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Book Review

John Hart (ed.), *The Blackwell Companion to Religion & Ecology* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2017), 560 pp., $195, ISBN: 978-1-11-846556-1.

The *Blackwell Companion to Religion & Ecology* is the latest in a series of readers introducing the field. Although those readers now number in the double digits, this volume, edited by John Hart, is a distinctive and welcome contribution, animated by a sense of the field's purpose that members should find provocative, even when they do not share it.

Introductions to a field—particularly those which appear in one of the major 'companion' or 'handbook' series—undertake a landmark interpretive task: they must depict an intelligible domain of inquiry, describe its central research questions, identify the major axes of difference that organize the field's intellectual diversity, and then commission a set of contributions that exemplifies the range of that domain, the variety of methods for approaching its questions, and the significance of their differences. Moreover, especially in the multidisciplinary and culturally urgent field of religion and ecology, they must negotiate how much to project a vision of how a field *should* understand itself, how much to depict the most productive sites of the field *as it is*, how much to represent the range of meaningful *diversities*, and how much to demonstrate the field's broader cultural *significance*. As editor of two such volumes myself, I appreciate the impossibility of resolving those tasks in a comprehensive way.

With those field-staging questions in mind, I first observe that about half of the 35 chapters in the *Handbook* are significantly engaged with Christianity, with both the Foreword and Afterword written by Christian theologians, which could suggest that the major referent of 'religion' in the field of religion and ecology remains Christianity. That seems regrettable to me; it shortchanges the diversity of the field's religions and contexts, and it suggests to young scholars—in a way I think is actually inaccurate—that Christianity continues to dominate the frame of reference for future research in religion and ecology. I can see, however, that an editor might defensibly suppose that Christianity has been the predominant focus of scholarly attention and so choose to depict where the most work has in fact been done. John Cobb's Afterword suggests, additionally, that the focus on Christianity may have to do with a moral choice to focus on a major cultural source of ecological problems, and so may even be part of the work of repentance. Yet, if so, that is an intensely Christian theological understanding of the work of an academic field.

I also observe, and welcome more fulsomely, the robust presence of North American Indigenous traditions (featuring in four of 35 chapters). Those choices reflect Hart's own intellectual career, shaped by lifelong engagement with Christian and Native American interactions with environmental questions. They do, however, leave

relatively less space for contexts and methods one would have otherwise expected to find in an introductory reader. The continents of South America and Australia, including their Indigenous cosmovisions, are missing altogether. Arctic Indigenous life-worlds are absent. Asian contexts and traditions are allotted just five chapters, of which two feature Christianity. The ecological spiritualities of Paganism and new animism, or 'dark green' spiritualities of any sort that do not appear within conventional religious formations, receive no thematic attention. Scholarship on popular movements and cultural productions which may not present themselves as religious yet seem to bear religious dimensions or at least be susceptible of religious analysis is also absent.

A critic could go on in this way for any introductory reader, carping about what kinds of religion are missing. More important for understanding the *Companion*, I think, is seeing the shared figure of religion with which many of the authors seem to work. With a few exceptions, contributors present religion as benignly transformative yet hindered and corrupted by exogenous causes of ecological destruction.

The very first sentence of the opening chapter by Seyyed Hossein Nasr reads: 'One can hardly avoid the conclusion that as long as religion was central to human life, there was no ecological crisis' (p. 3). Throughout the subsequent chapters it is indeed difficult to avoid that conclusion. Across different contexts and traditions, many of the contributors share an implicit sense that powerful social forces (secularization, industrialism, colonialism, fossil fuel imperialism) have dampened the summons of religion to live an authentically ecological humanity. In his preface, Hart laments that religious leaders are regularly dismissed when they call for ecological responsibility. In his view, individualist, relativist, and consumerist dynamics in global social relations permit people to avoid reckoning with those calls; resistance to the challenge of religious teachings is abetting ecological disaster. If Hart comes to this project with that sense of the field's central problem, what else can he do?

> In this *Companion*, the voices of people from diverse religious and spiritual traditions from around the world call on their co-believers and others, and the public at large, to see what is transpiring as a consequence of human acts harmful to the Earth and all life, and to strive to transform human consciousness, culture, and conduct such that people care for their common home. (p. xxii)

The task of the field, by this light, is to curate and magnify religious teachings that call people toward a transformation of ecological consciousness.

