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**You're Grounded, God!**

Arianne Conty's *Grounding God: Religious Responses to the Anthropocene* is an ambitious work of comparative philosophy. It offers a striking synthesis of scholarship by placing several renowned anthropologists and philosophers in conversation, including Philippe Descola, Félix Guattari, Donna Haraway, Eduardo Kohn, Bruno Latour, and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro alongside many others in the broad fields of new materialism and political ecology. These thinkers break down subject-object dualities in order to recognize the myriad agencies that govern human life and reform civilization to prioritize a sustainable future rather than a nihilistic obsession with resource extraction. To this mixture of contemporary theories on ecology, agency, and subjectivity, Conty adds examples from religious traditions to test the extent to which ideas from Christianity, Buddhism, neopaganism, animism, and other religious forms of thought may answer the call of these theorists.

The Anthropocene is often understood as an apocalyptic epoch, when human interference with all manner of environmental processes has completely upset the prevailing planetary patterns that favor diverse lifeforms, leading to a mass extinction event. Conty cleverly embraces this apocalypse as an impetus to do away with the misguided modern philosophies that created it, turning instead to nonmodern forms of thought that have already survived apocalyptic mass extinctions of people and cultures: “Perhaps we will learn from the indigenous how to survive the apocalypse, and how to reconfigure history without progress. Perhaps we may learn from survivors how to create the conditions for a good apocalypse after all” (p. 37). Although there are ultimately few indigenous voices in the book, Conty's efforts are well intentioned, and sympathetic readers will appreciate her attempt to answer Arturo Escobar's call for “a New Story that might enable us to re-
unite the sacred and the universe, the human and the non-human” (p. 32). By “grounding god” in a mixture of earth system science, political ecology, new materialism, and philosophical anthropology, Conty crafts a narrative that supports new types of science-based religious attention to the world.

The branding of this book in its title, however, oversells the role of religion in Conty's argument, which consists more of theoretical responses to the Anthropocene, with dashes of religious thought thrown in for flavor. Conty notably selects the least supernatural or enchanted ideas to work with, so that religious thought can be more favorably melded with natural science and modern critique. With this approach, Conty departs from previous scholarship on religion in relation to climate change or the Anthropocene,[1] as she includes no ethnographic accounts of responses to these problems by actual religious adherents who constitute the real practitioners of such traditions. Some may see Conty's purely theoretical lens as myopic, but the agenda of her book makes sense as a work of comparative philosophy and constitutes a unique endeavor in this field. The book is successful if read as a diverse collection of ideas meant to reframe our relationship to the planet in the twenty-first century.

Although Conty's synthetic methodology that blends ecological and religious theories is a strength of the book, her rapid movement through various theoretical entreaties does risk unmooring readers from lived realities into a realm of unreleatable and unrealistic scholarly injunction. This purely theoretical approach creates an especially odd chapter on Christianity, in which Conty seems to suggest that the best way forward for Christians in the Anthropocene is to abandon several core tenets of Christianity. Conty acknowledges in passing Pope Francis’s innovative encyclical on climate change, *Laudato si’*, but ultimately dismisses it because the pope “retains the human exceptionalism inherent in humanism and warns against pantheisms that divinize the earth.... He thus remains clearly apologetic. According to this apologetic approach, the Christian tradition has always provided an adequate response to the environmental crisis, and there is thus no need for radical revision and transformation” (p. 43). This is a rather limited way reading of *Laudato si’*, as Bruno Latour, himself a Catholic, has remarked on the radical tenor of the encyclical in the way it personifies the planet and equates its treatment with the downtrodden classes of humanity, formulating a terrestrial rather than celestial outlook.[2] Conty, however, turns to more radical theorists that trade theism for panentheism, excavate purportedly animist tendencies in early Christian practices, and advance a scientism that rejects the notion of a transcendent and omniscient creator God. Although Conty acknowledges that “their work may lack the moral authority, institutional resources, and collective actions that religious traditions wield,” such thinkers occupy the bulk of this chapter (p. 47). This does raise a question about Conty's intended audience when the book sometimes feels as if God has been grounded in the sense of being scolded, banished, and unable to socially interact. As Laurie Patton has argued, scholars of religion in an age of mass communication must presume that their work will enter the public square and be discussed by members of the religious traditions they analyze.[3] How many Christians will recognize the heavily modified versions of Christianity endorsed here as constituting their response to the Anthropocene, or even as a new story worth pursuing?

