

(UNIT 1) Introduction: The ‘Greening’ of Religion

The modern ecological crisis represents what is surely the most formidable challenge that humankind is likely to face in the 21st century. Small wonder, then, why concerted efforts are being made by nations and peoples across the globe to help mitigate the impact of human-induced climate change, the need for which, as the 2014 Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (AR5) makes abundantly clear, is as urgent and essential now as it has ever been. This more profound appreciation for humankind’s relationship to the natural world has provided the context for much reflection in recent decades on the environmental legacy of religious belief. Confronted with the potential for ecocatastrophe on an unprecedented scale, ecologically-conscious religious believers have sought to engage their respective faith traditions from an environmental perspective, to discern what (if anything at all) those traditions might be able to offer a discussion of ‘green’ issues. This ecologically oriented approach to religion must be considered a necessary enterprise: contemporary concern over the perceived threats to the natural world, coupled with the massive influence which religion continues to exert worldwide, means that what faith traditions ‘say’, or are purported to say, in relation to the environment cannot easily be ignored.

Essential Reading

There are a number of excellent book chapters, essays and articles that will help to introduce you to the now well-established field of religion and the environment. Your reading for this unit should begin with two essays from *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology*: the introductory chapter by Roger Gottlieb (**‘Religion and Ecology – What Is the Connection and Why Does It Matter?’**) and the survey of the field provided by Mary Evelyn Tucker (**‘Religion and Ecology: Survey of the Field’**). The Oxford Handbook is available as an e-book and can be accessed via the University’s online catalogue (link on Moodle page). These should be followed by the first two chapters in *Ecology and Religion* by Grim and Tucker (given as PDF files on the Moodle page). The essay by Grim and Tucker for the *Routledge Handbook of Religion and Ecology* (**‘The Movement of Religion and Ecology: Emerging Field and Dynamic Force’**) also constitutes a useful general introduction to the subject (PDF file on Moodle). Finally, it would be a good idea for you to familiarize yourself with the website of the *Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology*. Coordinated by John Grim and Mary Evelyn Tucker, the Forum has, for a number of years, been at the forefront of the discussion on religion and the environment, and its website will be an invaluable resource to you over the course of this module. The website itself contains a vast amount of material but its **‘Overview of World Religions and Ecology’** will be the best place to begin (link on Moodle page).

Suggested Further Reading

Roger Gottlieb has produced the go-to text for learning about religious environmentalism (***A Greener Faith: Religious Environmentalism and Our Planet’s Future***) and it would certainly benefit you to read its opening chapter (this is available online). Another useful book is

Grounding Religion: A Field Guide to the Study of Religion and Ecology (edited by Bauman, Bohannon II and O'Brien). Unfortunately, this publication is not available from the library but it can be viewed, at least in part, in Google Books. The same goes for *Inherited Land: The Changing Grounds of Religion and Ecology* from the same editors. There are links to both of these on Moodle.

Questions to Consider

- 1) What does it mean to say that religions have entered into an 'ecological phase'? Why has this happened?
- 2) To what extent is an ecologically oriented approach to religion a necessary enterprise? How important is it, in your opinion, that religions respond to the modern environmental crisis?
- 3) What possible objections might one raise to the 'greening' of religion? What are some of the difficulties in engaging religious/spiritual traditions from an environmental perspective?
- 4) At this stage, would you regard religion as a help or a hindrance for thinking positively about ecological issues?