In the second of his own two chapters in the volume, Hart makes plain the form of religion for which he is looking: 'Earth's religions have an important role to play vis-à-vis ecology: to imagine today and actualize tomorrow the new Earth that is envisioned in and by a community of communities' (p. 485). Hart articulates that general religious role through a strikingly revised Christian narrative of Creation and Fall: entrusted with Earth by a Creator, humans violated that trust and fell into chronic exploitation. The Fall was not into utter ecological depravity, for many Indigenous communities 'did retain their sense of responsibility for Mother Earth', thus representing a general split of humanity into exploiters and caretakers (p. 471). The task of religion is to call people away from fallen exploiter-humanity into caretaking-humanity.

Hart curates the volume's generally shared vision of religion precisely because he deems it crucial for understanding global challenges and responding adequately to them. Many of his contributors agree, and they may all be quite right. Let me nonetheless point out what that shared figure of religion occludes. Its prevalence in the volume means that this companion does not offer much help in understanding the field's key methodological questions, or the range of ways for taking up those inquiries. (What different things do we mean by religion? With what different notions of ecology/environment/nature do we work? How do we evaluate better and worse ways of connecting those terms?) I am not saying that the editor fails to offer careful definitions of 'religion' and 'ecology', but rather that their use in this volume is to serve as generics for invoking the religious ecology that he thinks is needed at this moment, rather than to serve as lines of investigation into differences made by various intersections of religion in various ecologies.

The *Companion*'s way of proceeding leaves out, for example, social-scientific accounts of how environmental imaginations function in particular religious contexts. The exception here—the chapter by Sheldon and Oreskes on US evangelicals and climate science—is the best general essay I have yet read on that subject. Standing out from others in the volume for its different mode (historical) and cultural stance (pragmatic), its value to the *Companion* makes one wish for more chapters written using historical, ethnographic, or other social-science methods.

In other words, the diversities represented in this volume leave to one side other possible pluralisms. Saying that, I have now reproduced the form of a critical move familiar to nearly everyone in the field, responsible for some of its major fissures and divergent research projects. I have probably also become more querulous than the merit of my own editorial efforts permits.

Let me offer, then, some discrete appreciations to affirm why this is a welcome and valuable volume. First, in a tribute to the standing of the editor, many of the contributors are acclaimed luminaries, including founding scholars of the field (Sayyid Nasr, John Cobb, Fazlun Khalid, John Haught, Hava Tirosh-Samuelson, Larry Rasmussen, Roger Gottlieb, Mary Evelyn Tucker, John Grim), famous environmental thinkers (Bill McKibben, Vandana Shiva, Naomi Oreskes), globally prominent religious leaders (Patriarch Bartholomew, Arthur Waskow), and globally prominent Indigenous leaders (Tom Goldtooth, Robin Kimmerer, Winona LaDuke). It is a landmark volume for that reason alone.

Second, several of its chapters offer elegant, succinct summae from key thinkers in the field. The chapters by Chapple, Kimmerer, and Harris are especially noteworthy on that score—all three are likely to appear on a syllabus of mine in the near future. Because of my criticism of the volume's shared notion of religious transformation, I should confess that what I especially appreciated about Kimmerer's was that it moved me with its summons to an inward transformation: 'Gratitude is most powerful as a response to the Earth because it provides an opening to reciprocity, to the act of giving back, to living in a way that the Earth will be grateful for us' (p. 373). Meanwhile Harris's way of connecting violence against Black women and violence against Earth integrates anti-racist reparations with ecological restoration in a way that will be obviously helpful for anyone familiar with either literature. Calling for a holistic reparative response to the way 'dominion' moralized white settler ecocide and genocide, Harris argues that 'ecological reparations dismantles White supremacy and colonial ecology' at the same time (p. 198).

Third, precisely because this volume does not try to offer pure instantiations of 'each religion' and does not seem to mind the predominate appearance of Christianity, it features a number of hybrid contexts in which we see some form of Christianity drawn by ecological stress to engage with other religious inheritances (Korean indigenous religions with Christianity, or Confucianism with Christianity). Particularly commendable is the very fine essay by Kapya Kaoma on 'The Serpent in Eden and in Africa'. Kaoma considers the conflict between traditional religions and Christianity in regard to snakes. Whereas Christianity has typically transmitted vilification of the serpent associated with Eve's transgression, the animals carry deeply positive associations in many African cultures. Reading across several kinds of literature, Kaoma treats the serpent as a site of environmental friction in the ongoing exchange between African traditional religions and African Christianities in a way that nicely exemplifies how the field of religion and ecology can enhance understanding in multiple domains.

In sum, there are strong reasons to spend time with this important volume, to assign its chapters to our students, and even to be moved by its vision. There are also strong reasons to be dissatisfied with its depiction of the field.

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