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IGNORING RELIGION IS NOT AN OPTION

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It is high time that the environmental humanities got religion. Don't worry. This is not a call for conversion. At least not to any one faith tradition. It is a call to pay attention. We need to take religious beliefs, values, and practices more seriously. Not just within the environmental humanities, but also among those pushing for sustainability transformations. Why? Because religion has always mattered.



Michael Wolgemut, *Lot and his Family Leaving Sodom*, ca. 1493-1500, ink on paper, 3.62 x 4.88 cm. Published in the *Nuremberg Chronicle* (*Liber Chronicarum*) by Hartmann Schedel (Anton Koberger, 1493). [Public domain](#).

Across human history—and still today for the great bulk of humanity—religion has shaped how people understand the world and how they live with everything else on Earth. Religious texts and traditions convey narratives, symbols, beliefs, and practices that inform what it is to be human and how we should relate to other beings and our shared environs. Even within modern largely secular societies, some dominant notions about nature have religious roots. Take the modern Western idea that the Earth should be valued primarily as a storehouse of “resources” and provider of “ecosystem services” for human use. This instrumental view is derived historically from the biblical creation narrative in Genesis 1 that accords humans “dominion” over other creatures. The secularisation of this notion of human supremacy—stripped of the theological qualification that the entire natural world was to be honoured as God’s primordially good creation, and that all creatures are beloved by God and should not be wantonly mistreated—opened the way to that wholesale exploitation of the Earth, which has been so conducive to capitalist industrialisation.

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The role of religion in shaping environmental attitudes and interactions suggests that religious studies should be a core component of the environmental humanities as an inter- and transdisciplinary research area that examines the “underlying cultural and philosophical frameworks that are entangled with the ways in which diverse human cultures have made themselves at home in a more than human world.”¹

This definition comes from the editorial introduction to the first issue of the field’s flagship journal, *Environmental Humanities*. And yet, there is a gap. When that same introduction lists the disciplines that make up the field—environmental history, philosophy, anthropology, sociology, political ecology, posthuman geographies, ecocriticism—religion is missing. Environmental religious studies are not even mentioned. This is not a small oversight. It reflects a broader pattern.

Look at the evidence.² Among the major introductory anthologies in environmental humanities published between 2015 and 2020, only one includes a chapter on religion and ecology.³ Even Emmett and Nye’s widely cited “critical introduction” to the field only touches on religion in passing.⁴ It does not treat the study of religion as a research area in its own right. Only recently have religious studies begun to feature more centrally in introductions to the environmental humanities, notably in Hubbell’s and Ryan’s textbook, which includes an excellent chapter on “Ecological Religious Studies.”⁵ Recognition nonetheless remains patchy.⁶

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This neglect is surprising, especially when we look at the field’s origins. One of its most influential early texts, now seen as a forerunner of the environmental humanities, is Lynn White Jr.’s “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” published in *Science* in 1967. It is a short, speculative essay, but it had enormous impact. White argued that it was a particular variant of Christianity that took shape in the Middle Ages—in response to contingent environmental conditions, technological changes, and economic shifts—that produced the particularly aggressive form of human-centred thinking in Western modernity. That essay became foundational. It was even reprinted in the first anthology of environmental literary and cultural studies.⁷ But White’s conclusion is often misunderstood. He did not call for rejecting religion. He did not even call for rejecting Christianity. Instead, he suggested something more constructive. He invited readers to develop more ecological forms of religious imagination. For him, that meant moving toward something like animism. Still, the message has not fully landed. As recently as 2025, the prominent US ecocritic George Handley felt the need to restate the case. In his book *On Literature and Ecotheology: From Chaos to Cosmos*, he explains in detail “why ecocriticism needs to get religion.”⁸

The consideration of ecology in religious studies itself is not new. Important work goes back to the 1960s, but the field really took off in the 1990s. A key moment came with a series of conferences at Harvard Divinity School between 1996 and 1998, which led to the creation of the Forum on Religion and Ecology, now based at Yale University. The Forum has sister organisations across the globe. Since 2006, it has been joined by the International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature, and Culture. From the beginning, this has been a lively, multidisciplinary space, bringing together history, theology, anthropology, sociology, comparative studies, hermeneutics, and the arts—reminiscent of the environmental humanities’ trajectory. This academic work has developed alongside something equally important: faith-based environmental activism.



