Book Review


As the sense of urgency increases to find a resolution to the current environmental crises facing our planet, world religions are being looked to for insight, answers and solutions. In *Religion and Environments: A Reader in Religion, Nature and Ecology*, Richard Bohannon compiles 36 essays on the relationship between humans and nature. Bohannon approaches this relationship from the perspective of religious practitioners and leading environmental scholars. The essays included are wide ranging, covering both classical and contemporary interpretations of religion and the environment, making this book an excellent introductory resource, displaying the development of religious environmental thought over the past two centuries.

Bohannon asks two key questions which he aims to answer in the book. First, what is gained by looking at religion and the environment? And second, in what ways can religion help address our situation? To answer these questions, the book is split into three parts, separating the collection of essays into the broad categories of *Wilderness*, *Garden* and *City*, each of which is preluded by a thoughtful and explanatory introduction by Bohannon. Part One, *Wilderness: Nature as Wild and Remote*, focuses on the power that nature possesses, the preservation of nature and the prevention of future negative human impact on natural environments. Part One provides a solid foundation for the rest of the book by including important and significant essays from authors such as Edward Abbey, Henry David Thoreau and John Muir. We are also introduced to a number of different religious perspectives, including from the American Indian tradition, Judaism and Thai Buddhism.

Part Two, *Garden: Cultivated and Transformed Landscapes*, takes a much more anthropocentric view than Part One, with its biocentric tendencies. Bohannon explains that gardens are created by humans and as such the essays included in Part Two do not aim to avoid human contact with nature. For example, Part Two starts with Aldo Leopold’s influential work, *The Land Ethic*, where Leopold talks about a need for humans to change from dominating the environment to becoming citizens of the environment. This theme of stewardship runs throughout Part Two, including approaches from a range of traditions which enable the reader to further understand the varying attitudes in regards to human use of the land. Among others, Bohannon incorporates two essays on Islam, by Cara Wolinsky and Safei El-Deen Hamed, as well as an essay by Vandana Shiva on the influential Chipko movement that began in India in the 1970s.

Finally, Part Three, *City: Natural and Human Environments*, addresses human spaces, referring to urban environments or other kinds of built environments. This section is unique amongst similar volumes in environmental philosophy, offering twelve essays on the urban environment and environmentalism in urban centres, an exciting development to edited volumes of this kind.
Bohannon has skilfully compiled this volume, covering a wide range of perspectives and traditions in one book. The way the book is structured, both in its themes of *Wilderness*, *Garden* and *City*, and in the ordering of the essays, allows for a fluid and engaging read. *City*, the third and final section of this book, is a particularly interesting addition.

Through the selection of important and historical environmental literature incorporated into this book, I believe Bohannon has shown that looking to world religions is critical for understanding and resolving environmental matters. The volume includes a number of essential readings in the field of environmental philosophy that are necessary for gaining a true understanding of the general issues in this area. However, more emphasis could have been placed on religious positions in general to really allow the reader to engage with the questions proposed at the start of this book. Despite this, the weight placed on environmental philosophy is important if it is to be used as an introductory source in the area of religion and the environment, allowing the reader to have a thorough grounding in historical context.

Furthermore, Bohannon accepts the limitations of the structure of this book, as indeed important topics such as climate change and pollution feature little, since they do not fall into the broad categories he lays out. Additionally there is more of an emphasis on deforestation than on other issues such as those related to water management. Bohannon makes the reader aware of this from the beginning of the book, and I therefore do not see this as a weakness. He has clearly been purposefully selective in order to keep the volume well organised and allow the essays to compliment one another, which he achieves successfully. In addition, Bohannon has included suggestions for further reading in each section. *Religion and Environments* is therefore a very accessible collection of essays. With most of the readings being short in length, it would make an ideal resource for undergraduate courses that cover religion and the environment or environmental philosophy and ethics.

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