

Book Review

Grim, John and Mary Evelyn Tucker. *Ecology and Religion*.
Washington, DC: Island, 2014.

In *Ecology and Religion*, John Grim and Mary Evelyn Tucker provide an exemplary overview of religion and ecology. They have been active participants in the emerging field of religion and ecology in recent decades, particularly through their work as the co-directors and founders of the Forum on Religion and Ecology at Yale — the largest international and interreligious organization dedicated to exploring the religious dimensions of contemporary environmental issues. Along with the field of religion and ecology, this book is situated in relation to many other fields of environmentally oriented inquiry, including scientific ecology, environmental policy, environmental ethics, eco-philosophy, and the environmental humanities. The book is well suited for classroom use, complete with discussion questions for each chapter, a glossary of important terms, notes with many suggestions for further reading, and multiple appendices, including recommended online resources related to religion and ecology. However, *Ecology and Religion* is not only relevant in academic contexts. It is also relevant for activists, advocates, and any readers who are generally interested in developing more comprehensive and inclusive response to environmental issues. In other words, this book functions as a guide to religion and ecology both “as an academic field and as an engaged force” (p. 10).

Grim and Tucker address multiple religious perspectives on ecology (i.e., “*religious ecologies*”), including perspectives from Abrahamic traditions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—as well as Asian traditions (Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism) and indigenous traditions (p. 2). The authors do not presuppose that the reader has any particular religious background or any familiarity with religious studies, yet nonetheless they raise points significant to advanced scholars of religion and religious leaders. Furthermore, they do not espouse any particular religious doctrine, which is not to say that they propose atheism instead of theism, nor is it to say that they advocate agnosticism or some such position that considers it impossible to know whether any religion is true. Rather than promoting any one position, Grim and Tucker facilitate dialogue across religious differences, articulating common ground for effective communication between different religious traditions and also between religious perspectives and the contemporary secular perspectives of science, policy, and ethics. Such communication is not easy, as it requires critical reflection on the beneficial as well as the harmful contributions that religions have made or can make towards understanding and responding to the natural world. Accordingly, following the orientation to the field and force of religion and ecology in the introduction, the first chapter focuses on acknowledging “the problems and the promise” of that field and force (p. 18).

Every religious tradition has a mixture of beneficial and harmful implications for its relationship to ecological phenomena. Every tradition has “both conservative and progressive dimensions” and “can be both limiting and liberating,” sometimes neglecting earthly matters in favor of more “otherworldly” pursuits and sometimes taking a more “this-worldly” approach and affirming the entanglement of human existence in relationships with the rest of the Earth community (p. 14). Religions have propagated oppression, violence, and war throughout history, yet they have also been active participants in social movements for peace, equality, and justice. Similarly, religious ecologies have propagated exploitative and destructive attitudes toward nature, yet they also contain myths, rituals, and doctrines that call for respect and reverence towards life and, indeed, the whole universe. In other words, religious ecologies have promoted anthropocentric attitudes for which the natural environment is subordinate to human interests, yet they have also promoted “anthropocosmic” sensibilities in which humans and the natural world are intimately intertwined (pp. 23, 43). That is, every tradition has its anthropocentric problems and anthropocosmic promise. Moreover, the problems and promise of religions are relevant in contemporary society. Religions are not just superstitions from ancient and medieval times, predating the spread of modern science and secular politics around the globe. Scientific rationality and secularization have not eradicated religions; on the contrary, they have opened opportunities for greater freedom and diversity of religious expression (including non-institutional religious expressions, i.e., *spiritual-but-not-religious*), and they have also opened a space for reactionary fundamentalist expressions of religion. For better and for worse, religions are a persistent part of society; thus it is imperative to account for their problems and their promise, while hopefully attempting to minimize the former and realize the latter.

