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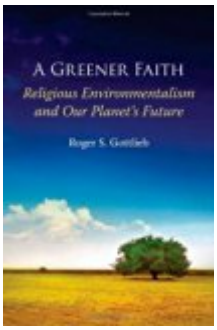
Roger S. Gottlieb. *A Greener Faith: Religious Environmentalism and Our Planet's Future.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2006. x + 288 pp. $29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-517648-3.



Reviewed by Megan Jones

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Religion is under fire. In the past few years, Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, and Christopher Hitchens have written widely publicized books attacking religion (as an institution), theism, and Christianity. Many of their readers applaud these works, viewing them as potent weapons that argue against the increasing power and presence of certain religious beliefs on the world stage. There has been much ink spilled over the rise of evangelical Christianity in the United States, and the threat of Islamic fundamentalists around the globe. A large portion of this commentary is negative, particularly about the latter. A casual observer, if basing his or her opinion regarding the usefulness of religion on contemporary writings, could fairly argue that religion appears more damaging than beneficial to humanity.

Roger S. Gottlieb, a professor of philosophy, provides a countervailing argument concerning the utility of religion in today's world. In his book *A Greener Faith*, Gottlieb offers a descriptive analysis of contemporary "religious environmentalism," positing that religion holds the key to managing and solving the current environmental crisis. Intended for the general reader, this book details the major strains of thought within religious environmentalism and the unique contributions religion has made (and can make) to the environmental movement. Gottlieb's central argument is that religion, which once largely neglected nature and uncritically favored industrial civilization, is now a "leading voice" that urges followers "to respect the earth, love our nonhuman as well as our human neighbors, and think deeply about our social policies and economic priorities" (p. 9). In this book, religion is certainly not the problem, but is instead a useful and effective solution.

One might not initially think that religion could solve environmental problems, considering that much of it deals primarily with metaphysical concerns and not the material earth. Gottlieb argues that religion can help in many ways and aims to provide the "full scope of religious environmentalism" in support of his thesis. By examining the recent shifts in religious thought, the commitment of many religious institutions to environmental issues, and the collaboration of religious and secular environmentalism, Gottlieb

seeks to prove that religion can provide hope to people and alter the trajectory of the human relationship to nature.

In writing *A Greener Faith*, Gottlieb seeks to describe contemporary religious environmentalism, but he does not specifically define what this term means. At the outset, he defines "religion" quite broadly, as a "system of belief, ritual, institutional life, spiritual aspiration, and ethical orientation" that deals with the nonmaterial and a belief in the supernatural (p. viii). The specific religions Gottlieb primarily discusses are Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism, though he frequently makes use of examples from "New Age" versions of spirituality, Native American religion, and animist belief systems. Gottlieb defines spirituality as "not opposed to religion," but as a term that "simply emphasizes a certain way of being religious" (p. ix). By using such an expansive definition of "religion," Gottlieb can ascribe religious qualities to many environmentally related issues and causes. In doing this, he will undoubtedly raise some eyebrows, particularly because he uses myriad examples from very different backgrounds to support his claims. In general, when Gottlieb refers to "religious environmentalism," he is speaking about that portion of the global environmental movement that has some kind of religious tinge, be it a Jewish holiday celebrating trees or Islamic sheiks' injunction against dynamiting fish off the coast of Madagascar. Gottlieb intentionally "casts a wide net" in order to demonstrate the various incarnations of religious environmentalism, but in so doing casts some doubt on his semantics.

Gottlieb believes that "the environmental crisis requires a profound shift in religion's understanding of human existence" (p. 19). The dramatic environmental problems of the past few decades led many theologians and believers to question their faith and its meaning in the world, prompting a reconsideration of the relationship between nature and faith. As he sees it, this reconceptualization resulted in a new "ecotheology" that reinterprets sacred texts (the Bible and Qu'ran), criticizes the way religions previously approached nature, and contributes to the creative evolution of religion. Gottlieb views the myriad descriptions of the human-nature relationship as providing a sound foundation for a new worldview and moral code, one which urges followers to change their thinking regarding all relationships (p. 42). Throughout his book, Gottlieb repeatedly contends that religious environmentalism should be viewed as a progressive political movement, as it requires individuals to expand their moral code. He argues that religious environmentalism, as described by him, follows the traditions of previous religiously-inspired progressive movements such as abolitionism and pacifism (p. 56). According to Gottlieb, religious environmentalism is particularly potent because it reforms religious traditions and also challenges oppression in society. In focusing on a more ecological sense of the relationship between human and nature, this movement challenges people and institutions to fight against racism, sexism, and economic inequality.

The eradication of all oppression is a noble goal of religions, one that is relatively new in some instances. For centuries, Christians and Muslims attempted to stamp out their respective enemies and non-believers. In response to this historical fact and out of concern for the well-being of the public sphere, many world citizens might pipe up and argue that religion has no place in politics or in providing a solution for such a scientific problem. In chapter 2, Gottlieb takes on these opponents by refuting the secular argument that religion and democracy are incompatible, the irrationality of religious belief, the accusation that religious values have no bearing on environmentalism, the idea that religious meddling in politics is a bad idea, and the claim that religion is irrelevant to modern life. The role of religion in politics has long been debated, and readers will either nod in agreement or scoff at

Gottlieb's arguments on behalf of religious activism.

