

Review

Climate Politics and the Power of Religion. Edited by Evan Berry. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2022. 265 pages. \$80.00 (Hardback)

Three years ago, I explained the basic elements of my research on religion and climate change to an American nonacademic friend of mine. He responded by asking, “Is religion really that relevant anymore? I don’t know anyone who still goes to church.” This comment typifies the view of so many scholars throughout the last decades, if not the last several hundred years—what Claire Dwyer calls the “modernist academic gaze” which asserts that religion is peripheral at best to the important questions of the day (“Why does Religion Matter for Cultural Geographers?”, *Social & Cultural Geography*, no. 6, 2016). Yet, as academics across a wide swath of fields are only beginning to see, this secularist ontology has blinded us to religion’s pervasive and critical influence. Gaps as large as chasms riddle our understanding of human environmental behavior; a researcher seeking data on environmental movements may not see that a Hindu temple is engaging in similar environmental work as a nearby NGO because the temple couches its work in theological instead of secular terminology.

In response to these gaps, Evan Berry, an Assistant Professor of Environmental Humanities at Arizona State University, has edited this book elucidating the multidirectional and complex connections between religion, politics, and the climate crisis. By emphasizing case studies in the Global South, it gives voice to communities which are chronically understudied, but which play a vital role in religious influence in the public sphere.

This book is divided into three overarching segments, each loosely bound by a different exploration of this key relationship. The first three chapters explore religious influence and ideas in national environmental rhetoric. Chapter 1 shows how in the Philippines, Duterte’s morally bankrupt drug war left the normally politically powerful Catholic leaders without energy to meaningfully capitalize on the Pope’s pro-climate 2015 Encyclical, *Laudato Si’*. Similar forces are seen at play in Chapter 3 that discusses how Modi’s brutal calculus in pursuing economic gain in India led him to use traditional Hindu nature rhetoric to defend environmentally friendly practices abroad while simultaneously actively undermining them at home.

Chapter 2, on Trinidad, does not fit as neatly into this narrative of policy building through religious influence, yet, it is among the most powerful chapters in the book. More clearly than almost any case study I have read, it illustrates how people can use theological reasoning to explain and inform beliefs on the climate. It juxtaposes two ways people from Trinidad conceptualize the dynamic between God and their island nation. The stewardship narrative creates a subject-object relationship between humankind and nature, where nature is perceived as a means to an end. The other narrative treats land as a form of God. Extracted oil is God bleeding. Holes drilled through mountains are piercings in God’s own body. Human-nature relationships are of a subject-subject construction, and life is a

dynamic exchange between two forms of sentients. Both perceptions emerge from the same overarching religious family—Christianity—and yet they have radically different environmental outcomes.

Section 2 dives into theory, building the superstructure in which the other chapters are situated. As such, the section would likely make the most sense at the beginning rather than middle of the book. Chapter 4 makes a particularly articulate case for how secular ontologies are both weird and western, and yet are built into the very fabric of the modern system of nation-states. These secular ontologies create a rigid hierarchy where the secular is superior to religion, and man superior to nature. The hierarchy exists, author Erin Wilson reasons, to protect the subjects in a nation-state from elements labeled as “dangerous”—in this case, religion and nature. This fear-based hierarchy blinds us to the powerful ways religion and nature pervade human life. In our blindness, we often fail to find nonhierarchical and nonfear-based solutions to the current crisis.

The final section’s four chapters are so loosely joined by a common theme that the most that can be said about their similarities is encapsulated in the pointedly vague section title, “religion and the complexity of public environmental discourse.” We return to India in Chapter 6, this time to an overview of several court cases about India’s most sacred rivers, the Ganga and Yamuna. The authors make a compelling case that the “cross-cutting contradictions” between groups with different levels of power in society can re-entrench power structures rather than undercut them. This chapter also explores a question of increasing importance to those interested in climate and law—whether a river can be considered a legal person, sentient like us, and what that may mean for environmental policy.

Chapter 7 expands on the question of intersentient obligation through an analysis of the poor Mestizo people of Peru. These people, being neither entirely indigenous nor nonindigenous as popularly defined, have a strong relationship with sentient mountains or “Apus.” The relationship is reciprocal, and like in Trinidad, is seen as one where either element can willfully harm the other. Author Ana Mariella Bacigalupo argues that the idea of giving legal personhood to the land can help move beliefs in sentient landscapes from the cultural periphery to its center. In so doing, disenfranchised communities that may otherwise be viewed as merely superstitious can develop a legally sanctioned voice within national and international systems.

The final two chapters explore a common theme—resilience versus vulnerability. Chapter 8 fleshes out the idea of a “bridge concept,” a term that is used in various different fields and has similar, though not necessarily identical, meanings. Here, author Andrew Thompson argues that vulnerability should be seen as a bridge concept. Though technically defined by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), vulnerability is also a term that has been much explored in feminist Christian theology. The author hopes that the power these theologians have found in vulnerability, through their reading of Christ’s total sacrifice, could be meaningfully interpreted in the practice of building mental, emotional, and community-based resilience among the most climate vulnerable. Though Chapter 9 builds on these same themes, it takes a uniquely political and U.S.-centric approach. In it, author Roger-Mark De Souza argues that through city-to-city

partnerships, religious organizations and people can help increase the resilience of their compatriots around the globe.

In the conclusion, author Ken Conca urges researchers studying this intersection of religion and the environment to remain aware of the limitations in the work already constructed, and therefore to engage with previous research with a critical eye. As he explains, “80 percent of people practice a religion, and half of all schools are religiously affiliated. It should be little surprise, then, that people seek answers in religious thought and practice” (p. 265).

Berry’s book does an excellent job of illustrating just how critical religious thought is to public life throughout the world, especially in many of the understudied countries in the Global South. From India to Trinidad, we find examples of how religious leaders, followers, and thinkers conceptualize the right relationships with the earth, law, and each other. In some places, the amoral, inanimate mountains of secular thought become living beings. Other times, the earth remains an object, a gift from God, given for our gain alone. This book does not seek to valorize religion as a source of unmitigated good, but rather to place it back in its true position—one integral to the formation of our most intimate ontologies. If we hope to find the nuanced, place-oriented solutions necessary to resolve our current climate crisis, we cannot afford to ignore the source of the deepest beliefs of the majority of humankind. Berry’s book succeeds in adding a little more knowledge toward filling the chasms of understanding resulting from secularist ontologies, and thereby allows us to turn toward a less mechanistic, more sacralizing environmental future.

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