To better understand the problems and promise of religion and ecology, Grim and Tucker elaborate on different facets of religious ecology, including the ways in which religions transmit symbols, stories, and practices that situate humans, grounding them in relationships with one another and with their place in the universe. Accordingly, religious ecologies cannot be separated from “*religious cosmologies*,” through which “humans narrate and experience the larger matrix of mystery in which life arises, unfolds, and flourishes” (p. 35). Along with their function of grounding human-beings, religious ecologies and religious cosmologies orient them toward some encompassing sacred or “numinous” reality, which is sometimes imagined as a transcendent Creator, as a creative force immanent in nature, or as some combination thereof (as is the case in panentheism, in which God is in all things (immanence) and all things are in God (transcendence) (p. 39)). In orienting and grounding human-beings, religious ecologies/cosmologies also nurture them with rituals and stories that provide guidelines for accessing the life-sustaining energies of food, water, and community. Religious ecologies

facilitate transformation, changing lives and shifting identities from isolated individuals to interconnected participants in the dynamics of the universe.

The science of ecology emerged against the background of the religious ecologies of Western philosophy and religion. Grim and Tucker illustrate how those religious ecologies were shaped by two main sources: the concept of nature as developed by Ancient Greek thinkers like Pythagoras and Aristotle and the concept of creation that emerged from the Abrahamic religions. Greek philosophy and Abrahamic religions both entailed a suppression of “animism”—the predominant form of the indigenous religious ecologies of the ancient Mediterranean, which perceived the world as a community of humans and nonhuman persons and lacked a concept of a single “nature” or “creation” or a single God or logic behind nature/creation (p 45). Over time, the complete transcendence of the biblical God and the rationality of science and mathematics contribute to a sense of nature as a collection of purposeless objects. That idea of nature as valueless is a dominant theme in modernity, although it has never been without opposition: notably in the romantic and transcendentalist movements of the nineteenth century, which aimed to recover a more intimate and revelatory relationship to the natural world, thereby opening up possibilities for restoring a sense of subjectivity and intrinsic value in nonhumans (p. 54). Along with these resistance movements, the twentieth century saw further resistance to the modernist devaluation of nature from process philosophy (e.g., Alfred North Whitehead; Henri Bergson), phenomenology (Maurice Merleau-Ponty; David Abram), and deep ecology (Arne Naess).

Grim and Tucker show how the history of ecological science is characterized by a tension between the reductionistic view of nature as a totality of mere objects and the more holistic view of nature as intertwining objective and subjective facets. Scientific ecologies and religious ecologies are “dynamic, contested, and still developing,” exhibiting a tension between anthropocentric perspectives that find only instrumental value in the environment, and ecocentric or anthropocosmic perspectives that recognize intrinsic value in nature and call for the creation of “ecological cultures” that work toward the “conservation and preservation of ecosystems and species” (p. 84). The field of religion and ecology emerged in the context of efforts to create such ecological cultures. In their account of the emergence of the field of religion and ecology, Grim and Tucker highlight many important precursors to the field, including eco-theologians, philosophers, religious leaders, feminists, and more, including the cultural historian and Earth scholar Thomas Berry, who played a pivotal role in calling for dialogue between scientific and religious perspectives on ecology (p. 89). They also highlight three main methods used in the field of religion and ecology: 1) retrieval, which entails a recovery of religious stories, symbols, and rituals that connect humans to their ecological and cosmic contexts; 2) reevaluation, which implies a reassessment of the problems and promise of

the stories, symbols, and rituals recovered in the retrieval process; and 3) reconstruction, whereby aspects of religious traditions that were not originally ecologically oriented can be reinterpreted and adapted to address contemporary environmental issues (p. 86).

While the whole book is full of brief examples from indigenous, Western, and Eastern religious traditions, Grim and Tucker explore a few of these traditions in greater detail, with Christianity, Confucianism, and Hinduism each receiving the treatment of full chapters, along with a chapter on the indigenous lifeway of Salish/Okanagan peoples. For instance, Grim and Tucker describe the ways in which contemporary Salish people are retrieving, reevaluating, and reconstructing the Winter Dance—a ceremony that connects the participants to the nourishment provided by the spiritual forces of the land, facilitating the remembrance of reciprocal relations between humans and the food given to them by the nonhuman inhabitants with whom they share their place (pp. 126-139). The Winter Dance is constantly changing and adapting as the Salish reconstruct ways of affirming the nourishing reciprocity of human-Earth relations amidst contemporary challenges such as postcolonial cultural subversion, sovereignty and land right disputes, encroaching extractive industries, and an overall depletion of resources.

