
It can feel as if there is often a kind of detached response to the realities of global crises like climate change in many academic circles. There is a recognition of the crisis, conferences are held, theories developed—or better yet, the crisis is nicely fit into existing theories—and scholars go about their business teaching tried-and-true methods courses with a deference to long-trusted theoretical models. Elsewhere Amitav Ghosh (2016) has called climate change a crisis of thought, that it can be unthinkable. Climate is relegated to an issue amongst other issues, with not enough attention given to how its all-encompassing effects alter the religious landscapes and embodied rituals of academic inquiry—not to mention the very tools of performing said inquiry. Performance is key here, and is an important theme in Todd LeVasseur’s timely *Climate Change, Religion, and Our Bodily Future* which looks at how religion is performed—and perhaps just as importantly, how the study of religion is performed—in localized environmental spaces enveloped by global climate crisis.

The book has two primary lenses through which it frames its analysis: a focus on what humans do with religion to shape their bodies—individually, collectively, corporately—and what they do with religion to respond to climate change (p. xiii). Divided into two overarching sections, Part I focuses on various theoretical approaches aimed at decentering logics of dualism and domination related to environmental thinking, while Part II centers ecological and religious bodies in various case studies. Chapter 1 uses a biochemical lens to analyze collapsing boundaries between bodies and the more-than-human forces constantly acting upon and changing those bodies, as well as between long-held dualistic relationships between religious subjects and the academics who study them. Chapter 2 builds on this breakdown of boundaries and introduces a key term guiding this work: ‘religious bodily dramaturgy’, which draws on feminist new materialisms and queer ecological epistemologies to ‘analyze the culture and subcultures of bodily practices in religious settings on a planet undergoing climate change’ (p. 26). The construct of ‘nature’ itself is the focus in Chapter 3, emphasizing porous boundaries around how we conceive the natural world in relation to our bodies located in particular ecological spaces. Chapter 4 serves as a bridge chapter between the theoretical models of Part I and case studies in Part II, focusing on the pervasiveness of oil and the role petrocultures play in shaping religious traditions—including their reaction to oil cultures, such as the interreligious #NODAPL protests at Standing Rock led by indigenous groups. Petrocultures are fundamentally intertwined with religious bodies and shape how religion is performed, breaking down any kind of perceived separation between...
humans and the environments in which they perform rituals.

With a focus on religious pilgrimages—specifically the Hindu practice of receiving darsan in the Himalayas in India, and the Muslim practice of the hajj to Mecca in Saudi Arabia—Chapter 5 looks at how climate change will dramatically shape religious journeys centered around millions of bodies interacting with their environments. Rapid glacial melt in the Himalayas and extreme temperatures in the Middle East not only upend vast ecological networks, but hold profound implications for the religious traditions that shape and are shaped by those sacred spaces. If Chapter 5 laments the dire futures of millions of religious bodies impacted by climate change, Chapters 6 and 7 offer a picture of how religious traditions can be instrumental in responding to the climate crisis. Chapter 6 focuses on Buddhism, and, in particular, Tibetan monks working with local experts in Ladakh to engage in adaptive practices such as constructing artificial icefall glaciers as a way to preserve snow runoff in an area that relies on glacial melt for water. The combination of religious leaders working with local farmers and engineers in ‘a fusing of traditional ecological knowledge with Western science’ highlights the ways religious groups can work with their communities to address climate change (p. 111). Building on examples of response, the final chapter applies a more generalized notion of Bron Taylor’s ‘Dark Green Religion’ to highlight various nature spiritualities influencing protest art and other subversive acts in combatting climate change. Here, a section on spiritually engaging the natural world through surfing coupled with ecoerotic subcultures offers a new angle on how a certain kind of nature Romanticism paired with an attention to embodiment might have new affective applications in responding to climate crisis.

A critically important contribution of this work is the implication of LeVasseur’s understanding and theorizing of bodies to implicate not just the religious subjects of academic study via some externalized and removed process, but the bodies of academics themselves analyzing subjects and religious practice. LeVasseur’s critique of the removed positioning of the kind of normative, Western academic is scathing, and highlights a gulf between how we talk about and theorize climate crisis and what we actually do about it. LeVasseur notes that the stories he is interested in—the stories that we tell ourselves—are fundamentally ‘academic stories and religious stories, both, and how these impact our understanding of self, of community, of moral care, and of proper or improper behaviors, are central to our evolved capacity to live within planetary limits’ (p. 52–53). The reality is that religious rituals and practices are always acted out in particular places, shaped by environmental factors, as are the academics studying these phenomena. Religion scholars receive the primary focus here, given LeVasseur’s own training and the focus of the book; however, this is clearly an indictment of academia more broadly.

While there are more questions than answers in parts of this work—asking what happens to centuries-old pilgrimages like the hajj in the face of rampant climate chaos is, on some level, fundamentally unknowable—the practice of posing such queries is critical, and LeVasseur’s point that academic disciplines do not or are not properly equipped to ask them is well-taken. Yet, paired with the examples LeVasseur provides to ground such existential specters of climate chaos in the material now, those potential futures are also not unimaginable. Nor are they unthinkable, so long as we commit ourselves to a practice of thinking that is not
disembodied but recognizes the enveloping material realities of climate change. Is there a world in which religious traditions, or even religious studies, can be positioned to imagine such futures in a way that both centers the performance of religious bodies and galvanizes necessary action? Hopefully. But if there is to be hope, it can only result from a move to the kind of embodied re-attunement to the planetary found in a work as excellent and important as this one.

Matthew R. Hartman
Department of Theology & Ethics
Graduate Theological Union
mhartman@gtu.edu

References