions with global aspirations); “cosmovisions” (indigenous lifeways for which conventional categories of religion and tradition may not fit); “spiritualities” (including experiences and practices sometimes excluded from religion); “regions” (a geographical approach bringing into view the hybrid and overlapping religiosities in a particular area); and “challenges” (where ecological problems present sites of religion-involved cultural stress and creativity). None of those categories would on their own allow attention to the range of scholarship that shapes the field and that is needed to understand ecological relations. “Religion” is usefully unfathomable, supporting many different research programs that recognize one another, at least as participants in the debate over the meaning of religion.

Can the field of religion and ecology have a shared conversation if it includes so many methods and phenomena? While environment-related work was pursued in various domains
of religious studies as early as 1960, a shared field of exchange could not emerge until connective terms of inquiry were forged. An important event for making that conversation possible was a conference series on “Religions of the World and Ecology” held at Harvard University from 1996 to 1998, which helped organize many dispersed projects into a field with shared research interests. Led by Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim, the conference series gave rise to the Forum on Religion and Ecology (now at Yale). The Harvard conference participants developed three basic theses that made it possible for scholars of many traditions and methods to recognize a shared conversation: (i) that religious worldviews are significant for environmental behavior, (ii) that scholars should critically engage religious traditions with the ecological values and ideas needed for humanity to find “new and sustaining relationships to the Earth amidst an environmental crisis,” and (iii) that environmental crises are also cultural crises of a religious depth (Tucker and Grim 1998, xv).

The first thesis redirected debates over whether and which religious traditions are culpable of exploitative environmental attitudes by focusing on a minimal assumption of argument: that religious worldviews matter for environmental behavior. Whether or not Lynn White was correct that modern instrumentalism could be traced to medieval Christianity, the notion that current behavior can be explained by worldviews motivates a line of inquiry into the “ecological attitudes” of all the traditions (White 1967). The second thesis then combined that notion with a commitment to critically re-examine traditions. “The Harvard project identified seven common values that the world religions hold in relation to the natural world,” write Tucker and Grim, which can orient academic work of retrieving, re-evaluating, and reconstructing religious traditions for modern circumstances (Grim and 2014, 8). The third thesis then underscores the cultural significance of that academic work by suggesting that modern environmental problems put into question fundamental human–Earth relations, about which “the shared symbol-making capacity that has endured in world religions can be a source of wisdom” (Grim and Tucker 2014, 170). Those three ideas oriented shared inquiry across religious worlds and connected diverse projects in a coherent cultural endeavor.

All three theses have been subject to criticism by subsequent scholarship. Understanding criticism of the foundational stage of research in the field is important for understanding the range of subsequent work. The arguments made possible by those initial terms of inquiry have extended the boundaries of the field and given rise to different terms.

Why, some scholars have asked of the first thesis, should we assume that the religious worldviews of the major traditions are important drivers of environmental behavior? Scholars with a more materialist view of history investigate connections that run the other way: how changing environmental conditions may drive changes in how people think about their world, including religious thought. If worldviews determine how scholars think about religion and its relation to society, it can lead to organizing work by a list of the world religions and a comparative assessment of their ecological ideas.

Whose religion is included on a list like that? The ideas of a “world religion” and of a “global tradition” were born in colonial projects seeking to sort primitive superstition from civilized belief, in order to safely exclude the former from the rights and dignities of the latter. The categories of “religion” or “tradition” exert both constructive and reductive influence (Masuzawa 2005; Chidester 2014). Comparative fields have strong incentives to construct simple and discrete religious units that can be made subject to common terms of inquiry (“ecology”). In order to make comparison possible, scholars may reduce complex, pluralist, and contested inheritances into an essentialized picture of ecological thought.

