Religious Studies and Environmental Concern

The establishment and growth of Religion and Ecology as a new area of study can be attributed in part to its instigation by scholars who feel morally and ethically compelled to address serious environmental problems. That religion itself has been implicated as a catalyst of environmental decline has prompted such scholars to examine the relationships among human cultures, religions, and environments. The *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature* is, of course, one manifestation of the effort to understand such relationships. But it is hardly the first example of interest in religion and ecology among religious studies scholars, and some of this interest is more than analytic, it is itself religious. Indeed, especially since the mid-1960s, there has been intense scholarly interest in the relationships between human cultures, religions and environments, not only among religious studies scholars, but also among philosophers who have been pioneering the field of Environmental Ethics. Some Anthropologists have also focused attention on Ecology and Religion and have been developing a field known as Ecological Anthropology. A good starting point for the study of religion and nature is to review the range of scholarly approaches to understanding the relationships between cultures, religions, and environments. Here we focus on the role played by religious studies scholars in religion-related environmental studies and activism.

Religion and Ecology in the American Academy of Religion

In 1989 and 1990 David Barnhill (then a Professor of Buddhism and Environmental Studies at Guilford College) and Eugene Bianchi (a Professor of Christian Theology and specialist in Roman Catholicism at Emory University) teamed up to propose a Religion and Ecology...
“consultation” to the American Academy of Religion, an important academic association devoted to the study of religion. The consultation was approved and held its initial sessions in 1991. The Christian Process Theologian Jay McDaniel, and the Buddhist scholar and deep ecology activist Stephanie Kaza were among the group’s earliest supporters, both of whom were engaged in their own scholarly and activist work toward environmentally friendly religion. Demonstrating strong interest from Academy members, in 1993 the Consultation became a “Group”, a status which it has maintained to this writing.

The Religion and Ecology initiative represented a concerted effort to focus scholarly attention on the religion variable in human/ecosystem interactions. Some of the scholarly work presented there clung strictly to historical or social scientific analysis. The majority of the group’s presentations, while they might have involved in or taken such work as their starting point, have also had a normative, ethical dimension.

Some participants explored how the world’s dominant religions could be “mined” or “reconfigured” to promote environmentally sustainability lifeways. Others, influenced by perspectives articulated during the emergence of ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS and RADICAL ENVIRONMENTALISM, promoted the revitalization of cultures and religions they considered to be environmentally benign (such as indigenous, pagan and animistic ones), but that had been declining in the face of what the presenters considered the world’s dominant, imperial religions (especially the monotheistic ones). Still others proposed or endorsed recent religious innovations (such as the "Universe Story," "Epic of Evolution," ecofeminism, various new religious movements including Wicca) as correctives if not antidotes to anthropocentric religions that view the earth instrumentally and consequently degrade it. Yet others advanced an EARTH CHARTER in order to capture and deploy religious ethics in a way that would promote a new environmental
ethics, one that would view the preservation of biological diversity a sacred duty, while simultaneously valuing cultural and religious diversity.

Within the wider American Academy of Religion, critics of the religion and ecology group have argued that Religion and Ecology scholars are more engaged in green religion and “missionary” work than in scholarly analysis. Such criticisms are likewise addressed to other ethically or religiously engaged groups in the AAR and reflect a wider fissure within it. For some scholars of religion, religious studies should promote religious tolerance and thus a more humane world, and therefore to promote the “greening” of religion, or to participate in it, would be appropriate modes of academic engagement. For others, such as Donald Wiebe (1999) and Russell McClutcheon (2001), who analyze in complementary ways the religiosity animating much of what is called “religious studies” today, the task of the discipline is properly to analyze religion rather than to defend or engage in it.

The conflicting responses of those in the Religion and Ecology group reflect this fissure. Some are apparently not involved in religious production or environmental ethics. Others unapologetically defend the normative religious or ethical dimension of their work and the group’s attention to it, arguing that the world cannot afford to have scholars sit on the sidelines in the struggle for sustainability.

The differing approaches and tensions reflect the plural identity in the religion and ecology field to date, which has scholars engaged in both analytic and normative work. This said, most participants and observers of the AAR’s Religion and Ecology group would acknowledge that much of the work of its affiliated scholars is animated, at least in part, by environmental concern. And some of the participants would certainly understand themselves to be “engaged scholars” involved, in one way or another, in the struggle to “green” religion and
ethics. (The word “green” is now used not only as an adjective but as verb and adverb in a linguistic innovation that signals environmental action.)

