

Editorial

Introduction to “Religious Environmental Activism in Asia: Case Studies in Spiritual Ecology”

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Environmental issues and problems are serious; some are getting worse, and occasionally new ones are still being discovered (Flannery 2010; Meyers and Kent 2005; Ripple et al. 2017). A multitude of diverse secular approaches to environmental concerns from local to global levels have certainly made important progress and are vitally indispensable, such as in the environmental sciences, technology, and conservation, as well as in the environmental agencies, laws, and regulations of governments and through the activities of nongovernmental organizations (Hawken 2007; Shabecoff 1993, 2000; Uhl 2013). Among many other things, since 22 April 1970, annual Earth Day celebrations have enhanced environmental information, awareness, sensitivity, responsibility, and activism in America and other countries (Nelson et al. 2002). By now, more than one billion people participate each year, about one in every seven humans on the planet. Nevertheless, in spite of all of these positive activities, secular approaches have proved insufficient, although necessary.¹

Most secular approaches only treat specific superficial symptoms, rather than the underlying root causes of the unprecedented global environmental crisis as a whole. Moreover, secular approaches have been insufficient, because most ignore the fact that *ultimately the environmental crisis as a whole is a spiritual and moral crisis* and that it can only be resolved by radical transformations in the ways in which industrial capitalist and consumerist societies, in particular, relate to nature (Foster et al. 2010; Gottlieb 2019; Rockefeller and Elder 1992). This has been variously called the Great Awakening or the Great Turning. This transformation from the Industrial Age (Anthropocene) to the Ecological Age (Ecocene) involves fundamental changes in world views, values, attitudes, behaviors, and institutions relating humans to nature in far more sustainable and green ways. If it is not accomplished voluntarily and incrementally, then it may be suddenly forced at far greater expense and suffering for societies, especially by global climate change as the primary catalyst (Best and Nocella 2006; Bourne 2008; Korten 2006; Raskin 2016).

In addition to vital secular approaches, spiritual ecology is responding to environmental crises, especially since the 1990s. It is generating a quiet revolution, meaning nonviolent but growing exponentially in a multitude of ways. As an umbrella term, spiritual ecology may be recognized as a vast, complex, diverse, and dynamic arena of intellectual and practical activities at the interfaces of religions and spiritualities with nature, ecologies, environments, and environmentalisms. It embraces other narrower fields, such as dark green religion, deep ecology, earth spirituality, earth mysticism, ecomysticism, ecopsychology, ecospirituality, ecotheology, green religion, green spirituality, nature mysticism, nature religion, nature spirituality, religion and ecology, religion and nature, religious ecology, religious environmentalism, religious naturalism, and sacred ecology. The qualifier spiritual

¹ Usually, it is obvious that the secular and the spiritual are quite separate. However, there can be instances of some overlap between them. Earth Day celebrations are mostly secular, although some individuals and organizations are spiritually or religiously motivated. The book by Bron Taylor (2010) and that by Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim (Tucker and Grim 2016) are examples of overlap between the secular and religious/spiritual. Another example of overlap is the parallels between aspects of modern Western science and Buddhism identified by David P. Barash (2014).

is used instead of religious, because it is far more inclusive. Religion usually includes the spiritual, but some spirituality is not associated with any particular religion (Sponsel 2012, 2014, 2019). Even some atheists are spiritual (e.g., Crosby and Stone 2018).

The core principles of spiritual ecology are the following: (1) It is necessary, and potentially pivotal, in engaging many environmental problems and issues from local to global levels. (2) It recognizes the unity, interconnectedness, and interdependence of all things, beings, and forces, as does Buddhism as well as the Western sciences of ecology and quantum physics (Barash 2014; Wolf 1999). (3) Spiritual ecology relates to the *spiritual, moral, and intrinsic values of nature*. (4) It cultivates respect, affection, and reverence for nature with caring stewardship and benevolent coexistence. These four core principles are among the commonalities of spiritual ecology underlying the diversity of many religious and spiritual traditions (see Appendix A for key resources on spiritual ecology).

