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Book Review

Emma Tomalin, *Biodivinity and Biodiversity: The Limits to Religious Environmentalism* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2009), 230 pp., $99.95 (hardback), ISBN: 978-0-7546-5588-6.

Emma Tomalin's recent book artfully balances its position in response to the question: Can religion play an affirmative role in enabling environmental sustainability in poor, developing socio-political contexts (such as India, one of the primary case studies used in the volume), or is such religiously inspired environmental activism, as ideology and practice, confined to serving the interests and well-being of an affluent class of citizens? In other words, does religious environmentalism—particularly the activism that is interested in ecological protection by affirming the fundamental organic relationship between human beings and nature—have restricted relevance, predominantly important in a post-materialist and largely Western context?

To answer this question, Tomalin lays out a theoretical framework that traces the origins of the notion of nature as *intrinsically valuable* to the European Romantic movement and further argues that it is a *particular* understanding and interpretation of religion, rather than religion itself, that serves religious environmentalism. Following this highly detailed and nuanced review, Tomalin draws upon substantive case studies from Britain and India to explore the main question posited in the volume, which illustrates the values and methods of Romantic religious environmentalism (the Environment Direct Action in Britain and the Rainbow Family in India), as well as one instance of a locally devised religiously inspired environmentalism from India, the Vrindavan Conservation Project. The latter case is motivated by an interest in ecological restoration and protection for pragmatic, human-serving ends, and does not place the celebration of human–nature relationships at the centre of the project. The volume concludes that the question it addresses defies a clear answer—indeed, by using religion as an anthropological category of analysis in understanding contemporary environmentalism, any study of and conclusion to this issue must necessarily be informed by its local colour and context.

Biodivinity and Biodiversity balances with finesse and clarity the frequently conflicting politico-environmentalist agendas of the materialists or those individuals who tend to place a greater value on economic growth and physical security, and the post-materialists who typically prioritize environmental protection and social justice, and the developed and the developing world, as most evident in current global debates on global warming. The volume is clearly well-situated within the discipline of religion and ecology; however, the book is also a valuable contribution to the growing body of literature on the interface between religion and development, particularly sustainable development. The concern about the limitations and even the dangers of coopting post-materialist Romantic ideals of religious environmentalism into developing countries like India are valid. American sociologist Ronald Inglehart formed his post-materialist theory on the precept that after a sustained period of affluence and

materialism, people may become 'post-materialists' and place a higher value on life-sustaining values such as civic life, democracy, nature, and preservation and respect for public wealth. However, post-materialism and ecological concern, he warns, typically depend on a prior 'super-materialism' or hyper-consumption. Innumerable studies in India since the 1990s have noted with alarm the tendency of the burgeoning Indian middle class toward unrestrained consumption. From this viewpoint, preserving and promoting Romantic ideals of religious environmentalism in growing middle class societies like India might actually come in the way of sustainable environmental development and action.

One of the most valuable contributions of this book is its impartial and exhaustive review in Chapters 2, 3, and 4 of environmentalism in general and religious environmentalism in particular, demonstrating that environmentalism is as much a response to social and cultural conditions as it is a call for ecological change. By considering the efficacy of religion and Hinduism particularly as a 'cross-cultural tool', the book offers a clearing for a renaissance of religion, this time based on contemporary ecological priorities. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Hinduism underwent a massive cultural renaissance in response to British colonialism, when the religion was closely scrutinised and updated, preserving aspects of literary and cultural pride, and discarding backward superstitious practices such as child marriage and *sati* (widow-burning). Enlightenment ideals of secularism, equality, and democracy were enormously influential on Hindu reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Rabindranath Tagore. In the twenty-first century, Hinduism may yet be in need of revival and refreshing, this time based on ecological priorities. Tomalin's clarification of the notion of pragmatic environmental action based on the realistic survival needs of the majority of people in India is a substantial step in indicating the ways in which such an ecological renaissance of Hinduism may occur.

Tomalin further makes a very critical contribution to the understanding of the complexities of religious environmentalism in India by demonstrating how Hindu religious environmentalism may be, even unwittingly, drafted by extremist Hindu groups to promote sectarian and chauvinistic agendas. Her review of the Hindu Right emphasises that the fundamental concern for environmental sustainability may be that religious messages are often selectively manipulated and/or institutionalised.

Tomalin seems to view the notion of religious environmentalism in an instrumentalist manner, as one way of enabling ecological activism. In doing so, it creates the space for raising some points for further review. For instance, it may be useful to examine a diametrically opposite perspective used by several faith organisations: *using environmental sustainability as a way of enabling religion*. For some home-grown religious and neo-religious movements in India, such as the Art of Living foundation in Bangalore or the Sathya Sai Baba Ashram in Puttaparthi, a high degree of participation in social service and environmental protection forms an integral part of their religious and spiritual practice. Here, the priority is not so much ecological care *per se*, but spiritual self-development, where responsibility for nature is an important part of such self-actualisation. Ecological care is thus not an end and valuable in itself; rather, it is a means to an end.

On the whole, *Biodivinity and Biodiversity* is groundbreaking in the ways it establishes critical inquiry into the nature of interconnections between the natural ecology and religio-cultural belief systems, by analysing well-chosen case studies on Romantic and pragmatic religious environmentalism from two diverse cultural contexts. Most

of all, it establishes a solid ground for similar inquiry into the agendas of other religious environmentalisms and for further work on Hindu environmentalism. Tomalin's book carries the authority and clarity that comes from fine scholarship, and has earned a space on the bookshelf of scholars from a range of disciplines, including predominantly secular areas of inquiry such as Development and Sustainability Studies.

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