

Earth and Spirit

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Sarah McFarland Taylor, *Green Sisters: A Spiritual Ecology, Harvard University Press, 2007.*

Sarah McFarland Taylor's book, *Green Sisters: A Spiritual Ecology*, explores how an evolving commitment by Roman Catholic sisters is challenging traditional modes of monastic life [p. 111] as well as the Church's position on bioregional and economic sustainability. Committed to "healing and mend(ing) the earth," [131] the sisters interviewed for this book have created a loosely affiliated, national resource of advocacy for spiritual and ecological change. [pp. 17-18.] Taking life-vows as religious sisters, these women frame their commitments with new scientific theory as well as by historical and biocentric ethics and theologies. Saving aspects of their monastic histories as farmers save and then distribute heirloom seeds, they companion plant cosmological science with the ecological theology of Thomas Berry, a Passionist priest whose scholarship created an ecological ethos that changed Christian theological and ethical assumptions. [p. 47.] They function within existent church hierarchical structures but also demand change, creating an "engaged green monasticism." [p. 118] Resonating with liberation theology, their way of life bridges conventional "liberal" and "conservative" theological and political designations while emphasizing social and economic justice. [p. 121.] Reconstructed rituals and prayers mediate changed behaviors of recycling, supporting community agriculture, and ecologically redesigning buildings. Younger women are being drawn into these communities along with members of local communities, churched and non-churched. [pp. 246, 275.] Often contested and costly, the sisters' work is producing diverse seeds of challenge to religious institutions and capitalism through new local, national, and global partnerships of food production, ecological resilience, and economic justice. The stories in this book recount the power of the Green Sisters' work from a Los Angeles garden involving homeless people [p. 194] to a biodynamic farming process in New Jersey. [p. 198.]

Taylor's comprehensive study of the rationales, theologies, and personal commitments that shape these women's and their partnering communities reveals a plasticity in the lived religions of Roman Catholicism [p. 132] that is often overlooked. The book describes how this form of ecological spirituality and action has matured and spread. The chapter titles reveal the journey from "Green Catholic Imagination [Chapter 1: integrating various theological and Roman Catholic legacies nourishing their response] to "Changeless and Changing" [Chapter 4: new monasticisms for this environmental era] to "The Tractor is my Pulpit" [Chapter 6: creating sacred agriculture] to "Stations of the Earth" [Chapter 8]. Building a complex case through well-structured arguments about power, resources, and justice, Taylor conveys why and how green sisters conceptualize and enact their new "renatured" religion, one that will help liberate people from life-destroying religious ideologies. She also challenges other scholars to rethink their categories of analysis and critique. [pp. 282, 284.] This well-documented and carefully argued book is a necessary read in the growing field of religion and ecology.

Methodologically, Taylor emphasizes detailed interviews and years of participant observations. She ethnographically describes and then analyzes the sisters' projects and rationales for "reinhabiting" and revivifying their own buildings and gardens and religiously framed lives. Foregrounding the sisters' views as correctives to or enhancements of her experiences and understandings, Taylor uses an open-ended interview method. Through email, ongoing

relationships, and shared retreats and conferences, the sisters adjust, even correct, her descriptions and conclusions according to their own viewpoints and commitments. The breadth and detail of her research uncovers multiple layers and variations in sustainable lived religions within this movement and among its friends. She works with materials from communities as experimental as Genesis Farm, Green Mountain Monastery, and the Santuario Sisterfarm to more established communities, including The School Sisters of Notre Dame, The Dominican Sisters of Sinsinawa, Wisconsin, and the Monroe, Michigan IHM sisters.

The book reveals the evolving interplay of choices made each day at a personal, religiously communal, and/or local level and how those choices inspire others to practice a new spirituality and justice ethic driven by care for the earth. [p. 212.] The longstanding traditions of Catholic social teaching, Taylor theorizes, are revised and renewed through liturgies and devotional practices created by these green sisters. Using insights from bioregionalism, ecological philosophy [p. 61], and feminism, they rework ethics into community-based actions that are aimed at liberating the earth. Involved with edgy rituals of movement, chant, and prayer, often drawn from Native Peoples [p. 235] and other non-traditional sources, these women have become a “sore spot for many Catholics.” Taylor directly addresses these fears that “reverence for the earth and the earth spirituality may really be nature worship.” [p. 260.] Following the sisters’ back-and-forth movements from counter-cultural positions to counter-church decisions, Taylor analyzes the power of these women’s witness and action for genuine ecological change at home, locally, and in their bio-regions. [p. 276.]

Taylor’s writing flows clearly and convincingly. Weaving a personal approach of self-reflective scholarship, she adds richness to information, including examples of slippage in communication, areas of contestation within and among groups, and conflict arising from politicized actions. Her use of ecological metaphors to explain dynamics and interactions throughout the book works effectively as mimesis of the lives, work, and intentions of the sisters.

Reading this book about religious women reinhabiting their vows as acts of justice and love for the earth confirms the obvious. Sustainability movements, intersecting social, economic, and environmental justice, now engage a critical mass of participants. Explaining how ecological consciousness and crisis has liberated action among and within these essentially religious communities, Taylor’s book adds another layer to this global experience. No scholar of social change should miss it.