Religious organizations such as the Vatican, secular ones such as the Worldwatch Institute, and hybrids such as the former Alliance of Religions and Conservation in association with the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) explore and implement into action ideas about the relevance of religion and spirituality in dealing with environmental issues and problems (Dudley et al. 2005; Palmer and Finlay 2003; Posey 1998). This new approach of spiritual ecology may help to at least reduce, if not entirely resolve, many environmental concerns, thereby turning global environmental crises around for the better. It is also applicable at the individual level (Hecking 2011; Pfeiffer 2013; Vaughan-Lee and Hart 2017).

Clearly, religion and spirituality can be extraordinarily influential in positive ways on many levels with their intellectual, emotional, and activist components (Gottlieb 2013; Lerner 2000; Smith 2001).² Many religious organizations possess vast resources such as moral capital; persuasive, motivating, and mobilizing power; large populations and social networks; sacred texts with environmentally pertinent points; print publications and other media; and land and various other assets. Religions can generate hope and mobilize followers to make a significant difference. They can arouse and guide emotions as well as reason through their powerful leaders, sacred texts, rituals, and symbols to a much greater extent than secular approaches to environmentalism (Gardner 2002, 2006).

The Anthropocene is the new era recognized by many geologists, ecologists, and others, as human impact on the environment is leaving substantial evidence on the accumulating geological record (Ellis 2018; Schwagerl 2014). An example is layers of plastic debris in sediments, sometimes solidified with sand or other rock (plastic conglomerate or plastiglomerate). Obviously, massive mining projects such as mountain top removal coal mining in Appalachia and the tar sands of Alberta also leave evidence on the geological record. Nevertheless, the Anthropocene remains a controversial issue (Moore 2016). Yet, it serves to emphasize just how far reaching human activities can be in their impact on the environment.

With so many very grave and urgent environmental problems from local to global levels, including everything in between, there is also a multitude of diverse practical initiatives in religious environmentalism addressing the challenges. They offer significant potential and actual concrete achievements (e.g., Gottlieb 2006). This Special Issue of *Religions* focuses on providing a set of captivating essays on the specifics of concrete cases of environmental activism involving most of the main Asian religions from several countries. Regrettably, authors were not available for important religions such as Shintoism and countries such as Mongolia, something inevitable with any collection short of an encyclopedia.

Here, particular case studies in spiritual ecology activism are drawn from the religions of Animism, Buddhism, Daoism, Hinduism, Islam, and Jainism. The countries discussed include Bhutan, China, India, Indonesia, and Thailand. Thereby, this Special Issue offers a very substantial and rich sampling

² It should be mentioned that, among other issues on this subject, some authors have pointed out that religion may not be effective in dealing with environmental concerns or may even have negative environmental consequences (e.g., Taylor 2015, 2016; Taylor et al. 2016; Wexler 2016).

of religious environmental activism in Asia. Importantly, the articles are grounded in extensive original field research. Each article begins with an abstract, so they will not be summarized further here (on Asian religions in general, see [Esposito et al. 2018](#)).

Religious environmental activism in Asia is a relatively neglected subject that deserves far more attention in the periodical, anthological, and other literature.³ Thus, this Special Issue of *Religions* begins to help explore a strategic gap. Collectively, the articles reveal a fascinating and significant movement of environmental initiatives engaged in practical spiritual ecology in Asia. Accordingly, this Special Issue should be of special interest to a broad diversity of scientists, scholars, instructors, and students, as well as communities and leaders from a wide variety of religions, environmentalism, conservation, and countries.

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Appendix A. Spiritual Ecology: A Brief Resource Guide

The first general textbook on the subject is:

Kinsley, David. 1995. *Ecology and Religion: Ecological Spirituality in Cross-Cultural Perspective*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc.

The most recent general text is:

Grim, John, and Mary Evelyn Tucker. 2014. *Ecology and Religion*. Washington, D.C.: Island Press. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=15v6f2moleE>, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yGJ_r-pEH64.

