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**Introduction to the Special Issue:  
Religion, Environment, and the Political Right**

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This special issue represents an attempt to merge insights from two fields that have so far had little to do with each other: conservative/right wing studies and religion and nature. Our occasion for doing so is the convergence of two powerful trends: destabilization of the climate—which itself emerges in the context of a pre-existing environmental crisis—and the destabilization of liberal democracies around the world, as conservative and right-wing movements grow in power (Malm et al. 2021). In theory, scholars of religion and nature should be well positioned to analyze the intersection of these two trends, but such a turn has been surprisingly long in coming. This special issue proposes shifting gears.

For most of our field's history, to study religion and nature/ecology was to study how religious teachings could help address the

environmental crisis. In the pages of this journal and elsewhere, religion and nature scholars have demonstrated how religions are attempting to integrate environmental concern and activism into their institutions and liturgies, to process ecological grief, and to promote deeper forms of earth reverence in hopes of a better ecological future. Looking back on this literature post-2016, however, the absence of interest in politics—indeed, erasure of the political realm—in much of this literature is notable.<sup>1</sup> The reasons for this erasure deserve further exploration, but not here. Instead, we simply observe that, viewed through the dominant theoretical lens in our field, the ‘greening of religions hypothesis’, religious ecologies of the right appear inexplicable and anomalous (Taylor 2016).<sup>2</sup> At a surface level, this begins to explain their absence from the scholarly literature. But, as we hope the following pages demonstrate, there is much to be gained by bringing a religion and nature lens to bear on conservative and right-wing movements.

In an early exploration such as this, the choice of terms is important. A quick dive into the academic and journalistic literature reveals that a number of terms have been applied to movements on the right, including conservative, right-wing, far right, extreme right, radical right, and alt-right. To avoid exacerbating this terminological proliferation, we follow Blee and Creasap (2010)’s recommendation to use ‘rightist’ as an umbrella term to capture a range of conservative and right-wing movements. Blee and Creasap define *conservative movements* as those that ‘support patriotism, free enterprise capitalism, and/or a traditional moral order and for which violence is not a frequent tactic or goal’ (2010: 271). On the other hand, *right-wing movements* are those that ‘focus specifically on race/ethnicity and/or that promote violence as a primary tactic or goal’ (Blee and Creasap 2010: 271). It is worth noting that in practice, there is often significant overlap between conservative and right-wing movements (Blee and Creasap 2010: 271). Race or ethnicity often forms a core element in the ‘traditional moral order’ conservatives seek to enshrine, whether openly acknowledged or not; the violence with which they operate often taking more systemic and

1. There are important exceptions to this pattern, including entries for fascism (Griffin 2005) and pagan-inspired ethnic nationalism (Shnirelman 2005) in the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, Laurel Kearns’ many works on climate skepticism among US evangelicals (e.g., Kearns 2007), Crews (2023), E. Berry (2022), Taylor and Johnston (2016a; 2016b) and Veldman (2019). These works have not been theoretically integrated into the field, however.

2. The greening of religions hypothesis is that ‘as religious people (or some subset of them) become more aware of negative environmental impacts from human behaviors, they are transforming their traditions in more environmentally friendly directions’ (Taylor 2011: 254).

less direct forms. Nonetheless, 'rightist' captures succinctly the range of manifestations that the political right can take, without necessarily implying in advance any specific motivations or underlying ideological emphases. Rather, it presents a broad base through which the connections between these manifestations can be interrogated, their core assumptions unearthed, differences delineated, and similarities brought to the fore. It is in this spirit that we set out to explore what we are calling *rightist religious ecologies*, those conservative or right-wing ideas (to use Blee and Creasap's typology) about the natural world that emerge from or merge with religious convictions. Sometimes, as Michael Barkun stresses in this issue, these views are environmental only in an implicit sense. But whether implicit or not, they are worth attending to both because doing so will broaden our theoretical viewpoint substantially, and because the instability and uncertainty caused by climate change is likely to further empower rightist movements. As these movements grow in power, so too will their religious ecologies come to matter.

