

Editorial

# Religion and Nature in a Globalizing World

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Despite the recent series of electoral victories by populists seeking to capitalize on antipathy about globalization, our world remains radically interconnected. The planet's ecosystems are just as dependent on global climatic processes as before; the world's societies continue to experience intensifying levels of cultural exchange; and economies still operate with increasing disregard of limits, be those political borders or environmental tipping points. This historical moment seems fragile—it is, of course—but persons and communities remain as dynamic as ever in finding new ways to understand and respond to mounting environmental crises. Many scholars have, for the past several decades, attended to the role played by religion as a source for this dynamism.<sup>1</sup> This Special Issue of *Religions* seeks to advance this expanding body of knowledge by paying particular attention to questions and issues related to globalization.<sup>2</sup>

The term globalization is put to work by people for whom it serves a range of purposes. For some, it is a descriptive term that captures the various processes of current historical period of intensified cultural and economic exchange among societies.<sup>3</sup> For others, it designates a homogenization through which cultural differences and local livelihoods are eroded by the deracinating forces of international capitalism.<sup>4</sup> Ironically, where this normative critique was once the province of leftist theoreticians, it now also circulates as a key talking point in resurgent rightwing nationalisms where traditionally powerful groups decry the arrival of immigrants and new cultural forms. Conceived nearly two years ago, at a time of apparent cosmopolitanism, this Special Issue aspires to capture the rich variety of relationships between religion and nature in a world characterized by vibrant cultural intermingling, by the exchange of knowledge and ideas across borders, and by concern about the threat of climate change shared by leaders in every country around the globe. That threat looms more largely than ever, and people—with their ideas, traditions, and gods—continue to circulate amongst one another with an intensity unprecedented in human history. However, conversations about religion and nature might seem more appropriately focused on local circumstances, parochial environmental knowledge, and community engagement. This is indeed the scholarly enterprise taken up in the several articles conjoined here, and yet, each of these essays points beyond the particular concerns of local religious communities toward broader conditions of globalization that are inherently woven into the fabric of contemporary religious life.

For example, David Krantz' article on shmita examines the historical and theological developments underpinning the emergence of ecologically-attenuated rituals among the global Jewish community. Shmita is a highly particular form of religious praxis, which we see here as renewed and re-interpreted in the face of new ethical questions. Sarah Robertson-Bertoni's examination of Muslim American

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, the series of volumes on religion and ecology published by the Forum on Religion and Ecology in conjunction with the Harvard's Center for the Study of World Religions [1].

<sup>2</sup> Within the subfield of religion and the environment, few social scientific publications adopt a specifically global frame of analysis. One of several notable exceptions to this lacuna is [2].

<sup>3</sup> This usage is best represented by the work of Roland Robertson; see, for example [3].

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, [4].

ecological foodways compliments this analysis, developing a more narrowly focused consideration of how a specific community is adapting and applying a conventional mode of religious practice to environmental considerations. In each of these articles, religiously grounded traditions linked to the production and consumption of food can be seen in context of globalization, situated in terms of the religious dynamism of diasporic communities. Environmental challenges, especially those that, like climate change, confront us each and every one, are themselves not religiously particular; rather, religious communities and traditions offer vehicles through which such challenges are received and met. Understanding these broader patterns by which environmental issues are articulated into the vernacular of local-scale religiosity requires detailed cases, like those presented here.

Other contributions to this Special Issue serve as correctives to the strong bias toward North Atlantic cases, in particular, as counter-weights to the disproportionate availability of social scientific information about religion and nature in the United States. Despite a rapidly expanding and improving body of scholarly work in this field, there remains an acute need for theoretically sophisticated, empirically grounded research on religion and nature in a globally comparative frame. For instance, Miriam Pepper's and Rosemary Leonard's article considers the specificities of denominational responses to climate change in the Australian context, providing important nuance in a swirling debate about how religious sentiment shapes public opinion about climate policy. Working in a similar vein, but with quite different conclusions, Catrien Notermans, Albertina Nugteren and Suma Sunny offer an ethnographic and historically informed analysis of conservation in Kerala, drawing attention to the ambivalence of theological tradition to matters of environmental policy. In this South Indian case, the application of religious sentiment to questions of environmental conservation would appear to have produced a mixed record.

This Special Issue of *Religions* reinforces other developments within the field of religion and environment by taking an interdisciplinary social scientific approach. Knowledge about the interplay between religious ideas and environmental practices is most significant when scholars attend to the political and social ramifications of such linkages. These tensions are taken up explicitly in Lucas Johnston's essay on sustainability discourse in higher education, which interrogates the ways in which the production of academic knowledge itself is implicated in the power dynamics that yielded 'crisis' in the first place.

Under the mounting social, economic, and ecological pressures attendant of a changing climate, these and related questions are increasingly pressing themselves on scholarly work across a variety of fields, from religious studies to environmental history, from environmental humanities to international relations. This Special Issue of *Religions* addresses that need by advancing knowledge about religious engagements with environmental issues and identifying gaps in the existing scholarly literature. 'Religion' is a meaningful conceptual tool for knowledge production about the variegation among diverse cultural engagements with the environment, a tool that offers scholars the ability to associate the multifaceted and uneven ways that societies are making and meeting ecological challenges with the systems of power and symbolism that both limit and expand the possibilities for progress. The articles assembled here help expand and provide contextual depth for this larger interdisciplinary undertaking.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## References

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