As a result, serious scholars have sometimes found themselves grappling with hopeless questions like: “Is Buddhism an ecological religion?” (See Christopher Ives in this volume on the...
career of that question.) One would need to know whose enactment of which Buddhism in what contexts, before even beginning to wonder what it means for the phenomena to count as “ecological.” The result can also be repressive and exploitative, as when applying the category of “religion” to indigenous cultures and traditional ecological knowledge imposes on them a typically western separation of religion from ordinary life. As Grim notes in his introduction to the section on Indigenous Cosmovisions in this volume, some indigenous communities therefore reject the category of religion. If their bioregional practices are seen as religious, it could allow modern secular polities (for which religion appears as private and subrational) to dismiss indigenous ecological sovereignty as mere religion, thereby keeping their lands open for resource exploitation.

Moreover, some scholars in religious studies have criticized conceptions of religion that focus on beliefs and institutions, calling for more attention to embodied experiences, hybrid cultural flows, and everyday practices. What about forms of ecospirituality that are not tied to conventional memberships? Catherine Albanese’s *Nature Religions in America* helped draw attention to a stream of thought and spirituality that may not show up as religious because it cuts across the conventional taxonomies; nature functions as symbolic center for some within major traditions, for dissenters from those traditions, and for those who do not think of themselves as religious at all (Albanese 1991). Following implications of those critiques, Bron Taylor, founding figure of the Society for the Study of Religion, Nature, and Culture and editor of *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, writes that initial methods in the field of religion and ecology “left much nature-related religiosity out of sight” (Taylor 2005, 1375–6). Marginal communities and hybridizing bricolage may not appear visibly religious, but they are important for interpreting the proliferation of various “Earth-based spiritualities” that are influential within streams of environmental culture (Taylor 2001). Consider Gary Snyder’s bioregionalist borrowing from indigenous, pagan, and Buddhist traditions, or the way that practices like surfing or fly-fishing might be important spiritual experiences for individuals, or how nature-themed religiosity appears in popular culture.

Graham Harvey’s chapter on paganism and animism in this volume focuses on forms of nature-based religiosity that have sometimes been overlooked because regarded as primitive vis-à-vis the “world religions.” In fact, as David Haberman shows, the concept of a world religion was developed in contrast to notions of animism as childish and uncivilized. In the case of Hinduism, the construct encouraged scholarly excision of nature-focused pieties from the devotional practices that made up the “tradition” (Haberman 2013). So, in that case, the very idea of a tradition was hostile toward nature-based spiritualities. Harvey thinks religious studies still bears some of that hostility, and calls for the discipline to attend more broadly to “the relationships that constitute, form, and enliven people in everyday activities in the material world” (Harvey 2014, 2).

Now, rejoinders could be made to this first line of criticism that it is not really true; work in the Harvard series included attention to indigenous cosmovisions, hybridizing practices, and Earthen spiritualities – even an essay by Gary Snyder. Some of the tension here might be explained by Evan Berry’s distinction between substantive and functionalist conceptions of religion operative in the field. The former focuses on institutional memberships and the environmental implications of their beliefs and practices; the latter looks for implicit religious characteristics of a wide cultural range of environmental behaviors (Berry 2013). Taylor’s criticism, however, targets another zone of methodological controversy in the study of religion: the role of confessional and normative commitments. When scholars understand themselves to be contributing to ecological reform of the traditions they study, and imagine such revisions contributing to an overarching civilizational movement – as the second and third theses of the
Harvard project hold – then, Taylor thinks, they have become “confessional” and “activist” in a way that is inappropriate to the academic discipline of religious studies. Taylor describes the Encyclopedia as placing more emphasis on historical and social-scientific description of religious phenomena and less emphasis on reforming traditions. Provocatively mapping that distinction onto a broader disciplinary debate sometimes cast as “theology” (confessional) versus “religious studies” (descriptive), Taylor criticizes the received terms of the field as being, effectively, too theological (Taylor 2005, vii–xxii, 1374–6).

However unreliable that distinction and however accurate Taylor’s application of it, the question of normative commitments is critical for the field of religion and ecology – perhaps even more acutely than for the wider discipline of religious studies. The question comes up in two major issues: the role of theological work and the field’s relation to environmental activism. I begin with theology and take up activism in the next section.