The subsequent chapter on Buddhism does not depart so dramatically from core Buddhist principles, but Conty’s use of its philosophy is limited to ideas that support her argument in favor of nondualistic views of the world. The complete lack of engagement with the critical discipline of Buddhist studies is a blind spot at this point in the book, which leads to an awkward representation of Buddhism that ironically causes Conty to reproduce dualistic categories even as she attempts to abolish them. By opening the chapter with Lynn
White Jr.’s famous but dated 1967 article “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” Conty reproduces the old dualistic division of “Western” versus “Eastern” thought, with the latter presented as a panacea for our environmental ills. Assumptions about inherently environmental Eastern thought, however, ignore the centuries of deforestation and other habitat degradation and species loss in locales like China and Japan. Yet Conty continues to assert that “Buddhist ideology seems ideally suited to confirm and give a philosophical foundation to the science of the ecosystem and of ecology more generally” (p. 59). There is no reference by Conty to the many Buddhist studies scholars who have argued that it is anachronistic and erroneous to presume that Buddhist philosophers were interested in “ecology” or promoted an environmental ethic.[4] In the process, Conty also reproduces the “scientific Buddha” stereotype that scholars have problematized as a modernist colonial relic.[5] The Buddhism chapter bears more fruit when Conty settles into a case study of the Japanese philosopher Tetsuro Watsuji. Here Conty shows her skill as a comparative philosopher by placing Watsuji in dialogue with his teacher Martin Heidegger to explain the textures of the Japanese term *fudo*, which can be roughly translated as “climate,” but more fully means the entire ecological milieu in which one is raised and lives. It is an interesting example of nondualism that itself unseats the purported division between Eastern and Western thought, as Watsuji’s own formulation of *fudo* as a theoretical concept arose out an encounter with Heidegger’s philosophy.

The ways in which our language can unwittingly slip into dualistic expression is an important lesson of Conty’s book, however unintentional it may be at times. Such slippage also occurs at the end of her chapter on Buddhism, when Conty analyzes a passage in which Watsuji writes: “The way that a flower is beautiful is based on human experience; it is not a property of a thing called a ‘flower’ which is separate from human existence” (p. 73). Conty is correct to suggest that Watsuji was influenced by Zen Buddhist thought, as this statement conveys a common Zen teaching that all human experience is mediated by mental formations that create our impressions but cannot capture fully unadulterated reality as it unfolds moment to moment. Conty’s interpretation of the passage, however, strays too far into isolating human experience away from the rest of the environmental milieu that informs its reality. She writes: “From a scientific point of view, the flower’s perfume, color, and shape are intended for the bee and the bird, and without them, there would be no flower. But the useless beauty of the flower is there for us. The flower exists for the bee and the bird, regardless of human spectators, but the beauty does not” (p. 73). If what humans call beauty is based on attributes that help to attract wildlife, such color and scent, then is it right to call the beauty of the flower “useless”? Because the beauty originates from the ecological usefulness of the flower, beauty can only be understood as useless if it is dualistically separated as something solely human, as culture apart from nature. The botanist and Potawatomi philosopher Robin Wall Kimmerer captures the same scenario with a better eye for interdependence when she writes that “the visual effect that so delights a human like me may be irrelevant to the flowers. The real beholder whose eye they hope to catch is a bee bent on pollination…. As it turns out, though, goldenrod and asters appear very similarly to bee eyes and human eyes. We both think they’re beautiful.”[6] Such a description more aptly captures the nondualism of a Zen Buddhist, as the principle of emptiness is demonstrated through a dissolution of distinctions between me and bee and our ability to be naturally moved by beauty. To dispel the illusory conceptual divisions that make our minds cling to preconceived notions or emotions, Zen Buddhists strive for a state of spontaneous action generated by “unknowing” or “no-mind,” which the same flower-insect imagery helped the Zen poet-monk Ryōkan (1758-1831) illustrate:
The flower invites the butterfly with no-mind;  
The butterfly visits the flower with no-mind.  
The flower opens, the butterfly comes;  
The butterfly comes, the flower opens.  
I don’t know others,  
Others don’t know me.  
By not-knowing we follow nature’s course.[7]

We should not presume to know that the beauty that strikes us is unseen by others who are also instinctively drawn to it. To paraphrase Wat-suji, there is a way that a flower is beautiful based on bee experience, too. Can this not overlap with human experience? After all, we inhabit a fudo together.