The strength of Gottlieb's synthesis of contemporary religious environmentalism lies in his obviously wide-ranging knowledge of people, institutions, organizations, and belief systems. ***A Greener Faith*** contains a number of concrete examples aptly used to bolster Gottlieb's arguments in support of religion's foray into the environmental movement. Several chapters are dedicated to detailing the actions of religious groups, environmental statements by prominent religious leaders, interviews with leading religious environmental activists, and examples of specific rituals used by various faiths to honor nature. Part of Gottlieb's overall argument is that "religious environmentalism" is a global, interfaith movement (p. 113). He makes his case by referring to and discussing a multitude of religious faiths, people, and organizations, from the relatively liberal World Council of Churches (representing over 400 million Christians) to the Buddhist Sarvodaya Movement in Sri Lanka, from Native American activist Charon Asetoyer to the Pope.

Gottlieb's chapter on the religious roots of environmentalism strives to solidify the connection between religion and the environmental movement. At one point he argues that the similarities between "secular environmental organizations and institutional religion ... make it quite difficult to talk about the relationship" between them because "the two so shade together that it becomes hard to tell them apart" (p. 148). This argument is perhaps the most controversial. There are many instances of religious figures, and individuals who argue for wilderness preservation using religious analogy, in the environmental movement. One of John Muir's most cited quotes is full with religious imagery: "Dam Hetch Hetchy! As well dam for water-tanks the people's cathedrals and churches, for no holier temple has even been consecrated by the heart of man" (quoted, p. 152). However, simply because individuals use religious terms such as "reverence" or "sacred" when speaking about nature, does not mean one can easily equate environmentalism with religion. Yet that is exactly what Gottlieb does, in arguing that "environmentalism can function as a religion because it begins with religious emotions and connects them to an articulated set of beliefs about our place in the universe" (p. 160). He does qualify his sweeping statements, however, by saying that not all environmentalist experience, belief, or action is spiritual. Gottlieb only points to Gifford Pinchot's rational management and Alice Hamilton's concern with public health in early twentieth-century cities as exceptions to this rule; in so doing, he dismisses earlier "green" causes as insufficiently global visions and focuses on the religiosity and spirituality of modern environmentalism. In this sense, his arguments regarding the spiritual dimensions of some part of the modern environmental movement are correct, particularly when one thinks of such new movements as ecofeminism. Gottlieb's sweeping claims for the all-encompassing affinity between religion and environmentalism, however, will elicit skepticism in many readers.

The last chapter of ***A Greener Faith*** places religious environmentalism in a larger context and helps to strengthen Gottlieb's case for the place of religion in environmental politics. Gottlieb views consumerism, religious fundamentalism, and globalization as three major threats to the world, and explains how a uniquely religious environmentalism can combat all three of these, to him, pernicious phenomena. As Gottlieb argues throughout his book, religion can offer a worldview that secular society cannot. One of the most important contributions of religious environmentalism is the concept of hope, the idea that doing something is better than doing nothing. This is a refreshing take on the world's current environmental situation, one that more often than not presents a bleak picture. Pandora might have let all the world's evils escape, but she did manage to save one thing that has managed to sustain hu-

manity these past millenia. Religious environmentalism sustains this hope in the face of increasingly deadly environmental crises: global warming, deadly natural disasters, species extinction, islands of trash in the ocean, and so on (pp. 241-243). To paraphrase Henry David Thoreau, Gottlieb certainly believes that in religion lies the preservation of the world.

Roger Gottlieb wrote *A Greener Faith* because he felt "deeply heartened by the astonishing new movement of religious environmentalism" (p. vii). Religious involvement in the environmental movement is not entirely new, and neither is the suggestion that religion can potentially help solve the environmental crisis. Theologians and religious practitioners began reassessing the role of religion in and attitudes toward the environment in the late 1960s and 1970s, partly in response to historian Lynn White's essay that placed the blame for environmental degradation squarely at the feet of Christianity. In 1967, White published "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis" in the journal *Science*, in which he connected arrogant Western attitudes toward nature to Christian teachings and the eradication of pagan animism. In the same essay that sparked the debate over Christianity's culpability, White himself suggested that religion should provide the remedy. Nor is Gottlieb the first to describe and analyze the emergence of religious environmentalism. Historian Roderick Nash detailed the "greening of religion" in one chapter of *The Rights of Nature* (1989). Nash argued that religion had already begun to "green" considerably by the 1980s, and that "ecotheology had not only become a new word but a compelling worldview."[1]

Gottlieb does not break new ground, but that was not really his goal. *A Greener Faith* does an excellent job of detailing the vast, diverse facets of contemporary religious environmentalism, drawing on the author's extensive knowledge and familiarity of the movement. In so doing, Gottlieb provides some impassioned and well-argued reasons for why religion (of a certain type) should play a prominent role in environmental politics. Not everyone will agree with him, but Gottlieb will certainly inspire many people of faith by his hopeful words and suggestions. This, I believe, was his primary goal.

Note

[1]. Roderick Frazier Nash, *The Rights of Nature: A History of Environmental Ethics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 120.

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