Similar to the chapter on indigenous traditions, the chapters on Christianity, Confucianism, and Hinduism highlight specific parts of those traditions, outlining their retrieval, reevaluation, and reconstruction. Regarding Christianity, Grim and Tucker focus on Orthodox Christianity, specifically the efforts of the “Green Patriarch” Bartholomew, who has done much to facilitate a dialogue between science and religion, advocate for spiritual and ethical responses to ecological destruction as a form of sin, affirm the presence of the extraordinary in the ordinary and the close relationship between the Creator and Creation, and emphasize the cosmic significance of the body of Christ (i.e., “the Eucharist as cosmic liturgy”) (p. 103). Regarding Confucianism, Grim and Tucker provide a brief yet thorough overview of Confucianism and consider its resurgence in the “New Confucianism” of China after the death of Mao Zedong (p. 115). In their view, Confucianism is a profoundly anthropocosmic tradition, oriented toward the cultivation of the self in harmonious moral and spiritual relationships with society and with the “material force” (*qi*) composing the whole universe. Accordingly, the tradition of Confucianism is contributing much to the current effort of the Chinese government to create an “ecological culture” (p. 111). Regarding Hinduism, Grim and Tucker consider the role of devotion (*bhakti*) in Hindu ecologies, particularly in view of Hindu perspectives on the Yamuna River, which is considered to be a goddess and lover of Krishna, a divine incarnation of Vishnu (140-142). Although the Yamuna is deified and considered an object of religious devotion along with Krishna, the Yamuna is severely polluted. Rapid industrialization has ravaged the river as the focus on religious devotion has given way to a focus on development and engineering, and

even when religious devotion remains, some devotees of the river consider any pollution in the physical river to be insignificant compared to the spiritual purity of the goddess (p. 152).

The situation with the Yamuna is indicative of the need for more dialogue between scientific and religious ecologies. The sciences are necessary, but they do not sufficiently address of religion in shaping human-Earth relations. Religious ecologies are a necessary part of a comprehensive and effective response to the pollution of the Yamuna or to any environmental problem, yet they too are insufficient, as they lack the kind of empirical information that scientific ecologies provide about environmental conditions. Furthermore, cooperation between religions is also necessary, as the environmental challenges facing a globalized and multicultural world call for global and multicultural coordination. Accordingly, Grim and Tucker call for interreligious dialogue to contribute to a global ethics oriented toward peace, justice, and sustainability. They consider the Earth Charter to be an exemplary articulation of such a multicultural and global vision, (pp. 156-161). They note the role of religious values in the Earth Charter as well as the adoption of the Earth Charter at the 1999 meeting of the Parliament of World Religions, which has been a significant source of global interreligious dialogue since its first meeting in 1893.

Ecology and Religion is an educational and inspiring call for the creation of a planetary civilization grounded in shared values of mutually enhancing relationships between humans and the Earth community. Among the numerous other books that present visions of a planetary civilization, this book stands out due to its breadth and depth of knowledge, spanning multiple religious, philosophical, and scientific perspectives from ancient to contemporary historical periods. It also stands out in its clear, accessible, and unpretentious style, in contrast to much ecologically oriented writing, which tends to suffer from excessive academic jargon and/or postmodern irony. Most importantly, this book stands out for its thorough account of religious ecologies—"a critical but sometimes missing element in environmental discourse" (p. 170). In short, this is the definitive work on the field and force of religion and ecology. It would be of significant benefit to anyone personally or professionally interested in ecology, environmental humanities, or religion, and to anyone who wants to live in a more peaceful, just, and sustainable world.

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