Faith for the Climate protesters at The Time Is Now protest. © Eleanor Church. All rights reserved.

One early turning point came in 1982. The United Church of Christ organised a grassroots protest in Warren County, North Carolina. The issue was toxic waste. The plan was to dump it in a poor, predominantly African American community. The protest changed things. It was here that the term “environmental racism” was first used, contributing to the emergence of the environmental-justice movement.⁹ Around the same time, religious leaders began speaking out more strongly on environmental issues. In 1986, representatives from Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Muslim, and Jewish traditions met in Assisi with the WWF and other conservation organisations. That meeting generated a joint statement on why conservation matters to people of faith and eventually led to the creation of the international Alliance of Religions and Conservation in 1995. Many religious environmental organisations were already active, and others formed soon after. Several religious authorities have also issued major environmental statements. Two prominent examples are Pope Francis’ 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si’* and the 2024 Islamic *Al-Mizan*.¹⁰ Care for what Pope Francis calls our “common home” is also creating common ground for interfaith dialogue and activism ranging from small-scale local initiatives through to major global associations, such as [GreenFaith International](#).

Secular global institutions have taken note. In 2017, the United Nations Environment Programme launched the [Faith for Earth coalition](#). More recently, it produced *Faith for Earth: Call to Action*, a collection of materials from 13 religious traditions.¹¹ The project was coproduced with the Parliament of the World’s Religions, the oldest and largest interfaith movement. Its aim is to encourage faith communities to align their beliefs with ecological goals, including those of the Earth Charter.

At the same time, there has been a slow but important shift in recognising Indigenous knowledge within ecoreligious studies. Many Indigenous communities understand the sacred as present within the world. They also hold deep, adaptive ecological knowledge. For generations, they have defended their lands and lifeways against (neo)colonial extractivism. That knowledge is finally gaining

recognition in global policy. It appears in the 2022 report by the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services titled *Diverse Values and Valuation of Nature*.¹² And it is also acknowledged—at least in part—in the 2023 Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Agreement.

Of course, not all forms of religion support ecological care. Research in religion and ecology makes that clear.¹³ So does recent politics. The Trump administration's alignment with a particular form of procapitalist, far-right nationalist, and strongly millenarian Christianity is one example. Some religious expressions actively work against the kinds of transformations we need: transformations that are socially just, economically viable, culturally sensitive, and ecologically sustainable.

Religion cannot be ignored. It must be understood.

But that is precisely the point. Religion cannot be ignored. It must be understood. Environmental scholars and activists need stronger religious literacy. We need to understand the histories involved. We need to grasp the emotional and symbolic power of religious traditions. And we need to pay attention to the power structures and economic interests that shape how religion operates in the world—for better and for worse. The numbers alone make this unavoidable. At least 75 percent of the world's population identifies with a faith.¹⁴ Religion shapes how people see other beings. It shapes how they relate to their environments. And in turn, everyday ways of life shape how religious texts and traditions are interpreted. This is especially true in the Global South. There, religion and spirituality are especially vibrant and diverse, frequently playing a central role in conservation efforts.¹⁵

So, what does it mean to “get religion”? It means taking religion seriously as a force in the world. It means bringing it fully into the environmental humanities. And it means shifting perspective. So far, the field has largely developed in the secular academic contexts of the Global North—including, somewhat paradoxically, the geographically southern continent of Australia—which may be one reason why religious studies have been sidelined. “Getting religion” helps to decentre that starting point. It opens the field to a wider range of ideas, practices, and collaborations. And ultimately, this is not just about academic debate. It is about how we live on this planet. It is about how we respond to ecological crisis. And it is about how we protect—and where necessary restore—the shared habitability of our deeply interconnected, more-than-human world.

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Notes

¹ Deborah Bird Rose, Thom van Dooren, Matthew Chrulew, et al., “Thinking Through the Environment, Unsettling the Humanities,” *Environmental Humanities* 1, no.1 (2012): 1–5, p. 1–2, <https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-3609940>.

