
BOOK REVIEW

Nita, Maria. 2016. *Praying and Campaigning with Environmental Christians: Green Religion and the Environmental Movement*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. xi + 261 pp. ISBN: 978-1-137-60034-9 £99.99 (hbk); 978-1-349-95608-1 £99.99 (pbk); 978-1-137-60035-6 £79.50 (e-book).

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There is a growing body of sociological research into Christian “environmental attitudes”, and environmental psychology has often attended implicitly to Christian persons since the late 1970s. What is lacking among this literature are more in-depth ethnographic studies of Christian environmentalism. We already have a body of studies based on census and other large-scale survey instruments which attests to attitudes and values of generic groups of Christians in various (though mostly American) contexts. However, there are few close studies of Christian environmentalism, with only a few more anthropological exceptions, such as Sarah McFarland Taylor’s *Green Sisters* (Harvard University Press, 2007). This type of research is urgently needed because, as Maria Nita suggests in *Praying and Campaigning with Environmental Christians*, the presence of “green” Christians has moved from the margins to the mainstream in quite a number of important ways, seen on display quite substantially at the Paris climate summit of 2016. This surging of Christian engagement with environmental issues such as climate change has proven surprising to many, not just because it represents yet another emergence of post-secularity but also because a whole range of scholars since the mid-twentieth century have argued that Christianity is in fact a key cause of the environmental crisis.

What emerges from Nita’s analysis presents a challenge to some religion and ecology orthodoxies. In particular, Nita challenges the “deep green” argument by Bron Taylor. Taylor sees implicit and new religious movements as possessing greater flexibility and thus enabling more radical forms of environmental work. In contrast, Nita’s data indicates that “Christian activists adapted their religious belief and practices to various, sometimes extreme, degrees in their encounter with the nature spirituality of the green movement, or the climate and transition towns movement ... [and] most activists retained their primary Christian identities” (p. 6). At the heart of this study lies a sophisticated framing of Christianity, and by extension a model for other scholars seeking to engage in an ethnographic encounter with Christians involved in activism and campaigning. As Nita suggests, when seen up close, Christian identity, belonging and values can be quite hybrid, and the work of Christian activists collaborative, transgressing religious/secular divides. The ongoing

negotiation of interfaith issues and religious hybridity is complex. In the Christian encounter with secular environmentalism, particularly when there are various forms of belief and unbelief at play, some convictions are left behind or transformed, yet, as Nita argues, overall affinity and identity remains intact. To better understand this dynamic, Nita pursues four key questions: 1) How do environmental Christians campaign inside the climate and transition movements? 2) What sort of practices do environmental Christians engage in/with? 3) How do they understand their participation in the green movement and their identity as “green Christians”? and 4) How do they perform and ritualize their identities?

The underpinning data for this study rests on grounded ethnographic research conducted from 2008 to 2014 when Nita shadowed a wide range of Christian groups, from the relatively mainstream “Operation Noah” to the radical anarchist group “Isaiah 58”. Subsequent interviews were conducted with members of a variety of groups, but with an emerging focus on members of the Green Christian network. Nita does not write as a Christian insider or eco-theologian, so her study is a refreshing departure from other studies which seek to set normative claims in context with only lightweight empirical study. Nita approaches these communities as participant observer, that is, as a sympathetic and engaged outsider. What results is a fascinating, creative and in-depth exploration of Christian environmentalism. Non-specialist readers will find the book accessible, as Nita provides helpful summaries and history along the way, particularly in Chapters 2, 5 and 6, which briskly profile modern secular and Christian environmental campaigning, and scholarship of both. The book may also appeal to researchers seeking to make a start in this field, as the author builds up the field of study, with Chapters 3 and 4 on “Methods for the Investigation of Christian Environmentalist Networks” and “Theoretical Methods for Studying Christian Environmental Networks”. Analysis in the later chapters of the book focuses on modes of studying green Christian networks. Nita works with Latour’s actor-network approach to compare countercultural heterogeneous networks, and explores the process of identity negotiation, the relation between individual Christian activists and their communities, and the role of ritual formation in activist work. Particularly in the exploration of ritual, which takes up the final two chapters, we find some fascinating insights. Nita probes the work of eco-ritual formation (a mainstay of neo-Pagan and other new eco-religious groups) in specifically Christian groups. Photos and excerpts from a range of liturgies encountered in the field illuminate her scholarly discussion of the way in which rituals of fasting, eucharist and silence are reformulated around ecological affinities. Nita finds ways in which activists are using direct action as ritual alongside modes of affective remembrance in song and prayer, presenting a fascinating and interesting portrayal of Christian eco-activists in the UK. Nita’s work is an important and carefully composed contribution to a multidisciplinary field which is just starting to gain energy and will undoubtedly continue to increase in public and scholarly prominence.