What kinds of rightist religious ecologies are there? Imposing categories on belief systems is difficult since ideas are protean. Rather than attempting to do so, then, we will consider the spectrum of rightist ecologies more broadly, before turning to religion specifically. The first point worth making is that rightist attitudes toward the environment differ starkly from their attitudes toward climate change. On the political left, climate change is almost always framed as the *next* environmental crisis—after pollution, overpopulation, deforestation, biodiversity loss, etc.—a framing which renders climate change different in magnitude, but not in kind from other environmental issues. This ecological ontology does not hold on the right, where environmental themes and policies are sometimes embraced—as when the health of the land is figured as essential to the strength of its native people (Turner-Graham 2020)—while anthropogenic climate change is almost universally dismissed via conspiracy theories about cosmopolitanism, globalism, or a liberal world government (Forchtner 2019: 5). According to Forchtner's 2019 meta-analysis of the far right/climate change in Europe and the US, in fact, right-wing populist parties were 'overwhelmingly supportive of environmental policies, such as those dealing with biodiversity, plastic- and air- pollution' (3), while almost universally rejecting policies related to anthropogenic climate change. Thus, while it would initially appear that rightist religious ecologies could be categorized based on whether their members support or oppose environmental protection, because of these movements' contrasting attitudes toward certain types of pollution (opposing air pollution, for example, but unconcerned about CO2 emissions), such a binary classification

scheme ultimately fails. We suggest that a more useful axis of analysis concerns actors' attitudes toward liberal democracy.

With this axis in mind, we identify three orientations: one which generally accommodates itself to liberal democracy, one which rejects some of its principles, and a third which seeks to abolish it as a system of government. Starting on the side most in favor of liberal democracy, what we call *conservative anti-environmentalists* generally reject climate change and other environmental concerns for ideological (libertarian) reasons, but embrace democracy, or a limited version of it in which liberty is conceived of as economic liberty (Antonio and Brulle 2011). Second, those who could be called *ecopopulists* accept democratic principles but in the form of majority rule, without protections for minority rights. An example of ecopopulism would be the Finns Party in Finland, a populist radical right party that has consistently supported 'local toxin-free agriculture and keeping Finnish nature clean', while rejecting policies such as sewage regulation in remote rural areas, and 'green' gas taxes because they '[restrict] rural people's fundamental rights' (Hatakka and Välimäki 2020: 141). Third, *ecofascists*, referred to by Malm and the Zetkin Collective as fossil fascists, are anti-democratic, and use environmental concerns like overpopulation to justify goals such as militarizing the border or creating a white homeland (Malm et al. 2021; Taylor 2020; Hartman, this issue).<sup>3</sup> There is no hard and fast line between these three types (Taylor 2020; Forchtner 2020); rather, they should be understood as representing nodes on a continuum.

Religion can be found across this continuum. As for which religions, in the US, Christianity is dominant, making it dominant among rightist religious ecologies as well. Indeed, because the contemporary political right is more religious than the political left, and more orthodox in its religious leanings (see Veldman, this issue), it has become a petri dish for novel combinations of Christian orthodoxy and libertarian anti-environmentalism (Pogue 2022; Kearns 2007). The other major type of religiosity associated with the political right is paganism. In the past it has been more typical to associate paganism with the political left (Pike 2004), but rightist forms are now surging. These 'blood and soil Pagans' as Matthew Strmiska calls them, 'tend to ... romanticize the "land of the ancestors" as a single, ethnically pure entity, whose traditions they wish to protect from other cultural and religious influences and their carriers' (2018: 30). The Odinist Fellowship, for example, believed 'Norse paganism was the only way to stop the

3. Campion defines ecofascism as 'a reactionary and revolutionary ideology that champions the regeneration of an imagined community through a return to a romanticised ethnopluralist vision of the natural order' (2023: 927).

cultural decay of Aryans' because it 'reunited Aryans with their natural folk soul' (Campion 2023: 936; see also Gardell 2003). Paganism is a minority position, to be sure, but one that deserves attention due to its growing influence. Also worth noting is that there are significant tensions between Christians and pagans on the right; some racist pagans disavow Christianity because they believe its teachings of universal brotherhood are ideologically incompatible with white supremacy, for example (D. Berry 2022; Crockford this issue). Hence, despite the impression one gets from reading the literature on Christian nationalism (e.g., Whitehead and Perry 2020), religion can be divisive on the right.

Historically speaking, conservative anti-environmentalism has been far more prominent in the US—a legacy, perhaps, of the now-faltering consensus in favor of liberal democracy. But as the articles in this special issue show, ecopopulist and ecofascist forms are increasingly mixing with and influencing the mainstream.

Opening our special issue, dos Santos and Kearns compare the frames used by two religious anti-environmental organizations, one based in the US, and the other in Brazil, finding that their environmental views are more influenced by the distinct political and economic coalitions that support them than by the religious traditions with which they are associated. The US-based Cornwall Alliance is primarily staffed by and oriented toward evangelical Protestants, while the Brazilian organization Instituto Plínio Corrêa de Oliveira (IPCO) is Catholic. Nevertheless, the two organizations use similar framings, portraying the environmental agenda as a 'Trojan horse' for more extreme ideologies (communism, socialism, paganism, etc.) that their supporters can be expected to abhor. Such overheated critiques function to warn moderates away from creation care advocacy, they argue, by portraying any deviation from the highly individualistic, neoliberal forms of environmentalism protection they promote as religiously suspect. While advancing similar arguments, the organizations are influenced by distinct political and economic coalitions. Dos Santos and Kearns find that references to agriculture and livestock in one of IPCO's signature publications outnumbered references to fossil fuels by a ratio of ten to one, demonstrating its alliance with the agribusiness industry. The Cornwall Alliance, for its part, focused little on agricultural concerns in its publications, emphasizing the benefits of fossil fuels. With their rejection of climate change and other environmental concerns, and embrace of economic liberty, both groups illustrate well the conservative anti-environmentalist end of the rightist religious ecological spectrum.

