
Despite opening a *Greener Faith: Religious Environmentalism and Our Planet’s Future* by reminding readers “if you’re not depressed, it is only because you haven’t been reading the newspaper,” Roger Gottlieb succeeds in providing a few rays of hope-filled light by tracing religion’s emergence as a force for coping with and combating the environmental crisis. Through an exploration of religious environmentalism in action, Gottlieb maintains “religions have become part of the all too scarce good news on the environmental front—one more element in a worldwide environmental movement” (p. 7).

Because “the environmental crisis is not only a danger to our physical and economic well-being, but a unique challenge to our fundamental sense of what it means to be human,” Gottlieb argues that scholars and activists must not dismiss religion; for religion, through story and community, guides our basic concepts of “what it means to be human” (p. 4). Beyond fostering humility and humanity, Gottlieb highlights the ability of religion to encourage social action and participation where other platforms might fall short. (One need only look at recent election results in the United States to understand the power of religion to motivate political action—in any direction.) The trick however, he admits, is convincing religions to recover nature as a sacred or sacramental element in both teaching and practice.

In his first chapter, “Religion, Nature, and Environment,” Gottlieb outlines scholarly dialogues and faith based initiatives in the realm of what he calls “religious environmentalism.” The concepts of “religious environmentalism” and “ecotheology,” which he uses interchangeably, act as catch all concepts under which one can place Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, the work of Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme, or even radical environmentalism. While his point, which is to demonstrate the pervasive influence of religious values and faith on the environmental movement, is an important one, he tends to blur lines and lump movements. Such lumping might confuse newcomers to this discussion which is disappointing if his overall goal is to reach those unfamiliar or unconvinced about the role of religion in environmental action.

For example, theology according to Gottlieb, is merely a “fancy word for people who try to say what a religious tradition should mean,” rather than...
pertaining simply to explorations of the nature of God (p. 81). Although confusing to the uninitiated, reworking this term allows him to discuss Buddhism and Christianity in the same paragraph and makes sense in the overall scheme of the book. Gottlieb aims to avoid semantic debates on definitions of religion that might hinder the search for common ground for religious, faith based, and secular environmental groups. By locating this common ground, Gottlieb insists we might find impetus for a greater degree of action, rather than idle chit-chat about what we ought we to do in regards to the environment. Despite blurring movements at times, the first chapter offers an excellent primer on the state of the field of scholarship on “religion and ecology.”

For those skeptical of the role of religion in bringing about social and environmental change, or more importantly for those “devout secularists who believe religion should stay out of politics,” Gottlieb offers a pointed and convincing response in his second chapter (p. 57). Not only does he articulate the power of religion to positively function in a democratic system in protection of the environment, but he argues that in fact “religious environmentalism’s natural allies in this endeavor are progressive political movements, precisely those that are often the most suspicious of religion’s entry into public life” (p. 59). For all those who insist on a separation of religion and politics, Gottlieb traces the ways in which “religion can [and has] play[ed] a decisively positive role in modern democracy” (p. 57). Against the claim that “religion, in essence, is undemocratic and oppressive,” Gottlieb reminds readers that secular politics have an equally guilty track record in global history of failing to uphold democracy or slipping into fundamentalist oppression as does religion (pp. 59-60).

In another example, against the retort “religious beliefs are irrational [due to belief in God], and thus have no place in the organization of society” he rightly recalls how only small parts of religions are about God, and we should instead see religions as rich cultural and ethical systems. Further, regardless of one’s take on God, he argues, we are still talking about the same environment! More importantly, science is just as prey to biases as religion, reminding us that true objectivity is hardly obtainable. Rather than dismiss either side, secular or religious, Gottlieb advocates for both voices engaging in democratic conversation about what it means to be human and the future of life on this planet. Although the bulk of this book focuses on faith-based initiatives, Gottlieb also traces religious and spiritual