Among related complementary books are these:

Bauman, Whitney A, Richard R, Bohannon II, and Kevin J. O'Brien, eds. 2017. *Grounding Religion: A Field Guide to the Study of Religion and Ecology*. New York: Routledge (Second Edition).

Berry, Thomas. 2009. *The Sacred Universe: Earth, Spirituality, Religion in the Twenty-First Century*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Bohannon, Richard, ed. 2014. *Religions and Environments: A Reader in Religion, Nature, and Ecology*. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing.

Foltz, Richard C., ed. 2003. *Worldviews, Religion, and the Environment: A Global Anthology*. Belmont: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning.

Gottlieb, Roger S. 2006. *A Greener Faith: Religious Environmentalism and Our Planet's Future*. New York: Oxford University Press. https://www.wpi.edu/people/faculty/gottlieb#profile-faculty_profile, <http://users.wpi.edu/~jgottlieb>, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BVpxdd1Oosg>.

Rockefeller, Steven C., and John C. Elder, eds. 1992. *Spirit and Nature: Why the Environment Is a Religious Issue*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Sponsel, Leslie E. 2012. *Spiritual Ecology: A Quiet Revolution*. Santa Barbara: Praeger. <http://spiritualecology.info>.

³ There is, however, substantial literature on particular religions of Asia in relation to nature, ecology, and environment, but with relatively little attention to environmental activism. Especially noteworthy here are the substantial anthologies in the series coedited by Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim called *Religions of the World and Ecology* ([Tucker 2010](#); [Tucker and Grim 2017](#)). These are in association with the Forum on Religion and Ecology now at Yale University, and they were published by Harvard University Press. They are a historical benchmark and foundational for this field: [Chapple \(2002\)](#), [Chapple and Tucker \(2000\)](#), [Foltz et al. \(2003\)](#), [Girardot et al. \(2001\)](#), [Tucker and Berthrong \(1998\)](#), and [Tucker and Williams \(1997\)](#). Also noteworthy is the growing recognition in recent decades of the connection between sacred places and biodiversity conservation including in Asia ([Verschuuren and Furuta 2016](#)).

Taylor, Bron. 2010. *Dark Green Religion: Nature, Spirituality and the Planetary Future*. Berkeley: University of California Press. <http://www.brontaylor.com>, <http://www.brontaylor.com/blog/>, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uxIvBZEBS1M8>, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2UtmRLL5e8A>.

Tucker, Mary Evelyn, and John A. Grim, eds. 1993. *Worldviews and Ecology*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books.

Vaughan-Lee, Llewellyn, ed., 2013. *Spiritual Ecology: The Cry of the Earth*. Point Reyes: The Golden Sufi Center.

By now there are also several major reference works:

Crosby, Donald A., and Jerome A. Stone, eds. 2018. *The Routledge Handbook of Religious Naturalism*. New York: Routledge.

Gottlieb, Roger S., ed. 2006. *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Hart, John, ed. 2017. *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Religion and Ecology*. Boston: Wiley-Blackwell.

Jenkins, Willis, and Whitney Bauman, eds. 2010. *Berkshire Encyclopedia of Sustainability: Volume I: The Spirit of Sustainability*. Barrington: Berkshire Publishing Group LLC.

Jenkins, Willis, Mary Evelyn Tucker, and John Grim, eds. 2017. *The Routledge Handbook of Religion and Ecology*. New York: Routledge.

Taylor, Bron, ed. 2005. *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*. New York: Continuum Press, Volumes 1-2.

There are also two academic journals focused on this subject:

Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture, and *Worldviews: Global Religions, Culture, and Ecology*.

The Forum on Religion and Ecology at Yale University has extensive resources and also publishes a monthly email newsletter: <http://fore.research.yale.edu>. (There is a similar organization-in Europe).

Finally, there is the International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture: <http://www.religionandnature.com>.

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