

Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature

Bron Taylor (Editor)

New York: Continuum, 2005, 2008 (1874 pages, 2 volumes)

As editor, Bron Taylor, notes in his introduction, the entries of *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature* seek to illuminate questions regarding how religion impacts our understanding and treatment of nature and vice versa (vii). In this way, the encyclopedia has two goals. The first is to fulfill the traditional requirements of an encyclopedia, namely to provide definitions, history, and descriptions of key ideas and characters involved in the environmental and religious interface. The volumes' second goal involves evaluating the issues and ideas that relate to religion's impact on environmental progress. Do religious views and belief systems encourage or hinder earth-friendly behaviors on the part of their adherents? Put another way, are some religions more "green" than others? (vii).

Structurally, the text follows traditional encyclopedic format. Articles are organized alphabetically and each entry concludes with a bibliography and cross-references to other articles on related topics. As can be expected, significant articles address the environmental views of the world's major religions, such as Islam, Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism, and Hinduism. Smaller religions, such as Animism, Native American spirituality, and Scientology are also discussed. By adopting a functional definition of religion, which holds that religion is "that dimension of human experience engaged with sacred norms" (ix), the text's editors wisely avoided the thorny problem of defining *religion*. On this basis, articles cover secular-spiritual ideologies, such as Aldo Leopold's land ethic, feminist spirituality, and green anarchism. A surprisingly large number of articles cover what could be considered unusual or unexpected topics. There are articles on Canada, Disney, Disney Worlds at War, Nile perch, storytelling and wonder, and surfing. Smartly, the end of volume 2 has an index that provides yet another way for researchers to locate needed information and substantially increases the text's usefulness. Taylor's introduction (vii–xxi) and the reader's guide (xxix) are very helpful in orienting readers to the content and ideas of the text and are worth reading on their own. Because a comprehensive review would be prohibitively long, I focused on articles especially pertinent to Christianity and economics, such as abortion, Au Sable Institute, Biblical Foundations for Christian Stewardship, commons and Christian ethics, eco-justice in theology and ethics, ecology and religion, environmental ethics, Protestant ethic, Sabbath-jubilee cycle, and stewardship, among others. Articles were generally well-written and provided readers with important definitions and concepts related to the article's topic. Researchers interested in brief, but not simplistic, introductions to ideas related to religion and environment will be rewarded for reading these volumes.

Unfortunately, several weaknesses related to the text's liberal slant detract from the otherwise excellent quality of the encyclopedia. First, the publication's liberal bias is expressed in its treatment of topics. Authors repeatedly assert that capitalism, globalism, population growth, and high western consumption lie at the root of our environmental problems (e.g., eco-justice in theology and ethics, 539–43; globalization, 698–700).

Sometimes authors made broad claims that begged for a more conclusive and nuanced discussion. For example, in the entry on abortion (13–14), Paul Custodio Bube states, “Almost all environmental problems ... are results of humans exceeding the carrying capacity of the planet.” Regrettably, he never considers that corruption, immorality, and cultural baggage may provide better explanations than population or consumption rates for environmental devastation visited on various parts of the world. Granted the aforementioned articles were explicitly identified as opinion pieces, still one would hope that writers would be required to provide more support for their claims.

A liberal bias was also expressed in general entries, where one would expect more-balanced treatment of the topic (e.g., environmental justice and environmental racism, 608–611; population, consumption, and Christian ethics 1296–1298). Authors expressed general negative opinions of Western values and behaviors such as capitalism, private property, and consumerism without ever asking why Western liberal democracies have significantly healthier environments as determined by life expectancy, pollution, and conservation practices than societies in closer relation to their tribal roots. I suspect that some of the authors would reject this claim, perhaps by arguing that the West lives well at the expense of the less developed countries. The controversy also hinges on views of what constitutes a healthy environment. Should we define a healthy environment biologically by evaluating the vigor of the organisms in the entire ecosystem or anthropocentrically by human life-expectancy, or by something else? A discussion on this question in the introduction would have been useful, as it could have provided a context to understand the various criticisms of Western values in the text.

The encyclopedia also demonstrated its bias by the topics it did not include. Considering how often capitalism was blamed for contributing to environmental degradation, it is surprising that it did not receive an entry. Although the editor deserves credit for having evangelical environmentalist Calvin DeWitt provide the entry on the Au Sable Institute (129), it was unfortunate that entries on conservative thinkers (e.g., E. Calvin Beisner and Robert A. Sirico) were lacking. Happily, both, along with their respective organizations, were at least mentioned in the entry on the wise use movement (1757). The most significant weakness in the encyclopedia is expressed in the bibliography at the end of each article. Writers tended to ignore publications that defend conservative perspectives on religious doctrine and conservative economic ideas. The result is a publication that, in certain instances, reads more like a commentary than an encyclopedia.

These weaknesses aside, *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature* will provide readers with a wealth of information on the interface between religion and environmental views and as such will benefit environmentalists and theologians wishing to learn more about each other’s fields.

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