² Laurel Kearns and Kate Rigby, “Grounding Religion in the Environmental Humanities,” in *Grounding Religion: A Field Guide to the Study of Religion and Ecology*, rev. 3rd ed., ed. Whitney A. Bauman, Kevin J. O'Brien, and Richard Bohannon (Routledge, 2023), 26–38.

³ Kate Rigby, “Religion and Ecology: Towards a Communion of Creatures,” in *Environmental Humanities: Voices from the Anthropocene*, ed. Serpil Oppermann and Seranella Iovino (Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 273–94.

- ⁴ Robert S. Emmett and David E. Nye, *The Environmental Humanities: A Critical Introduction* (MIT Press, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/10629.001.0001>.
- ⁵ J. Andrew Hubbell and John C. Ryan, *Introduction to the Environmental Humanities* (Routledge, 2021), 129–46, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351200356>. See also Laurel Kearns and Kate Rigby, “Eco-Religious Studies,” in Metzler LIVE *Handbook of Environmental Humanities*, ed. Timo Müller and Evi Zemanek (Metzler, 2025), https://link.springer.com/rwe/10.1007/978-3-662-70886-6_1-1.
- ⁶ E.g., Jerome Cohen and Stephanie Foote, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Environmental Humanities* (Cambridge University Press, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009039369>, lacks a section on religion, while Matthias Schmidt and Hubert Zapf, eds., *Environmental Humanities. Beiträge zur geistes- und sozialwissenschaftlichen Umweltforschung* (V&R Press, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.14220/9783737012669>, references religion only in association with classical antiquity.
- ⁷ Lynn White Jr., “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, ed. Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (University of Georgia Press, 1996), 3–14.
- ⁸ George B. Handley, *Literature and Ecotheology: From Chaos to Cosmos* (Routledge, 2025), 9–95, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003480341>.
- ⁹ Dianne Glave, *Rooted in the Earth: Reclaiming the African Environmental Heritage* (Chicago Review Press, 2010). See also Laurel Kearns and Whitney Bauman, eds., *Religion and Nature in North America* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2024).
- ¹⁰ Francis, *Laudato Si’: On Care for Our Common Home*, Encyclical Letter (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html; Othman Llewellyn, Fazlun Khalid, and others, *Al-Mizan: A Covenant for the Earth* (Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environmental Sciences, 2024), <https://www.almizan.earth>. The website of the *Forum for Religion and Ecology* provides links to statements by individuals or organisations representing all of the world’s major religions, as well as several Indigenous traditions.
- ¹¹ United Nations Environment Programme and Parliament of the World’s Religions, *Faith for Earth: A Call for Action* (UNEP, 2020), <https://parliamentofreligions.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Faith-for-Earth-A-Call-for-Action.pdf>.
- ¹² Patricia Balvanera, Unai Pascual, Michael Christie, and David González-Jiménez, *Methodological Assessment Report of the Diverse Values and Valuation of Nature of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services* (IPBES Secretariat, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.6522522>.
- ¹³ See e.g., Terra Schwerin Rowe’s examination of the religious imaginaries informing modern petrocultures in *Of Modern Extraction: Experiments in Critical Petro-Theology* (T&T Clark, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.5040/9780567708366>, and the analysis of the exploitation of the theology of human dominion to advance the financial interests of big agriculture and fossil-fuel industries in Renan Santos and Laurel Kearns, “Trojan Horses Facing the Mirror: A Comparison Between Religious Anti-Environmental Movement Organizations in the US and Brazil,” *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature, and Culture* 18, no. 3: 318–44, <https://doi.org/10.1558/jsrnc.24014>.
- ¹⁴ Conrad Hackett, Marcin Stonawski, Yunping Tong, Stephanie Kramer, Anne Shi, and Dahlia Fahmi, *How the Global Religious Landscape Changed From 2010 to 2020* (Pew Research Center, 2025), <https://doi.org/10.58094/fj71-ny11>.
- ¹⁵ Radhike Borde, Alison Ormsby, Stephen Awoyemi, and Andrew Gosler, *Religion and Nature Conservation: Global Case Studies* (Routledge, 2023).



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