Religion and ecology beyond the academy

Outside of the American Academy of Religion, the contributions of religious studies scholars to the greening of religion is more transparent and less controversial. These contributions have been substantial and driven by a sense of environmental urgency, an impulse which predated the controversy of the LYNN WHITE THESIS. America’s premier twentieth century conservationist Aldo Leopold, for instance, urged the revisioning of ethics and religion toward a biocentric axiology in the 1940s, as Curt Meine, his biographer, reminds us in this encyclopedia. As Leopold asserted in 1947, when it comes to conservation, “philosophy, ethics, and religion have not yet heard of it” (Flader and Calliott 1991: 338).

Philosophy, ethics, and religion have now all heard plenty about nature – beginning perhaps with a number of small and little-noticed conferences that focused on religion, ethics, and nature during the 1970s and 1980s. Several of these occurred as the disciplines of ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS and CONSERVATION BIOLOGY got off the ground. But one conference in particular, held at Vermont’s Middlebury college in 1990, deserves here to be singled out, for it dramatically increased public and especially religious attention to environmental ethics. Featuring the Dali Llama and a number of prominent religious leaders and scholars who had previously focused attention on religious responsibilities toward nature, the “Spirit and Nature” conference was followed by a similarly titled American Public Television broadcast and widely distributed video (produced by the well-known journalist Bill Moyers), and a book (Rockefeller
All three “spirit and nature” manifestations promoted the idea that the protection of nature is a fundamental religious duty.

The driving force behind the conference was Steven Rockefeller, a Middlebury comparative religion scholar with a Ph.D. from Columbia, who also happened to be a practicing Buddhist born of one of America’s wealthiest and most politically prominent families. No doubt Rockefeller’s background and connections help explain the success of the conference. More importantly, the conference was successful because it reflected and captured a growing environmental concern among a wide variety of religious individuals and groups, and it evoked and inspired more of the same. The conference was capped by an inter-faith religious service that included the voices of whales and other creatures, brought to the congregation through the medium of Paul Winter’s music, itself an expression of contemporary nature religion.

In the subsequent years, Rockefeller and a number of other religious studies professors would become even more deeply involved in promoting a fusion of environmental concern and religious ethics.

The “Religions of the World and Ecology” Conferences

The next most significant development along these lines was a series of conferences, hosted by The Center for the Study of World Religions at Harvard University with support from a diversity of environmental, religious, and animal welfare groups. Entitled “Religions of the World and Ecology,” the conferences occurred between 1996 and 1998. Like the “Spirit and Nature” conference, these were followed with publications. Between 1997 and 2004, ten Harvard University Press books appeared, constituting an impressive series bearing the same title as the
conferences. The volumes explored what the series editors decided were the world’s major religious traditions: Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, Daoism, Hinduism, Indigenous Traditions, Jainism, Judaism, Islam, and Shinto.

The conferences were organized and the book series edited by two Bucknell University Religious Studies Professors, Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim, both of whom had been inspired by the work of Roman Catholic theologian Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, as well as by religion scholar and Roman Catholic priest Thomas Berry and his protégé [philosopher and mathematician] Brian Swimme, who together became the most influential religionists promoting the consecration of scientific and evolutionary narratives, which they called The Universe Story (Swimme and Berry 1992). They and others moved by these narratives have been involved in grafting these new sacred stories onto existing and new religious forms, sometimes monotheistic ones (such as when Christians celebrate the “Universe Story” linking it to creation through ritual performance), sometimes not (such as can be found in ritualizing of the Epic of Evolution in the work of John Seed).

Tucker and Grim have been instrumental in promoting the Universe Story through their long service as Vice President and President (respectively) of the American Teilhard Society. The Society was founded in 1964, Thomas Berry himself serving as its president during the 1970s. Grim assumed the Presidency in the early 1990s, and continued well into the twenty-first century. Tucker called the Society the “Seedbed for Thomas Berry” in a 2003 interview (31 January in Bucknell Pennsylvania; this paragraph and its quotes are gleaned from this same interview). Tucker and Grim, her husband, were well placed to know, for they had facilitated the society’s role in this regard. Tucker assembled a number of Berry’s essays and presented them to a publisher in the early 1970s, for example, which led eventually to the publication of Berry’s
influential *The Dream of the Earth* (1988), which would sell over 70,000 copies. For another example, the new journal *Teilhard Studies* (winter 1978) devoted its first issue to Berry, entitled “The New Story: Comments on the Origin, Identification, and Transmission of Values.” Tucker and Grim were also been active in the AAR’s Religion and Ecology group and instrumental in the development of the journal *Worldviews: Environment, Culture, Religion*, which commenced publishing in 1997, providing additional venues for promoting a sacramental sense of the Universe’s evolution. They have worked to draw the broader religion academy’s attention to the Earth Charter as well, which also conveys such spirituality.