Christian ecotheology proliferated early, catalyzed by responses to ecological critiques of Christianity, and therefore played a relatively larger role than other traditions of belief and modes of study in giving initial shape to the field of religion and ecology. Some have therefore wondered whether Christian theological debates have distortively influenced environmental inquiries in other traditions and even environmental thought in other disciplines (Haberman 2013; Jenkins 2005; Callicott in this volume). That suspicion raises a broader question: how should a pluralist field receive confessional scholarship? Does it have shared terms by which to critically assess work developed with the particular logics internal to some tradition of faith?

Without some shared terms to guide comparative inquiry, the field would risk becoming either too inclusive (an uncritical clearing house for any expression of religious environmentalism) or too exclusive (excising major forms of scholarly production because modally improper). Either response to tradition-internal work would impoverish the field’s pluralism. When constructive religious production happens because some religious world responds to environmental stress with its interior logic of reflection – for example, reading scriptures with ecocritical tools – the issue for the field is not whether it belongs, but what should be asked about it.

“Theological” does not always mean “confessional” or even “god-related.” As a modal qualifier, theology can stand for a mode of constructive work with a tradition, often but not always understood by the author to be accountable to key lines of historical argument over the meaning of that tradition. Constructive work may bear analytic or illuminative significance beyond the tradition and beyond religious studies. For example, Stephanie Kaza’s eco-Buddhism is “theological” in this modal sense because she goes beyond explication of Buddhism to make proposals for its practice and interpretation (Kaza 2010). Scholars of religious studies are sometimes wary of constructive modes of work in a tradition because they seem linked to confessional identities or seem overly deferential toward received authorities, but Kaza is primarily interested in showing how interpretations of Buddhism make illuminative contributions to environmental thought and connect with challenges faced by activists.

For some religionists, theology stands for a pluralist, pragmatist commitment to work with the cultural inheritances that inform how particular communities of discourse interpret the world around them. Theology allows constructive conversation in the moral vernaculars already in use in some community and may be a form of respecting the local differences of an interpretive world. In that mode, theology can function as a pluralist mode of discourse that nurtures creativity, helps realize cultural possibilities, or supports movements for adaptive ecological change (Kearns and Keller 2007). Movements for change take particular priority in liberative forms of constructive religious thought. In different ways, ecofeminist, indigenous, agrarian, black, latin@, queer, and other environmental justice thinkers have deployed
theological analyses to think from solidarity with resistance movements in order to critically illuminate ecologies of violence.

The austere attitude of uncommitted description in some forms of religious studies thus faces especially acute pressure in the domain of religion and ecology. For while the cultural dimensions of ecological relations can certainly be investigated without evaluative concern over contemporary problems, doing so amidst such stark ecologies of violence and fragilization of planetary systems seems irresponsible, if not complicit. Constructive religious thought (a.k.a. “theology”) may represent a particularist commitment to the sources and logics that shape cultural conversations, and a liberative intent to help important cultural conversations better interpret and relate to their ecology. Yet that begs a question about the second major term of the field: what is ecology?

Which ecology?

“Ecology” is variously used to refer to (a) the scientific study of organisms in relation to their environment, (b) an ethical worldview about appropriate human relations to their environment, (c) a political movement for adaptive social change, (d) a metaphor of interconnectedness, or (e) a materialist research frame for interpreting religious phenomena. That range of meanings construes work in the field so differently that some scholars would prefer the field’s title instead join religion with “nature” or “environment.”

The primary meaning of ecology in a university setting is (a) the scientific discipline that studies organisms in relation to their environment. Like other natural sciences, ecological research attempts to bracket issues of cultural meaning and moral value in order to focus on describing its objects of research. However, ecological science is uniquely entangled with ethics and culture, in part due to its history and in part due to the character of its research problems.

Ernst Haeckel, a founding figure of the new science, thought that knowledge about the relations among organisms would yield knowledge about the order and harmony of things, after which societies could pattern themselves. So from its beginnings, the discipline of ecology understood itself both as science and as worldview. Whether or not ecologists now think that their science can lead civilizations to better understand themselves as parts of a living whole, that is exactly how other realms of culture have appropriated it (Bauman et al. 2011).

