Editor's Introduction

As this issue of the JSRNC was nearing completion yet another article detailing the construction of and controversy over Kentucky's Ark Encounter theme park, masterminded by Ken Ham and his organization Answers in Genesis, appeared on the newswire. The park will contain a life-sized replica of the ark supposedly piloted by Noah during the great flood mentioned in the Hebrew Bible, a disaster purportedly engineered by Ham’s deity which, according to the story, led to the most dramatic simplification of the planet’s biological diversity ever. This unique park features educational exhibits that depict dinosaurs living alongside humans and inform visitors that the planet is little more than 6,000 years old. This ‘young earth’ notion was first broadcast by the engineer Henry Morris and the theologian John Whitcomb in 1961, but in the hands of groups like Answers in Genesis, it has enjoyed widespread popular traction. According to a 2014 Gallup poll, the percentage of US inhabitants who believe that humans were created in their present form within the past 10,000 years (or less) represents 42% of the population.

Not all Christians reject scientific understandings, however, and this includes evangelicals. Joel Hunter, pastor of the large and influential evangelical Northland Church in Orlando, Florida, who is also a spiritual advisor to President Obama, seeks to integrate science with his theology and insists that Christians must accept science, not run away from it. He even formed a deep friendship with the biologist E. O. Wilson through extended conversations with him about the relationship between religion and science. Hunter was convinced by Wilson and others, including the evangelical biologist Calvin DeWitt and evangelical climate scientist Sir John Houghton, that anthropogenic climate change is happening and that Christians had a moral responsibility to respond to it. Likewise, Pope Francis’s wide-ranging encyclical Laudato Si tied environmental decline to social inequality and proposed theological responses that he hoped would mitigate or ameliorate it. In both of these cases, scientific literacy is central to the theological vocation and fundamental moral stance of practitioners. These diverse approaches to science and the environment raise complicated questions, such as: To what extent do the views of prominent religious leaders influence the masses in the pews? And, what is the relative importance of religion when it is entangled with economic, political, and social variables? This special issue provides a benchmark two-part study that explores such questions in depth.

In Part One, Bron Taylor provides a cultural history of those who argue (or dispute) that one or more religions hinder environmental concern and action. He then also documents the views of those who have a positive assessment of the role of religion in environmental behavior, including those who contend as well that religions are becoming significantly more environmentally friendly and that religion is a critically important variable in environmental behavior. This perspective Taylor calls ‘the greening of religion hypothesis’, which we have adopted as the title for this special JSRNC issue.

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2 Morris and Whitcomb penned a book called The Genesis Flood (1961), now widely rejected, as are Ham’s views.
The second study (Part Two), a research and writing collaboration between Taylor, Bernard Zaleha, and Gretel Van Wieren, provides what is undoubtedly to date the most comprehensive review of research investigating the role of religion and the affective dimension of human life in environment-related behaviors. In it, the authors focus especially on extant qualitative and quantitative research, ranging from Abrahamic religions, to religions originating in Asia, to indigenous traditions, to nature-based spiritualities and philosophies (that profess in various ways a reverence for nature), and beyond to a wide range of religion-resembling social phenomena. Although their review has not found significant support for a dramatic greening of the world's most prevalent religious traditions, it does provide evidence that indigenous traditions and some newer forms of nature-based spirituality tend to promote pro-environmental behaviors, while noting that new hybrids are emerging that might be environmentally salutary.

Next, a case study of the transition town movement from J. Garrett Boudinot and Todd LeVasseur provides some intriguing data related to the hypotheses and research reviews described above. Boudinot and LeVasseur explore a now global set of social movements that began in the UK. They analyze the normative and spiritual dimensions of these movements, whose focus is on re-imagining human social and political communities in the face of climate disruption and ‘peak oil’. The authors argue that participation in these social movements fosters a form of dark green religiosity, and accompanying terrapolitan ethical sensibility. If they are right, it provides one data point which supports the contentions advanced in the other two articles.

The issue concludes with two book reviews, the first a review by Bron Taylor of noted legal scholar Jay Wexler’s book, When God Isn't Green: A World-Wide Journey to Places Where Religious Practice and Environmentalism Collide. Taylor notes Wexler’s analysis of instances where religion and environmental values conflict, which occur in cultures across the globe. Wexler employs a somewhat journalistic approach surveying many of these conflicts, and his investigations are another illustration of the ambivalences that are highlighted in the articles included in this issue. The second includes a review of the Christian ethicist Gretel Van Wieren’s book Restored to Earth: Christianity, Environmental Ethics, and Ecological Restoration from noted theologian Norman Wirzba, who has written extensively, particularly on agricultural ethics. This review at least illustrates that not all Christians are, like Ken Ham, mentioned above, antagonistic toward environmentally salutary Christian ethical mores.

This issue of the JSRNC does not answer definitively which, if any, religious and philosophical worldviews might eventually and most effectively promote dramatic environmental mobilization. But it sets the stage for further research exploring what is ultimately a much more varied and ambiguous scene than many scholars have imagined. Importantly, this issue could be utilized fruitfully as a starting point for students of religion and ecology and for scholars who are relatively new to this field of enquiry. Scholars who specialize in the complex relationships between religious beliefs and practices, and environmental behaviors, will likely find some surprises, some provocative arguments about major trends, and a tremendous breadth of resources produced by scholars from a wide range of disciplines.

In sum, an exciting new era of religion and nature scholarship awaits, and this issue of the JSRNC provides a seminal backdrop for future research into the role of what we call 'religion' in environment-related behaviors.

Lucas F. Johnston
Senior Book Reviews Editor/Assistant Editor
References