As important as an inspiring Universe or other religious worldviews might have been in fostering the emergence of “religion and ecology” as a subfield of religious studies, the field was driven as much by an apocalyptic reading of the current state and likely near-future of the planet. Tucker and Grim, for example, began the Series Forward of “Religions of the World and Ecology” with a strikingly apocalyptic tone:

> Ours is a period when the human community is in search of new and sustaining relationships to the earth amidst an environmental crisis that threatens the very existence of all life-forms on the planet. . . . As Daniel Maguire has succinctly observed, “If current trends continue, we will not” (Tucker and Grim 1997: vi).

Although some may think the extinction of *Homo sapiens* is a real, near-term possibility, few scientists share such a view, let alone fear that “all life-forms on the planet” will go extinct. This suggests that the framing of these volumes may be grounded more on an apocalyptic faith than biosphere science. Scientists increasingly do, of course, express alarm about the extent and
rate of environmental degradation. It should be no surprise that this would fuel apocalypticism. Indeed, some future scenarios do envision the end of the world as we know it, even suggesting this has already occurred, as Bill McKibben problematically did in his best-selling *The End of Nature*. He did so by conceptually extracting humans from nature, for humans can only end nature if they are not a part of it. This illogical feat McKibben accomplished with little criticism, which was made possible by the apocalypticism of the age. We might, nevertheless, have wished for a more judicious framing of McKibben’s book, which had much otherwise to commend it, as well as the Harvard series, which despite such framing, will properly be understood as a benchmark for a certain type of engaged religion and ecology scholarship. And certainly on a human level, the apocalyptic framing is understandable, for soberly presented ecological prognostications are certainly frightening enough to warrant such fears.

What is even more important to the current religion and nature discussion is the claim by Tucker and Grim in the introduction that the environmental crisis is grounded in defective religious perception, “We no longer know who we are as earthlings; we no longer see the earth as sacred” (1997: xvii). This implies not only that the earth is sacred, but that earlier humans had a different and superior religious sensibility toward nature than modern humans.

Whatever the truth of such assumptions, they certainly make comprehensible why Tucker and Grim, and the other scholars who share such presuppositions, have labored so assiduously in developing the “Religion and Ecology” field. They hope to rekindle a sense of the sacredness of the earth, which they consider a prerequisite to restoring ecological harmony. Indeed, a fundamental premise of most of the ferment occurring under the “Religion and Ecology” a global, green-religious reformation.
The introduction to the Harvard series made this clear: Religious studies scholars could contribute significantly to the quest for sustainability by identifying and evaluating the distinctive ecological attitudes, values, and practices of diverse religious traditions . . . Highlight[ing] the specific religious resources that comprise such fertile ecological ground: within scripture, ritual, myth, symbol, cosmology, sacrament, and so on (Tucker and Grim 1997: xxiii).

The objective of the conference series was thus to establish a common ground among diverse religious cultures for environmentally sustainable societies, while treating individual traditions as resources to be mined for the envisioned religious reformation. Many if not most of the scholars writing for the Harvard Series seemed to share the objective of its editors, striving to uncover and revitalize the green potential of the religions they were analyzing.

This encyclopedia provides many examples of scholars deeply involved in this process. Perhaps one of the more interesting is that of J. Baird Callicott, a protégé of Aldo Leopold, and one of the world’s pioneers of the field of environmental ethics. As if taking a cue from Leopold’s above-mentioned lament that philosophy, ethics, and religion have had little to do with conservation, Callicott has tramped worldwide pursuing cultural and religious resources for Leopoldian land ethics. Perhaps the foremost expression of Callicott’s religion-related work is Earth's Insights: A Survey of Ecological Ethics From the Mediterranean Basin to the Australian Outback (1994), a project he pursued although, as he disclosed in NATURAL HISTORY AS NATURAL RELIGION in this encyclopedia, he regards most religions as superstitious. He
nevertheless hopes they can be made to promote conservation ethics that cohere with ecological science.

“Culminating Conferences” and targeting the United Nations

After the World Religions and Ecology conferences at Harvard that focused on religious traditions, two “culminating conferences” were held, producing or contributing to three significant trends: (1) the spreading of spiritualities in which the evolution of the universe and life on earth is considered a sacred story; (2) the wider extension of green forms of mainstream religions; and (3) the greening of international institutions.

