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Nature, Science, and Religion: Intersections Shaping Society and the Environment

CATHERINE M. TUCKER (EDITOR)
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REVIEWED BY JAMES D. PROCTOR

Any title that includes the terms nature, science, religion, society, and environment runs the risk of wandering dangerously into Theory of Everything (ToE) territory. By emphasizing ethnography over philosophy, and focusing on nine case studies of land use and related movements among peripheral regions of the world, this volume generally avoids ToE-scale grandiosity, but given the broad scope important questions remain.

I know, as the editor of a volume that also included this trilogy in its title (Proctor 2009). Our effort was organized around five “visions” for nature spanning the sciences-humanities continuum—evolutionary nature, emergent nature, malleable nature, nature as sacred, and nature as culture—and related notions of science and religion. It included a broader disciplinary range of scholars—physical scientists, social scientists, humanists, and theologians, whereas contributors to *Nature, Science, and Religion* are overwhelmingly social scientists, primarily anthropologists. It also approached the key terms broadly as well: as one example, we explicitly avoided collapsing nature onto environment so as to explore the ways in which understandings of science and religion make reinforcing claims upon both *human* and *biophysical* nature—consider the explosion of research into neuroscience, or religious pronouncements on sexuality.

But we too may have set the bar ambiguously high (Irvine 2010); perhaps it’s inherent in invoking such broad terminology at the outset.

In the first few pages of *Nature, Science, and Religion*, the editor, Catherine Tucker, notes the impasse between humanistic scholarship that takes both religion and science seriously in the context of human-environment relations, and scientific, management-based environmental scholarship that discounts religion as a relevant—or methodologically tractable—force. Her desire to bring this scholarship together led to a School for Advanced Research-sponsored seminar in August 2009 that gathered contributors for a week in Santa Fe. The introduction by Tucker and Adrian Ivakhiv lays out well the multivalent notions of nature, science, and religion, as well as their messy interactions in socioecological contexts. This is a welcome departure from much of the earlier literature on religion and ecology (e.g., Tucker and Grim 1994, Callicott 1997), where the tone seems to be more univocal in claiming some common and laudable thread of ecospirituality running through the diverse traditions of the world.

The remaining essays are refreshingly interactive, frequently citing each other and hearkening back to shared experiences in Santa Fe. Chapter two explores the successful interweaving of religion and environmentalism in the context of Brazil’s Atlantic forest. Chapter three considers spiritual warfare in the U.S. and Papua New Guinea, and how science and nature became variably (dis)enchanted as a result. Chapter four notes how desiccation theory, a largely discredited scientific idea linking deforestation and climate, has been appropriated in strikingly different ways in Mexico. Chapter five, also based in Mexico, advances the notion of moral ecologies as a means for indigenous peoples to link spirituality with environmental activism. Chapter six examines religious syncretism in Honduras as a positive response to changing scientific knowledge and agro-ecological realities. Chapter seven considers reforestation efforts in Guatemala, and the positive effect of indigenous knowledge and ritual. Chapter eight addresses moun-

tain climbing in Japan via two contrasting models: one of mastery over, and the other of veneration for, nature. Chapter nine considers faith in a nonreligious context as trust in the process of water-related negotiations in Costa Rica and Brazil. Chapter ten reflects on experiences over time in Zimbabwe, where political and economic tensions ultimately disrupted a fragile but religiously ecumenical grassroots environmental movement. The volume concludes with a more theoretical piece by Ivakhiv, laboring to move this collection of ethnographies toward the space of a cosmopolitics. I find it both sorely needed and revealing, for reasons to be developed below.

The nine case studies that constitute the bulk of the volume vary relatively little in region (in particular, six are in Latin America). The form of religion studied, however, varies widely: religion as (former) colonial/indigenous syncretism, religion as mountain climbing ritual, religion as social justice-oriented Christianity, religion as faith in social process vs. theology, and so forth. If the reader needs any empirical evidence for the sheer dynamism and fluidity of religion as practiced in the context of land use, here it is. Yet is such a malleable notion of religion/spirituality helpful in interpreting the production/consumption and practical import of human-environment meanings? Or are the theological and metaphysical contexts typically implied in invoking religion and spirituality a bit beside the point in analyzing the cultural politics of land use and environmental struggles? Though there are exceptions, the overriding treatment of religion in this volume is instrumental, with primary interest in the ways that related practices and beliefs reinforce or challenge configurations of human-environment relations. Is a sort of latent functionalism at work here?

