
Book Review

Radhika Borde, Alison A. Ormsby, Stephen M. Awoyemi, and Andrew G. Gosler (eds.), *Religion and Nature Conservation: Global Case Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2023), 350 pp., \$48.99 (pbk), ISBN: 9781032158990.

This is an illuminating collection of case studies that illustrate how religious and tribal traditions can be used effectively as tools of conservation of the local ecology and natural resources. The case studies come from a wide swathe of regions in the Global South, primarily in developing countries, written by experts in fields as disparate as theology, conservation, geography, and diplomacy. Case studies taken from the religious contexts of African traditional religions, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Indigenous faiths, Islam, Judaism, Shintoism, Zoroastrianism, and synergistic religiosities illustrate how faith serves as a major driving factor in the conservation efforts of people groups from around the world.

Although it does not devote space to a critique of Western capitalism, this book describes these faith-based efforts and projects as valuing nature as a resource to be treasured, nurtured, and conserved as contrasting with other world views that may view natural resources merely as expendable targets for exploitation. The book's editors do an admirable job of reflexivity in acknowledging and meeting the challenges of choosing authentic, expert voices that are representative of the people groups whose conservation efforts and programs they describe in a post-colonial context.

The book establishes the context for demonstrating the value of faith-based Indigenous conservation efforts by citing a report of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, an independent, intergovernmental body founded by the United Nations Environment Programme, that shows that the rate of environmental degradation on Indigenous lands is lower than on other lands (p. 5). The editors subscribe to a 'Rights-Based Approach' to conservation, a normative conceptual framework linked to the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights that states that all human beings have equal and inalienable rights as the foundation of freedom, justice, and peace in the world (p. 5). Within this framework, UN member states bear the responsibility to protect these rights. Having established the underlying conceptual framework of international consensus of human rights and demonstrated the general efficacy of Indigenous conservation efforts globally, the authors describe individual projects in each chapter.

Conservation efforts described are based in Asia, the Indian subcontinent, Latin America, and other locations, and include conservation projects focused on snow leopards, sacred groves, tree festivals, marine conservation, and interspecies rituals. The authors bring a special authority in telling their narratives, as most, if not all, are both experts in their respective fields and also personally come from each of the Indigenous groups that have created the projects, participate in the rituals,

or in other ways or words do the actual work of faith and conservation the authors describe.

This collection of case studies creates value in two major ways. First, it provides a record, rich in detail and heavy on cultural nuance, of the very specific ways in which Indigenous religious practitioners interact with their environments. These descriptions alone are valuable as anthropological snapshots into traditional practices of under-studied cultures and as vehicles to give voice to peoples who otherwise might be categorized as subaltern. Second, and closer to the intent of the book, communicating each of the specific, different accounts of faith-based conservation efforts of Indigenous people from around the world provides qualitative detail and description that fleshes out the quantitative bones of the editors' argument: that statistically, land controlled by Indigenous people shows lower rates of environmental degradation.

My biggest criticism—and it is a serious one—is that many of the authors of this book rely on extremely dated sources. In many cases the sources the books' authors cite are decades old. One article cites a source from 1967 (p. 82), and this weakness is found replete throughout the book in many chapters. Other examples of extremely dated sources include, but are not limited to, instances of references dating from: 1994, 1995, 1996, 2001 (p. 39); 1973, 1982, 1975, 1984 (p. 82–83); 1992, 1994 (p. 257). Is this an indication that there simply is no more recent primary source material in this field? Or are some authors in this book relying on outdated sources and neglecting to read more current research? This should be clarified.

Despite this shortcoming, the collection does a decent job of using case studies to illustrate the value that faith-based Indigenous practices can bring to conservation. It also provides excellent detail on the various projects and demonstrates admirable conscientiousness in elevating authentic voices that represent people groups that otherwise go unheard.

References

- IPBES. 2019. *Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services*. IPBES Secretariat. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.3831673>

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