

AFTERWORD

The Jury Is Still Out

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Abstract

The afterword discusses several cross-cutting questions that the chapters raise. What is the influence of class and urban life on environmental awareness and action? Is there a broader ecological consciousness that extends beyond an urban elite? How much do state constraints and opportunities shape religious possibilities? Is there anything uniquely Asian about the developments documented here? To what extent is religion a driving force in these new forms of awareness? It argues that even though the book offers no definitive answers to these questions, it opens up conversational possibilities that are increasingly important as we think about our collective future.

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When I first went to Taiwan in the late 1970s to conduct dissertation research on religion, the environment seemed to be nowhere on anyone's agenda. I heard of no environmental protests, noticed no complaints about Taipei's grossly polluted air, saw no nature tourism, and found no media devoted to the natural world. Just a decade later, however, it felt like everything had changed. A newly emerged environmental movement had led to numerous protests, bookstores stocked piles of nature magazines, and the island suddenly hosted four brand new national parks and dozens of private nature tourism sites. Now, almost half a century after my first trips to Asia, we can see all kinds of fundamental changes in attitudes toward the environment across the region, and it is clear that my experience in Taiwan revealed just one very local variant of a phenomenon of widespread significance, which has continued to grow and evolve over the past few decades. The essays collected in *Religion and Environmental Crisis: Spiritual Responses from Asia* offer a welcome look at the scale and scope of some of these changes across the continent.

The book offers fresh insights that touch on a series of crucial questions about the possibilities of environmental change, and about how those potentials intertwine with religious ideas—broadly defined by the editors as the ways that people engage with “non-worldly powers transcending the limits of sectional interests and the particularities of place.” Let me briefly touch on what I think are some of the key questions that these essays address.

1. *What is the influence of class and of urban life?* To what extent are environmental movements the product of an urban elite rather than the extensions of a much broader change in consciousness? The evidence on this from around the world is quite mixed, with some arguing that urban intellectual leadership may lead to little direct impact on the ground, while others see a much broader base. Several of the essays collected here—but by no means all of them—show clear evidence of urban elite leadership that may have few broader effects. Münster, for instance, in his study of various yogic versions of agroecological alternatives in India, concludes that “Spiritual leaders who take on issues of the environment and soil care as part of their social outreach programs have hardly any impact on the ground and may, in fact, contribute to greenwashing in the agricultural sector.” In another case from India, the EcoSikh movement that Kvanneid documents seems to revolve primarily around highly educated people, and in many cases relies on the wives of well-off men. In another case, Baviskar’s study of the native (“desi”) cow milk industry concludes that “while they used organic inputs, desi cow dairies remained milk monocultures unintegrated into local ecological loops. In addition, their high-end boutique business model could not be adopted by the vast majority of farmers who supplied the national milk grid.” Although all these examples come from India, this kind of phenomenon is far more widespread, and is consistent with what I found when I first examined Taiwan’s burgeoning environmentalism in the late 1980s and beyond (Weller 2006).

2. *Is there a broader ecological consciousness?* As a group, however, the essays here suggest that the model of an environmental movement as a kind of elite NGO is far from the only possibility. The essay by Wellens and Hansen on a deity called the Divine Farmer (Shennong) in Taiwan makes the clearest argument for a truly broad-based change in ecological awareness, and they make a compelling case that there has been significant change since my own early observations decades ago. There is of course still some repurposing of local religion by intellectuals, but the overall case here is compelling in the way that we can see these popular changes most clearly by moving beyond the standard NGO model, in this case toward the social and cultural organization of popular temples. Theirs might be the clearest example, but others point at least partially in the same direction. At least some of the groups Münster discusses seem aimed at broad-based ontological changes, although their broader reach is unclear. Qian, Liu and Svarverud’s study of a Chinese eco-village, as another example, suggests that there was a kind of demonstration effect that altered the farming practices of at least some of the original villagers, although they also document some tensions between the two groups. Lu Rots’s study of Hòa Hảo’s attempts to limit plastic waste in Vietnam shows how little effect the campaign had on the religious behavior of many of its own members, but

comparing it to the similar efforts of the Taiwanese Buddhist group Tzu Chi's work on the global promotion of recycling suggests that it may indeed be possible to alter the behavior of large numbers of followers through such campaigns.

3. *How much do state constraints and opportunities shape religious possibilities?*

