

## **BOOK REVIEWS**

### **Faith and Environment**

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**Roger S. Gottlieb, *A Greener Faith: Religious Environmentalism and Our Planet's Future* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).**

Roger Gottlieb's *A Greener Faith* is a gripping account of the increasing role religious people and institutions are playing in environmental causes around the world. He succeeds admirably in arguing for "the distinct and crucially important partnership between people of faith and the secular environmental community" [p.9]. Gottlieb's thesis is not that religious motivations have come to the rescue and we can now be optimistic. He maintains the realistic awareness throughout the book that "ecothology...will compete with, and only occasionally win out against, social conventions, economics, personal gain, a virtual blizzard of media images, and pure human weakness" [p.55]. Readers looking for affirmation of the sense that environmental crises loom large and, further, that particular religious traditions have contributed to environmental problems will find excellent and specific examples to bear out their views. I found myself nodding in grim gratification at the itemized injuries done by particular leaders in the Catholic Church, by the warm relationship between American Protestantism and capitalism, and by varieties of disengaged Buddhism and Hinduism which coexist with their practitioners' violence to fellow humans and inattention to the earth [pp. 34-35, p.58]. Yet Gottlieb accomplishes what he sets out to do when he states, in his preface, that he "didn't write this book to depress us all further, but to cheer us up" [p.vii].

The cheerful news in the book is that, whether or not they always have (they haven't), all religions 1) *can* provide resources of philosophical wisdom, cultural attitude changes, political engagement, and material support; 2) they *should* draw on their considerable ranks, institutional systems, and inspiring texts; and 3) they increasingly *do* provide rationally justified environmental actors. This last is important; Gottlieb explicitly rejects the assumption that religious environmentalists' motivations are nonrational and faith-based, as opposed to secular environmentalists' rational, justice-based motivations. He repeatedly and convincingly juxtaposes the reasons and beliefs of religious environmentalists with the "currently reigning faith" of modernity, "the one that stresses the 'holiness' of economic growth, ever more complicated gadgets, and hyperstimulating media spectacle" [p.171]. Insofar as religious environmentalism is "more humanly fulfilling and less needlessly destructive," it is "*more* rational" than dominant exploitive attitudes [p.69]. By the end of the book, even a very skeptical reader may find compelling Gottlieb's argument that ecotheology constitutes an alternative framework for rational thought and—contrary to its typical characterization—is not a nonrational competitor with secular environmentalism.

At times, Gottlieb may seem to be making a merely pragmatic argument that secular and religious environmentalists should join hands—that whatever works is good. This is especially the case when he describes truly effective or moving religious environmental

actions, or appeals to the role of religion in politically motivating others, saying, “we don’t know what other people will find convincing...[Who] knows in which listener a responsive chord may be struck?” [p.67]. For this reason, I was surprised to find a review in which it was glibly stated that Gottlieb “wants believers to be green, and Greens to be believers.” The former is clearly true, as evinced by the title, *A Greener Faith* (as opposed to, say, “More Faithful Greens”). Most of the book is devoted to arguing that religious traditions, texts and rituals have the power to reorient human relationships to the nonhuman world, and therefore ought to be interpreted and practiced in ways that do so; rich and varied examples run through every chapter of religious environmentalist activities and successes. But since Gottlieb states clearly that globalization and consumerism are overwhelmingly powerful, he argues that much more political and social action is necessary [p.232]. His stated aim in the book is to show the extent to which ecotheologians are on the job, but I also take it as a call to action to religious believers and leaders. This is clearest at points when he urges political awareness and engagement, arguing that religions should be more creative and alert, saying, “[It is] religiously *necessary*...” [p.76].

Is he also doing the converse, arguing that environmentalism is necessarily religious? Gottlieb identifies religion and belief so broadly as to include spiritual attitudes and worldviews. Noting that acquaintances tell him they’re not religious but “spiritual,” he says that in his view, “spiritual aspirations...are in fact a *kind* of religious perspective, sharing the emphasis on a reality distinct from one’s conventional social position and on values that dissent from the social order” [p. viii]. Chapter Five, “Environmentalism as Spirituality,” is partly an account of what Gottlieb suggests is the presence of “religious or spiritual experiences, beliefs, and actions,” analogous to “essential aspects of religious life” in environmental attitudes and practices [p.150]. Gottlieb argues that “if we want to know who we are and what we must do, much environmentalism tells us, we must acknowledge [moral] relationships,” not just to humans, but “to a vast array of other beings” and “take them to heart. I am not sure a more precise expression of a ‘religious’ sensibility could be imagined” [p.160]. One could take him merely to be saying that we are already spiritual, not that we ought to convert.

And yet, I feel myself getting converted. I take this book to advance an argument for being more spiritual, more mindful, and more attentive to the worldview with which I practice environmentalism. Chapter Six, “Opening the Heart,” may be subtitled “The Ritual Life of Religious Environmentalism,” but feels prescriptive as well as descriptive; ritual, understood as authentic and mindful practice rather than mere patterns “we repeat mindlessly,” “can help us express deep feelings...arouse emotions...and they can soothe us” as well as connect us with fellow humans and with the wider world [pp.174-175]. At a minimum, Gottlieb is persuasive that religious and secular environmentalists have shared values of cooperation, commitment, and interconnection. I look forward to presenting my undergraduate students with this readable, well-researched and articulate argument for religious environmentalism, in order to explore whether we should all be spiritually rational.