In popular culture and in many of the fields that now make up the environmental humanities, “ecology” names (b) a worldview shaped by appreciation for sustaining goods that emerge from complex interactions of living creatures. It values those creatures individually, the relations among them, and especially the qualities that emerge from those relations. This worldview stands counter to the basic cosmology of modern industrialism, which – viewed in critical contrast – values things only as instrumentally useful to humans, who are imagined as more separate from than participant in the living Earth.

For many of its scholars, the field of religion and ecology orients to that second sense of ecology – as an ethical worldview grounded in natural science and critically different from the worldviews in which industrial capitalism emerged. Ecological science seems to support an ecological cosmology whose principles can guide resolution of ecological problems. Aldo Leopold, famous ecologist and cultural critic, often serves as intellectual icon of this meaning of ecology: “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community” (Leopold 1949, 224). The field of religion and ecology then investigates how religion variously supports or obstructs what is right, in Leopold’s basic sense of what is normatively ecological.

In that case the field has a foundational relation with environmental activism, which raises
anew the question of normative commitments. Insofar as the ecological worldview differs from the values and politics that have led to environmental degradation, the field's sense of ecology seems to imply (c) a commitment to social change. Roger Gottlieb puts that commitment at the center of the field's research; in his construal, “ecology” stands for a commitment to political and cultural transformation, and “religion” for the sort of cultural resources adequate to the depth of transformation required (Gottlieb 2010). For Gottlieb, the central phenomenon for the field is a broad movement of religious environmentalism, in which he identifies any form of activism that “roots the general environmental message in a spiritual framework” (Gottlieb 2006, 231).

What exactly is that message? Establishing the ecological worldview, let alone its precise political message, by appeal to ecological science proves elusive. It is not clear that the science can supply a natural foundation of social order. Certainly the science cannot, on its own, deliver objective accounts of integrity, stability, and beauty. Leopold's qualifiers beg evaluative questions, which introduce some ambiguity into the message of social change. (What sort of beauty?) Moreover, disruption, degeneration, and chaos also seem important to understanding ecological systems. Lisa Sideris argues that ecotheologians have chronically downplayed those elements in order to champion a picture of nature as harmonious, balanced, and even peaceful. The ironic result is that “ecological” work in religion sometimes appeals to pictures of nature at odds with the science of ecology (Sideris 2003). The point here is not that religionists should ground their values in a more accurate picture, but rather that activist notions of ecology require interpretive commitments beyond those warranted by the science of ecology.

Some scholars have turned about the question by analyzing environmentalist movements in religious terms (Dunlap 2015). To the extent that environmentalism resembles religious activity (spreading “the message”), then assuming an activist commitment among scholars in religion and ecology might indeed look like assuming a confessional commitment. Another reason some scholars prefer the category “religion and nature” is that it can deflate some of the normative pressure of ecology as environmentalism. Adrian Ivakhiv, for example, argues that “religion and nature” permits a broad constellation of interests and interdisciplinary practices, without identifying the field with a political movement (Ivakhiv 2007). Ecology as political commitment, Ivakhiv suggests, narrows the field’s pluralism.

Some scholars therefore deploy “ecology” as (d) a metaphor of interconnectedness. On this meaning, the field’s title refers loosely to the study of relations among things, especially humanity’s connections with its environments, particularly as religion matters to them. Scholars investigate “ecologies of religion” in that sense when they examine some special thing (“organism”) inside a religious world (“ecosystem”), especially with a view to how the relations of that religious ecosystem involve connections to its physical environment (Jenkins 2008; Taylor 2007). In that case ecology is used in an analogical sense and the field’s title might more accurately use “environments,” since the research investigates how religious systems interpret or involve connections of cultures and environments (Bohannon 2014).