Nearly all of the chapters in this book make clear just how important an effect state policies have on ecological possibilities, even those that work primarily through religious networks and concepts. Most of the states studied here have strong nationalist agendas and significant limits on the possibilities of an independent civil society. Borrowing loosely from the Buddhist idea of merit-making as a way of accruing better karma, we might see this as a need for political merit-making (Weller, Huang, and Wu 2017). This need leads to several kinds of consequences. One is an emphasis on changing individual selves but avoiding organized social actions, which meshes with the kinds of neoliberal individualism that most of these states support, and at the same time avoids organized protests and other forms of social organization that may clash with the state's levels of tolerance. This might explain, for instance, the emphasis on the individual heart-mind (*xin*) in the Chinese eco-village that Qian, Liu and Svarverud document. A second consequence is to channel environmental movements only into areas that the state considers safe, like plastic waste reduction in Vietnam, where Lu Rots shows how Hòa Hảo commitment to the campaign rises and falls exactly with state policy. The EcoSikh movement similarly promotes both an emphasis on the individual as the main target of change and on a very quiet and "pragmatic" environmentalism, in the context of a state that has limited tolerance for protest and limited space of activism for religious minorities like Sikhs. Tzu Chi had always promoted the individual as its fundamental target, and had always avoided confrontational environmental politics, perhaps partly as an adaption to the authoritarian regime in Taiwan in its early years. We can see this continue as they enter China, in Chen and Li's essay, and the trend becomes even more clear there as the nominally Buddhist group tends to avoid religious topics and to emphasize areas that are already state priorities, like recycling but not vegetarianism. Nielsen and Gokhale's Catholic case from Goa, which focuses on another religious minority in India, once again shows how very cautious the religious establishment has had to be, moving away from many kinds of activism, and lending real but only passive support to the agroecological movement there.

4. *What is Asian here?* Prasenjit Duara's *The Crisis of Global Modernity* is a touchstone for several of the contributions collected here (Duara 2015). In that important book, he partly echoes Lynn White's brief polemic, published well over half a century ago, blaming Christianity (and Abrahamic monotheism more broadly) for helping foment an ecological crisis by thoroughly separating God from nature

(White 1967). Following a partly similar logic, Duara suggests that Asian traditions might offer a more hopeful path forward. He writes, for example: “I distinguish two traditions of transcendence in Eurasia: radical transcendence mostly associated with an absolute notion of the creator God and the more dialogical religious traditions, where transcendence is interwoven with immanent, polytheistic, pantheistic and plural religious practices” (Duara 2015, 14). This line of analysis leads him to suggest that it might “be time for us to revisit the alternative traditions from China and India, many strains of which have adapted to the unceasing circulations of modernity, to examine whether they allow a more viable cosmological foundation for sustainability” (Duara 2015, 2). How much evidence do the chapters of this book give to support his case? As I read them, the jury is still very much out. A few of the cases have strong roots in local Asian traditions. This is most obvious for some of the chapters on Hindu ideas of purity (like the *desi* cows in Baviskar’s chapter), or about the nature of soil (Münster). The Taiwanese Divine Farmer temples also show very strong roots in local tradition (Wellens and Hansen). On the other hand, however, the sets of activities these groups undertake across the region—soil conservation and ecological farming, plastic waste reduction, recycling, and so on—do not seem very fundamentally different from each other or from what we might see in other parts of the world. Nor does the one Catholic case seem particularly different from the more local traditions. Perhaps no one has yet been able to mobilize the appropriate Asian religious resources in ways that Duara would like to see, but that is also a reminder that there are important structural reasons that make it difficult to do so. In any case, the question certainly deserves further exploration.

5. *What is the influence of religion?* There is no doubt that religions offer ways of influencing environmental attitudes and behaviors that the more usual focus on secular NGOs misses. That observation still leaves open the question of whether specific religious theologies, cosmologies, and ontologies really matter, or if instead religions are just becoming post hoc vehicles to carry environmental messages that developed elsewhere. One way of approaching this is to ask how much we can identify unique characteristics of each religious tradition as it addresses the environment; the alternative would suggest a finding that all religions are really promoting very similar goals. At least on the surface, many of the case studies here suggest that there are few characteristics that clearly originate in religious ideas. There is the emphasis on purity in some of the Indian cases, but even that reflects in part a particular state nationalist project of the moment. Much of what is central to the religious projects discussed here seems to bear a broad family resemblance to other ecological movements elsewhere, including secular ones. These include, for instance, Tzu Chi’s emphasis on recycling in China, the Hòa Hảo campaigns to reduce plastic waste, the Catholic passive support for agroecology in Goa, and the

“pragmatic environmentalism” of EcoSikh. Perhaps Taiwan’s Divine Farmer temples offer a partial exception, where the mobilizational capacity of local temples and the ability for deities to communicate directly through spirit mediums has sometimes been crucial in environmental protest. An even clearer case of a true alternative to dominant, secular, global ecological paradigms appears especially in Bäckström’s study of the Blang ethnic group located in China’s far southwest. In this entire collection, only the Blang really represent a group with few earlier ties to the great global and state religions of Asia. Originally living by slash and burn agriculture, the Blang have retained some older ideas of a “theogenic” world characterized by a fully relational understanding of humans’ place in the world—one that does not separate a natural from a human world of what Bäckström calls “manufacture.” On the one hand, his essay seems to offer the greatest hope for a genuinely different approach to ecological problems. On the other hand, the Blang themselves seem to retain little hope that they can fight against a system that has systematically cut off their earlier way of life.

Like any book that aims to advance our understanding, this one does not offer any simple answers to the questions I have asked, or to the many other possible questions one could pose. Instead, it enriches our thinking and challenges our assumptions. It does not let us take for granted so many things that much writing on ecological problems seems to assume, and it offers us new directions as we try to imagine and organize our way past current dilemmas. There is no easy environmentalism here that we can simply adopt or adapt—no simple Buddhist or Hindu or Blang or any other answer. Instead, these essays offer us something that should prove more useful: an opening up of conversational possibilities as we think about our collective future.

References

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