The first culminating conference, “Religion, Ethics, and the Environment: An Interdisciplinary Dialogue,” occurred September 17-20, 1998 at Harvard University. The focus of this conference was cosmology, environmental ethics, and the world religions. Speakers included Thomas Berry, the entomologist and biodiversity advocate E. O. Wilson, and J. Baird Callicott, all of whom have in their own ways promoted the consecration of scientific narratives. Steven Rockefeller also spoke. Since the Vermont “Spirit and Nature” conference, Rockefeller had become a critically important facilitator of the Earth Charter process. The Charter, intended for United Nations ratification as a sustainability strategy, is a remarkable document claiming that all life has intrinsic value and expressing reverence for the miracle of life, while calling the nations to understand, in one way or another, that preserving the earth is a “sacred trust”.

The second culminating conference took place on October 21 and 22, 1998, and brought the themes of the earlier conferences, including the sense of the sacredness of the Universe, right to the United Nations (the second day was held at the American Museum of Natural History).
This conference illuminated the role of religious studies scholars in the Earth Charter initiative, and indeed, one of the sessions was devoted specifically to “charting the course” for the Earth Charter.

One of the speakers was Oren Lyons, a professor of Native American Studies at the State University of New York at Buffalo, and the “Faithkeeper” of the Turtle Clan, Onondaga Nation, one of the traditional nations of the HAUDENOSAUNEE CONFEDERACY. In 1991, Lyons himself had participated in another important extension of nature spirituality into the culture’s mainstreams, through a Bill Moyers public television program based on a conversation with Lyons. Mary Evelyn Tucker was another speaker at the United Nations, bringing the message she was taking from the overall conferences, that religions were indeed turning green, sometimes in dramatic and decisive ways. Her experiences of this perception she discussed several years later in Worldly Wonder: Religions Enter Their Ecological Phase (2003). Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme were also presenters, bringing their reverence for the Universe directly to the conference, and kindling substantial interest. The first day at the United Nations drew an overflow crowd including many United Nations employees, and 1000 people attended the sessions at the Natural History Museum.

Perhaps even more importantly, a number of prominent figures associated with the United Nations spoke and endorsed the overall effort to green religion and ethics, including Maurice Strong, who reportedly first hatched the Earth Charter idea while serving as the Secretary-General of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development. This conference was held in 1992 in Rio de Janeiro and became known simply as the “Earth Summit”. Adnan Amin, the Executive Director of the United Nations Environmental Program, also articulated his support for the overall effort to promote a global environmental ethics and politics.
A few years after this meeting at the United Nations, in 2002, on the occasion of the United Nations’ World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg (which was the official follow up meeting to the Earth Summit), Steven Rockefeller played the leading in promoting the Earth Charter. The charter received respectful mention from a number of world leaders, but no formal attention on that occasion.

This discussion has demonstrated that ideas and initiatives, incubated if not birthed by religious studies scholars, have played important roles in the greening of religion and environmental ethics. They are, moreover, beginning to influence global environmental politics, bringing to them an important and sometimes innovative religious and ethical dimension.

The Forum on Religion and Ecology

Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim developed the conferences to encourage scholarly work in the service of greening the world’s religions, to promote a sense of the sacredness of the Universe and evolutionary narratives, and to support related ethical initiatives including the Earth Charter. To continue such efforts they also used the conferences to spawn a long-term initiative, which they called the “Forum on Religion and Ecology.” Known to many by its acronym, FORE, the organization was, according to its website, established to help develop “religion and ecology as an academic area of study and research in universities, colleges, seminaries, and other religiously affiliated institutions.”

A number of religiously affiliated colleges and seminaries have been developing religion and ecology as specialties, and in 2003, the University of Florida, a state-sponsored, secular institution, inaugurated the first “Religion and Nature” emphasis as a central part of its new
Ph.D. program in Religion. Such developments – occurring both in religious and secular institutions – suggest that the field of religion and ecology began emerging from its infancy in the early years of the twenty-first century. The differing approaches, confessional/ethical on the one hand, and historical/social scientific, on the other, will sometimes be in tension, but this is likely to be creative one. Sometimes the differing approaches will be blended in creative scholarly hybrids. Taken together, the various approaches will produce diverse kinds of scholarly work as the field is further constructed.

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Further Reading


See also: Anthropology as a Source of Nature Religion; Berry, Thomas; Callicott, Baird; Conservation Biology; Earth Charter; Environmental Ethics; Epic of Evolution; Leopold, Aldo; Lyons, Oren; Teilhard de Chardin, Pierre; Wilson, Edward O.; Winter, Paul.