A deep dive into Zen thought may have taken Conty’s book too far afield, but the omission of Kimmerer is quite puzzling, as Kimmerer’s work directly answers Conty’s call for collaboration between science and indigenous thought. This is one of several cases where a lack of indigenous voices hampers Conty’s argument, or leads to odd terminology. In the introduction, for example, she uses the word “Adivasi” four times without defining it or alluding to its literal meaning in Sanskrit as “original inhabitants.” She only glosses it as “earthling” (p. 30), which is etymologically incorrect. Conty does not acknowledge that Adivasi is the term used for diverse indigenous tribal communities in South Asia, especially India. Instead, those she includes among the imagined “Adivasi” clan include Donna Haraway, Joanna Macy, Jane Goodall, Greta Thunberg, and other environmentalist scholars, surely a surprise to actual Adivasi communities. An equally bewildering omission of indigenous voices comes in Conty’s chapter on animism. Rather than allowing indigenous peoples to explain animistic principles, the chapter is filled with voices of anthropologists who abstractly represent animism and explain the reticence of the modern world to take it seriously. In this way, the chapter is more a conglomeration of critiques than a world-building project to create a new story that responds to the Anthropocene. Remedying this could be as simple as choosing different parts of the cited literature to consider. For example, Conty includes Marisol de la Cadena’s magisterial book Earth Beings (2015), but only to talk about the exclusion of animistic ideas from political discourse. It would be much more radical to include some of the long quotations by de la Cadena’s main informant, the indigenous shaman Nazario, in order to help readers understand why Ausangate is not just an inanimate mountain in Peru, but an “earth being.” By not including these voices in her text, Conty implicitly reinforces the long-standing bias in philosophy, even in its comparative instantiations, that indigenous thought is inadmissible for serious consideration without first being translated into conventional academic paradigms.[8]

The final two chapters of the book are where Conty seems most at home, as they are made up of environmental philosophy without religious matters or mention of gods. In the chapter on panpsychism, Conty wades into one of the central debates in new materialism: How do we discern ethical responsibilities when agency and animacy are pluralized and extended in all directions? She emerges with a sensible solution based on the principle of suffering: those forms of animate sentience that can suffer are more important to safeguard so that suffering is minimized. Additionally, among the classes of non-suffering matter, Conty makes another distinction, between things that originate from the world itself, such as stones and electrons, and those things that have been artificially constructed by humans, such as machines. Here again there is a risk of reinscribing a dualistic worldview, but Conty navigates this carefully via the theories of Alfred North Whitehead to promote an understanding of sentience and ethics on a sliding scale rather than in absolutist divisions. The only regrettable part of this argument is its resort to fallacious slippery-slope, straw-man versions of several interlocutors. In one particularly unfortunate paragraph, Latour is erroneously said...
to “generalize all agency as equal” and Jane Bennett’s understanding of “all matter as vibrant” shockingly reduces her to someone “unable to differentiate between rocks and racoons” (p. 133). Conty repeatedly resorts to such hyperbole, suggesting that “if we are to treat a rock with the same consideration as a jaguar, and a washing machine as equivalent to an indigenous Anuar [sic], it is difficult to avoid a certain moral nihilism” (p. 131). Here she echoes herself from the introduction when she suggests that “conflations between animate and inanimate matter ... leave us unable to make ethical assessments that adjudicate between a rock and an indigenous Yanomami person, between a washing machine and a jaguar” (p. 14). So far as I am aware, no scholar has ever argued that an appliance, animal, or indigenous person be considered as ethically equivalent beings, nor would the average person come to such moral confusion. In her search for a witty turn of phrase, Conty again risks implicitly undermining the rationality of animistic cultures for whom rocks and people may be both be sentient (neither the “Anuar” nor Yanomami are actually discussed in the book). Surely such people would not mistake murdering a man for smashing a stone. In fact, a closer examination of indigenous cultures as well as religious traditions shows that people have long been adept at ethically navigating worlds where animacy and sentience exist by degrees rather than as absolutes.[9]

Overall, Grounding God is a serviceable work of comparative philosophy that collects in one place several important critiques of modernity and interesting reflections on the future of non-modern thought. Conty has a knack for setting similar scholars in conversation with one another, although this often makes the book feel like a review of literature. Those who study new materialism or political ecology will find much here that is already familiar, while scholars trained in religious studies will likely be frustrated by Conty’s lack of attention to specific subfields and frequent sidestepping of religion altogether. Likewise, casual readers hoping to find a scholar taking religion seriously on its own terms will also be disappointed. Ultimately, Conty’s description of her final chapter on ecosophy could stand for the spirit of the book as whole: “values will be promoted here according to modern criteria, in other words in line with science” (p. 147). God cannot come out to play.

Notes


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