Included in that sense of ecology are critical accounts of how power circulates through various human arrangements of their environment – sometimes called “political ecology.” Some scholars research how cultural patterns of environmental exploitation correlate with exploitation of vulnerable humans. Ecofeminist analyses, such as Heather Eaton’s in this volume, investigate connections between human domination of Earth and male domination of females. The political ecology frame investigates how environmental conflicts are often conflicts over access to resources and exposure to risks – conflicts shaped by the relative social positions of participants. Ecologies of racism, poverty, migration, and globalization show how axes of power and vulnerability reproduce or interpret certain environmental arrangements.
There is an implicit moral anthropology to this approach: if persons are vulnerable to ecologically mediated forms of political violence that implies there are inalienable ecological dimensions of human dignity. Disproportionate flow of toxins through air and water into the bodies of disempowered populations is the most visible example of that connection. In the United States, environmental injustice shows up in a racist landscape of toxic exposure. Material flows of white power push toxins into the bodies of racial minorities. Melanie Harris’s chapter in this volume thus connects police violence against black men with sick air quality in black neighborhoods, invoking the last words of Eric Garner (who was choked to death by a New York City policeman): “I can’t breathe.”

Tracing those lines of interconnection (ecology d) exerts critical pressure on environmental politics (ecology c). Environmental thought in the Global North has sometimes focused on the human–Earth relationship in general and has skipped injustices and dysfunctions within particular social relations. Preservationist impulses sometimes unthinkingly defend the landscape of power represented by some environment. Religion and ecology has sometimes reproduced the methodological whiteness of North American environmental thought by averting thought from social violence. However, if ecological flows are political flows, then political struggles are renegotiations of general human–environment relations and of the imaginaries that govern them. Seen that way, environmental justice struggles may be diverse sources of an adaptive cultural intelligence, sometimes drawing on religious inheritances (Jenkins 2013, Ch. 5).

Where scholars treat religious systems as more or less adaptive relationships with their environments, they attempt to rejoin cultural analysis with the primary sense of ecology as a science. In this frame, ecology denotes (e) a materialist research frame for interpreting religion as part of the physical ecology of the planet. “From this perspective,” writes Gustavo Benavides, “religions can be understood as the attempt to come to terms with constraints of all kinds, a task that is accomplished by exploring through speculation and ritual the range of options open to the kind of organisms that humans happen to be,” and may include maladaptive “attempts to escape limitations” (Benavides 2005, 548). Or one might interpret religion, as Stephen Kellert does, as an expression of genetic human affinity for nature (biophilia), and evaluate its variety of expressions according to adaptive fit (Kellert 2007). An implication of this view is that human–environment relations exert evolutionary pressure on religious systems (Wilson 2002). That theme remains underexplored in histories of religion, although some scholars have begun to shape inquiries into how, for example, climate change may have shaped religious experience in Europe’s “Little Ice Age,” perhaps fueling fear of witches in Europe and the energies leading to the Protestant Reformation (Fagan 2001).

A materialist sense of ecology will seem reductive to some religion scholars. It would be odd to think of the Reformation as merely a consequence of a climate aberration, and to consider its consequences only in terms of adaptive fit. On the other hand, consider how treating religion as an adaptive relation with an environment warrants regard for the ecological knowledge of indigenous communities and traditional ways of life. If sciences once regarded traditional ecological knowledge with suspicion because it is transmitted through religious narratives and spiritual practices, interpreting those narratives and practices in terms of their ecological function permits outsiders – especially outsiders with modernist scruples – to learn from them (Berkes 2008).

Using criteria of adaptive fit brings back the question of normative commitments in the cultural entanglement of ecological science. What constitutes adaptive success for a culture, or for a religious system? The science of ecology may not supply a moral foundation that can fully answer the question, but insofar as it researches problems that matter to human flourishing, ecology produces knowledge that matters for how cultures assess their values and understand
the human condition. In conditions of pervasive anthropogenic change, ecology investigates problems that lead cultures to question their values and reassess the human condition. Researchers of global environmental change have been asking societies to take responsibility for how humans are changing Earth and to intentionally develop responsibility for its systems. How to do so well?

It would be impossible to argue well about such a basic question without understanding religious inheritances and the way that they orient many diverse environmental imaginations. In a nonfoundationalist sense, the ecological questions of an era marked by pervasive human influence are irreducibly entangled with questions of a religious depth. That is, ecological questions have become entangled with questions about what it means to be human and how to live well, about where the living world has come from and where it is going, and why. It is not obvious or given which values, virtues, practices, or narratives should answer those questions – and yet the questions cannot be avoided.

References