Examining the same end of the spectrum, Veldman analyzes the broadcasts of conservative firebrand Rush Limbaugh, arguing that he mustered opposition to climate action by connecting it to concerns over the decline of traditional Christianity. More broadly, she sees Limbaugh as the vanguard of a broader shift toward religious leadership on the right being exerted outside of traditional venues like church and parachurch organizations. Limbaugh dominated the airwaves, and yet his religious teachings have received little attention as such because they do not conform to expectations about what religious teachings sound like. By adapting Robert Bellah's concept of civil religion, she demonstrates that generic, nation-centered religiosity has not disappeared as the US has secularized, but rather shifted to the political right, where it now serves to unite the religious from different traditions—primarily Catholics and evangelical Protestants—under a common sense of threat. Taken together, dos Santos and Kearns and Veldman begin to indicate the extent to which the greening of religions has been actively, creatively undermined by orthodox Christians and their neoliberal allies on the right. Such efforts should not be discounted as possible reasons the greening of religions failed to fully materialize (Taylor et al. 2016: 348). 'Greening' is not inevitable, like the appearance of foliage in spring, but is, rather, *contested*. Including rightist religious ecologies is not simply a matter of filling in gaps, then, but of embracing a dynamic, empirically informed understanding of religion.

Moving toward the ecopopulist/ecofascist realm, Hartman argues that what underlies the various ecological discourses of factions on the American right is support for an ideology of whiteness. As he shows, anti-immigrant views in particular—including the claim that immigrants threaten to despoil the white homeland—are fast becoming a unifying position across the right. Meanwhile, QAnon's apocalyptic conspiracies about climate change have also helped mainstream formerly fringe views. Hartman rightly notes that to the extent that scholars interested in the religion-nature nexus have considered the right, they have focused almost exclusively on the climate denialism of white evangelicals. This has led them to miss the complexity of religious environmental engagement on the contemporary right.

The remaining two articles, by Barkun and Crockford, explore variants of rightist religious ecology that are at best ambiguously supportive of democracy. Crockford explores the environmental leanings of January 6 insurrectionist Jake Angeli, also known as the QAnon Shaman. Using Angeli as her prototype, she argues that the conspiratorial orientation of New Age religion has left it vulnerable to the importation of ecofascist ideas. Like Hartman, she illustrates how left-wing ideas can change their political valence over time. Just as environmentalism has



come to be embraced by some white nationalists, new age spirituality (associated in the 1960s and 1970s with the left-wing peace movement) has been enlisted to support the January 6 insurrection and opposition to the COVID-19 vaccination. The collapse of distance between fringe and mainstream that Hartman observed is equally evident in her exploration of contemporary new age spirituality. Perhaps presciently, her article also explores the tensions between Christians and pagans that spilled into public view during the insurrection.

In the final paper, Barkun finds that right-wing extremists hold environmentalism in contempt but nevertheless exhibit a kind of ‘implicit environmentalism’ in their idealization of the countryside and corresponding disgust for multicultural cities. Ironically, nostalgia for a pre-industrial past and support for a self-sufficient, agrarian future is something they share with back-to-the-land environmentalists of the left. These implicit environmental ideas persist across religious lines, he finds, from Christian Identity believers to Odinists, often merging with apocalyptic anticipation of a coming societal transformation.

The papers in this issue by no means exhaust the topic of rightist religious ecologies. They are just a beginning. But they do suggest that broadening our focus beyond religions associated with the political left (an association that is sometimes only implicit) may encourage us to revisit some of our basic assumptions about the relationships between religion, nature, and culture. As the articles in this special issue make clear, liberal religiosity has no intrinsic monopoly on environmental ideas.

On May 17, 2023, while this introduction was being drafted, the World Meteorological Organization announced that in the next five years global temperatures were ‘likely to surge to record levels’. The likelihood that ‘at least one of the next five years, and the five-year period as a whole, will be the warmest on record’ was placed at 98 percent (WMO 2023). This special issue represents a first—and on balance, belated—attempt to analyze what happens to religion, the environment, and politics when we turn up the heat.

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