
Book Review

Forrest Clingerman and Mark H. Dixon (eds.), *Placing Nature on the Borders of Religion, Philosophy and Ethics* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011), 224 pp., \$119.95 (hbk), ISBN: 978-1-4094-2044-6.

Issues related to place and space are receiving increasing scrutiny in reflections about environmentalism, and it seems the metaphor of spatiality is able to trigger creative thinking. The current collection of essays, originating from a conference convened by theologian Forrest Clingerman and philosopher Mark H. Dixon at Ohio Northern University in 2009, offers further fuel to such conversations. It gathers fifteen authors, most from the USA and some from Iceland, Finland, the Netherlands, and Nigeria, in the disciplines of philosophy, theology, religious studies, environmental studies and literature, focusing on the central question of how place influences us and how we interpret place in the Anthropocene. While the book's first section examines the discussion of ecological restoration, its second section explores hermeneutics with regard to the interrelation of human beings and place, and also between humans and animals, both domesticated and wild.

A central intention of the volume is to investigate how humans imbue their habitats with meaning, and how this (to use Roy R. Rappaport's [1999] term) fabrication of meaning can be traced and valued with the hermeneutic method. Whereas phenomenology, aesthetics, and empirical science appear in the range of approaches in the different chapters, it is really hermeneutics, based on Ricoeur's influential framework, and the interpretation of nature and meanings ascribed to it that comprise the volume's main thrust. Although the editors claim to present a dialogue between the disciplines and to investigate place as a 'convergence point' for it, the volume instead offers appetizers rather than a complete dinner. This is no major objection as the discourse on religion, place, and environment still lacks a consistent agenda and form, which may be regarded as a catalyst for creativity rather than a hindrance. The reader, therefore, is free to pick among the dishes of the work's inviting table.

In the first chapter, Páll Skúlason strikes the tone by departing from his experiences, explorations, and inquiries regarding the Icelandic volcano Askja. Inspired by Rudolf Otto's classical thinking about 'the Holy', the author embeds the following chapters in a deep and spiritual connection that the mountain in particular, and place in general, has with us as 'earthlings'. A clear objective for the first section's chapters on restoration is that restoring environmental damage must be undertaken in such a way that the meaning and value ascribed to the environment is restored along with its physical integrity. One example is Todd LeVasseur's reminder about the significance of shame in this process, in which rituals may be needed to heal ourselves; we have been damaged along with our environments. James Danowski widens the field to include the built environment by meritoriously featuring the history of destruction and reconstruction of the 'Frauenkirche' in Dresden, East Germany, a key cultural and Protestant church building. The author compares this to the Taliban's brutal damage and destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan, and the immediate impulse

to reconstruct them. Comparisons between these cases and between the natural and the built environment thus develop a laudable potential for further reflections about the 'resurrecting Spirit'.

In the second section Martin Drenthen's and David Utsler's chapters are concerned with what Forrest Clingerman rightly calls 'the hermeneutical dilemma' of nature. Are meaning and value emerging from places and environments or are these endowed with meaning? Or should we imagine and apply some kind of an 'environmental hermeneutical circle'? Drenthen advocates approaching texts in order to change our understandings of ourselves and the world so that both the 'who' and 'how' of interpretation is affected by reading. Utsler follows Ricoeur and coins the term 'environmental identity', which is formed through narratives about the self and its engagement with particular places. For Drenthen, using a semiotic method alone is insufficient as it reduces the meaning and value in reading landscapes. Both chapters successfully advance the argument that hermeneutical theory and method offer a bountiful resource that strives to include the human, the cultural, and the ethical, not only for the environmental humanities but for environmental science. Even if I personally would prefer a synthesis of hermeneutics and cultural/environmental studies in the tradition of Clifford Geertz, for example, rather than a focus on (language-limited) Ricoeur, this thoughtfully executed volume offers rich inspiration and formidable arguments for the capacity of hermeneutical work to reflect the meaning and value of nature.

Reference

Rappaport, Roy A. 1999. *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

Sigurd Bergmann
Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies
Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Trondheim
sigurd.bergmann@ntnu.no