
Editor's Introduction: Contemporary World Religions and Nature in Asia and North America

It is customary that *JSRNC*'s quarterly publication schedule alternates more-or-less between special thematic issues on the one hand and the more eclectic 'grab bag' issues on the other. It is these more varied outputs that capture the full diversity and breadth of our offerings. Nonetheless, often a cogent theme will unexpectedly emerge from a medley of serendipitous submissions. This issue is an example of this phenomenon, as most of the featured articles address contemporary trends in major world religions and the attitudes of their adherents toward nature.

The six contributions of this issue fall into two coherent groups. The first group of three articles features new social-scientific research concerning religious attitudes within diverse Asian nations. Two pieces address shifting patterns of belief in Muslim majority nations of Western and Southeast Asia, and a third article addresses Christian environmentalism in Japan. The concluding group of three articles is more methodologically diverse, addressing contemporary Western traditions in a predominantly North American context. One examines predominantly Christian faith-based environmentalism in Florida. The final two essays focus on the significant work of two contemporary thought-leaders: Utah-based conservationist Terry Tempest Williams and Irish-American philosopher William Desmond.

We begin with Veronika Sobotková's work on Shi'ite clerics' dynamically changing attitudes toward coronavirus pandemic safety protocols. She analyzes the public policy rulings of the Grand Ayatollahs of Iran and Iraq, primarily as represented in media accounts, and notices an unexpected willingness of the religious leadership to heed scientific medical advice and impose severe restrictions upon traditional religious activities (such as shrine visitation, mosque services, etc.), even when these rules were rather unpopular with the public and with the lower clergy. This work has important implications for understanding Shi'ite jurisprudence as flexible and adaptive in the face of public health crises.

Next we continue with the work of Frans Wisjen, Mohamad Yusuf, Samsul Ma'arif, Any Marsiyani, and Zainal Abidin Bagir. Their pilot study applies the Human and Nature (HaN) scale to the Indonesian context for the first time, to assess the role of religiosity in relation to perceived human responsibility toward the environment. The HaN scale was developed in part to test the possible culpability of Western Christian ideology in promoting environmentally destructive attitudes and policies, as theorized most famously by Lynn White Jr. (1967). Although Indonesia is a Muslim majority nation, it is also a diverse and pluralistic one. Significantly, the survey data that the authors present in this article suggest that the perceived virtue of environmental stewardship is correlated with increased religiosity across several different Indonesian religious communities (Muslim, Protestant, Catholic, Hindu, and Indigenous). Surprisingly for those who are familiar with certain fundamentalist anti-environmentalist religious movements in the West, this work suggests that belief in human mastery (dominion) over nature is correlated with *less* religiosity across all religious groups in Indonesia. This observed positive correlation between religiosity and the stewardship ethos has implications for ongoing debates among conservationists about the merit of religious/secular alliances and religious environmentalism (*cf.* Mountain 2022).

In a harmonious vein, Samantha Senda-Cook and Emma Frances Bloomfield next analyze the reported experiences of the members of the Asian Rural Institute (ARI), a Christian environmentalist organization and school headquartered in Tochigi, Japan. The authors suggest this organization is an effective coalition-building agent, transcending sectarian identity to merge Christian and Japanese philosophical traditions in the service of the shared 'environmental pieties' of Christians and non-Christians, including Buddhist and Muslim allies explicitly.

The second three contributions move to the Western Hemisphere. Victoria Machado's ethnographic work examines the subtle influence of diverse faith-based ecological activists within the largely secular environmentalist movement in Florida, geographically situated within the religiously conservative Southeast U.S. As individuals, these (predominantly Christian) environmentalists-of-faith seem like outliers with respect to both their socially conservative coreligionists and their non-religious environmentalist allies. The implication is that this dual-outlier status has rendered these folks less visible to scholars interested in the role of religion and spirituality in the environmental movement. Machado encourages us to pay greater attention to the intersections between starkly different social groups, and not allow our discernment to become clouded by the political caricatures of right and left common within U.S. culture-at-large.

The remaining two contributions examine the work of contemporary Western authors, beginning with Luke Rodewald's analysis of essayist Terry Tempest Williams's slow journey away from her Latter-Day Saints sectarian upbringing, and toward a more nebulous nature spirituality, evidenced by her shifting religious environmental rhetoric. Rodewald makes the case that as Williams has gradually become less straightforwardly Mormon in her identity, she has come to espouse a spirituality more akin to 'dark green religion' as theorized by Bron Taylor (2010).

The final article is Ethan Vanderleek's analysis of ethical and religious trajectories within the writings of contemporary Catholic philosopher William Desmond. Vanderleek argues that Desmond's philosophy posits a human orientation toward transcendence, and that this fact gives his perspective an advantage over other similar works of contemporary continental philosophy, inasmuch as Desmond's ideas show greater potential utility for productive critique of technological determinism and ongoing human excesses resulting in environmental impacts.

With this issue's collection of articles, we begin volume 17 of *JSRNC*. We believe that these six individual contributions have enlarged our scholarly conversation in positive ways, and we hope that you will agree.

Joseph A. P. Wilson
Co-Editor

References

- Mountain, David. 2022. 'Greenwashing God: The Danger of Religious Environmentalism', *Free Inquiry*, 42.2: 16–19.
- Taylor, Bron. 2010. *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press).
- White, Lynn Townsend, Jr. 1967. 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis', *Science*, 155.3767: 1203–1207. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.155.3767.1203>