
This Cambridge Companion, edited by two scholars specialising mainly in the philosophy of religion, focuses on the role of Christianity in shaping thinking about and relationship to the environment. It touches upon historical developments from antiquity to the present and discusses contemporary issues as well, mainly from Christian perspectives. It also discusses Christian perspectives on a potential green transformation of Christianity and on how a greening of Christian thought could be cultivated. The introduction by Alexander J.B. Hampton highlights the diversity of ideas about the environment within the Christian tradition and how such ideas inform relationships with the environment. He emphasises that anthropogenic factors have altered the state of the planet and made urgent green transformation necessary and that Christianity has contributed to shaping current human-nature relationships. However, he focuses on the contestations and critical discussions following upon the publication of the Lynn White thesis in 1967 and presents this volume as a contribution to further complicating the claims made by White. He also emphasizes the importance of throwing light on the role of religion, especially Christianity, in the environmental crisis.

Hampton is surely right to emphasise that explanations of the environmental and climate crises are not monocausal, that the causes are complex. Still, in predominantly highlighting alternative Christian traditions that might form a basis for stimulating eco-friendly views, the introduction does place more emphasis on the ways in which Christian traditions embed views and concepts that are not environmentally detrimental than on the ways in which Christian views and concepts have exacerbated problems. The introduction also accepts the premise that views of nature fundamentally affect behavior and actions, so that the remedy for the environmental crisis could be changing our views of nature. In other words, the idea is that instrumentalist, utilitarian, and commodified views of nature worsen the environmental crisis, while the cultivation of eco- and bio-friendly views of nature would constitute a (part-)solution to the crisis.

While there might certainly be something to this assumption, which is prevalent in the field, it does leave some elephants in the room: global capitalism, corporate agrobusiness, large scale media actors, and more. It would certainly also be important and necessary to investigate practices and behaviours. Indeed, it could be more likely that changed practices could then stimulate transformations of views and norms. In any case, discussion of the work on religion and the
environment in the cross-cultural field of religion, nature, and culture, and in the non-confessional, historical, anthropological, and sociological study of religion, is lacking in the introduction. Engaging with this body of work would have made the volume more useful to historians and sociologists of religion, environmental historians, and others. In sum, the introduction provides a frame for this companion to Christianity and the environment that seems aimed at the disciplines of philosophy and theology, mainly.

The volume itself is divided into three parts. The first part, Concepts, deals with some of the formative ideas about the environment that have shaped—and might shape in the future—Christian thought. The seven essays in this section focus on various aspects of Christian theology and cover topics such as the disenchantment of nature, human and nonhuman animals, anthropocentrism and biocentrism, stewardship, participation ideas in Christian theology, and more. While presenting interesting materials, these contributions read mainly as discussions in and for Christian theology, confessional studies of religion, and philosophy of religion.

The following section, Histories, contains six chapters that consider how key periods in history have understood the environment and nature and how perceptions change over time. The approaches in this section are historical and sociological. Addey presents interesting readings of Platonist traditions in the ancient world that highlight aspects of ecocentrism and participation and see them as precursors to deep ecology. Robertson investigates the medieval ‘discovery’ of nature in Western Europe ca. 1100—1300; Lyons looks at natural philosophy in early modernity, the rise of mechanical philosophy and how this influenced European intellectual history, while Stoll brings out how the same Protestant culture that fostered the values that drove industrial capitalism also cultivated prominent, Protestant critics of the exploitation of nature. The final contributions to this section—by Dassow Walls and McGrath—present well-written discussions of modern and contemporary ecological thought.

The final section of the book, Engagements, with six contributions, returns to explorations of how Christian and religious traditions might contribute to ameliorating the environmental crisis and discussions of the constructive possibilities. While theological in orientation, there is also some emphasis on the importance of naturalistic, non-theistic perspectives, as in Brady’s nuanced discussion of wonder and awe in relation to the natural world. Hampton explores the potentiality of aesthetics to disrupt anthropocentrism and aid in a return to nature from western, Christian perspectives. Hedley discusses the Lynn White thesis and accepts his diagnosis, but highlights—like the volume overall—pects of the Western, Christian tradition that complicate the picture. Overall, the volume focuses predominantly on intellectual, conceptual, and philosophical aspects of Christian traditions.

The volume is well-edited and the chapters written by experts who provide insight into ideas within Christian traditions that could be seen as more biocentric and eco-centric. However, the discussions raised in this volume are often theologically-oriented—with some good exceptions, especially in the Histories section. In my assessment, the volume’s most immediate utility is for theological-philosophical disciplines and engagements in greening Christianity. As a scholar based in the historically, sociologically, and anthropologically oriented non-confessional study of religions, I missed perspectives from my field on Christianity and the environment. Deeper engagements with the cross-cultural study of
religion would have broadened the scope of this volume and the discussions of the role of Christianity in important ways. A more sustained attention to behavioral, emotional, bodily, ritual, lived religious, and material aspects of Christian traditions would also substantially expand our understanding of the role of various forms of Christianity with respect to the environmental crisis.

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