As with religion, science—or perhaps, more broadly, knowledge—shows considerable variability in its forms and outcomes expressed in these cases. We read, for instance, of science in support of spiritual warfare against demons or spirits inhabiting particular places, science as largely resonant with indigenous agricultural practice in supporting shade-grown coffee, science as outmoded desiccation theory invoked successfully to

support local control of forests. Similar to religion, science tends to be engaged as a means to political/practical ends, yet though traditional ecological knowledge is woven into several narratives, for the most part the practice of science by scientists is not, an important omission (with exceptions) in the volume.

At first glance, it would seem that nature, too, takes a variety of forms in these case studies: surely, at least, some Western notion of nature as wilderness outside the realm of the human is not what one encounters in these essays, and the details lead us in multiple directions, including an African environmental movement addressing deforestation, a contrasting set of perspectives on mountaineering in Japan, and responses to threats imposed by dams, mines, and other massive transformations of nature in Latin America. Yet norms of conservation, sound ecological practice, and sustainability are sometimes advanced unequivocally, as if the ideal nature lies beyond the realm of interpretation and dispute. It is as if religion in the plural and science in the plural offer a broad palette of options to do the work of saving nature (and relations with nature) in the singular.

We all know, as do the contributors, that differing takes on religion and science often buttress differing political positions on biophysical nature. But does this mean that nature itself is as mutable in reality and discourse as religion and science? And what would this imply for the hopes expressed by contributors to this volume, captured in the introduction as “unforeseeable emergences...radically new natures, that might allow for social justice, environmental sustainability, and cultural and biological diversity to co-exist and flourish” (p. 21)? Perhaps nature’s unfolding is appreciated, but the desired qualities of our relations with nature—justice, sustainability, and diversity—are apparently settled, at least in the culture of some writers and readers of this volume.

My reading may be unfair, but it resonates with a key argument of Ivakhiv’s conclusion, in which he builds on Bruno Latour’s critique of what we often find in contemporary ecological discourse, namely an embrace of multiculturalism coupled

with mononaturalism (Latour 2004). To Latour, the inherent settledness of nature becomes a (problematic) common ground to address the inherent unsettledness of culture. In the highly plural, late-industrial contemporary world Latour confronts, there is but one god, and it is nature. This tendency is understandable: after all, if there is no longer anything else we have in common, why not impart some transcendent unity upon that which we understand the least? (Indeed, these and other concerns led the final essayist in our volume to ask “Should the word ‘nature’ be eliminated?” [Brooke 2009].)

Yet Ivakhiv offers a way out of mononaturalism, which he generously—and, to some extent, rightly—extends to the other contributors to the volume. It is contained in the notion of a cosmopolitics. To Latour, cosmopolitics implies that the meaningful order of the universe—the grand synthesis of nature, science, and religion we can say—is, well, political: it must be hammered out the hard way, never simply uncovered in the hidden order of things. The term also reminds us of cosmopolitanism, the notion that assemblages of “society” and “the environment” cross space and time, and are never purely local.

There must then be connections between the volume’s largely local, embedded cases that merit further study at larger scales, if indeed the authors’ work is to contribute toward a cosmopolitics. Can this larger cosmopolitical scholarship also be ethnographic? Of course, as for instance the work of Anna Tsing (2005) suggests. But this awaits another volume. What *Nature, Science, and Religion* suggests is that these three concepts are by no means stable domains for which some intersection exists like the sweet spot in a Venn diagram. Rather, these are political ideas inherent in practice that draw lines of differentiation at the same time they weave networks of connection. The paradox of nature, science, and religion in the context of peripheral-region land use may indeed be how intersection and differentiation are part of the same process of meaningful practice.

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