Book Review


Edited by David L. Haberman, *Understanding Climate Change through Religious Lifeworlds* is an outcome of ‘Religion and Climate Change in Cross-regional Perspective, 2016-2018’, a project funded by the Henry Luce Foundation and managed by the Center for Latin American and Latino Studies at American University. It is the companion volume of the forthcoming *Climate Politics and the Power of Religion* (Indian University Press 2022) edited by Evan Berry, the principal investigator of the project. Haberman’s volume hosts ten chapters plus a conclusion from the fields of anthropology, sociology, geography, and religious studies, showcasing research-based findings and conceptual discussions by Cecilie Rubow, Guillermo Salas Carreño, Amanda Bertana, Georgina Drew, C. Mathews (Matt) Samson, Karim-Aly S. Kassam, Karine Gagné, Mabel Denzin Gergan, Karsten Paerregaard, and Willis Jenkins. As most of the contributors are anthropologists or are practicing field-based research methods, the book has a strong ethnographic flavor that geographically covers the Cook Islands, the Peruvian Andes, the Himalayas, the Guatemalan highlands, and the Pamir Mountains of the Central Asia. As it features four chapters based on the authors’ case studies in the Himalayas, the volume has a discernible Himalayan character. More broadly, with the chapters on the Pamir Mountains and the highlands of Central and South America, this volume can be regarded as a study of climate change and religious responses in the world’s highlands with a wealth of cross-regional comparative implications.

Haberman’s introduction both provides the reader with a roadmap of this interdisciplinary volume and offers his perspective, synthesized from the chapters, on the intersection of religion and climate change. His remark on climate change as being ‘everywhere, yet nowhere’ (p. 1) resonates with many of his peer scholars of climate studies situated in social sciences and humanities. He points out three objective conditions that contribute to the slippery sense of climate change. The foremost condition is that the notion of climate change is often proposed as a ‘scientific or economic issue’ (p. 3) with research, debates, and policy applications limited largely to natural scientists and governmental technocrats. This condition thus leads to the public perception of climate change as ‘one-size-fits-all’ (p. 1) against the backdrop of the world’s cultural diversity and biodiversity with a visibly exclusive character preventing the participation of non-specialists and the general public. Finally, the repercussions of this exclusivity relegate climate discourse as mostly unavailable or as ‘a foreign discourse’ (p. 3) for local...
communities around the world. Religion, as Haberman proposes, can play a significant role in making the climate discourse intelligible and accessible beyond the scientific world and, thus, can diversify the understanding of climate change with particular reference to locally lived experiences. Haberman’s inclusive perspective on the climate-religion nexus finds its basis in the field of religion and ecology propounded by Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim with its traceable intellectual roots in Lynn White’s discernment of the inextricable relationship between human ecology and religious beliefs (p. 2). In many ways, this book can be read as a text of religion and ecology with an emphasis on diverse understandings of global climate change and human induced environmental challenges.

The proxies of climate change in the ten chapters vary from ‘the works of God’ in the Cook Islands, ‘sea level rise’ (p. 83) in Fiji, ‘flash floods’ (p. 112-13) in the Garhwal Himalaya, ‘forced migration’ (p. 127) in the Guatemalan Highlands, ‘harmful psychological effects’ in the Pamir Mountains, and ‘ecological and cultural loss’ in Sikkim Himalaya (p. 213), to the glacial recession in the Andes (p. 44-45) and the central and western Himalayas (p. 44-45, 184, 243, 261). Given their human religious contexts, these physical manifestations of climate change are obviously not merely the products of the often abstractly-presented planetary climate system working through the atmosphere, the hydrosphere, the cryosphere, the lithosphere, and the biosphere; instead they are deeply embodied in concrete, ecologically diverse, multispecies habitats and entwined with human religion-based cosmovisions and moral compasses. As Haberman and Rubow respectively put it, ‘human morality and the environment are intimately linked’ (p. 249) and ‘climate change is a moral and spiritual concern’ (p. 35); therefore, human beliefs and natural occurrences condition each other.

It is then not surprising to recognize the role of religious traditions in providing their ecologically-specific constituencies with causal understandings of climate change and its environmental consequences. For instance, the chapters on the Andes and the Himalayas all show how the alleged deterioration of human morality leads to the anger of either God or a multitude of local deities incarnated in mountains and water bodies. The expressions of divine anger manifest in natural disasters and human livelihood hardships. At the same time, religious doctrines and other-worldly cosmovisions offer enough theological explanatory schemes to allow people to feel a sense of control and hope when encountering climatic risks and actual threats; see, for instance, chapters by Rubow and Bertana. Notably, the chapters by Kassam and Drew well capture the causally entwined human morality and climate change, as they respectively offer their observations, ‘the sacred is bound to the ecological’ (p. 153) and ‘climate change is a morality tale’ (p. 114).

Jenkins’s conclusion summarizes the book by resonating with Haberman’s introduction concerning the critical role of religion and ecology in climate studies and by recognizing the ‘multiple notions of climate’ (p. 286) throughout the book. At the same time, he also notes that the authors of the chapters are not always clear what they mean by climate change. This reader shares the same assessment, but also recognizes climate or climate change as an open concept, especially outside the natural sciences, and one without an absolute definition due to its physically discernible occurrences being quite diverse in how their physical and psychological effects manifest in place-specific environmental events.
In sum, the book is a pioneering publication on climate change utilizing approaches drawn from religion and ecology, environmental anthropology, and human geography. It successfully builds interdisciplinary bridges and offers cross-regional perspectives on climate change contextualized in different religious communities in the Pacific Islands and the highlands of Asia and America.

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