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Frans Wijsen (Eds.)

Varieties of Religion and Ecology

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The picture shows the Imogiri graveyard of the kings and their families that belong to the kingdoms of Mataram Sultanate, Yogyakarta and Solo. Surrounded by nature, it is a popular site of sacred pilgrimage.

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FOREWORD

The relation of mankind with nature and its position in the universe has been an important topic for philosophers and various other scientists since man started to ask questions. Although our understanding of the geo-physical, ecological and chemical processes has improved enormously over the past centuries and continues to grow, many basic life questions remain unanswered.

In the ancient history of the human race, spiritualism and religion evolved, driven by the need to explain the role and interaction of mankind with nature and the universe. These beliefs became increasingly important as they formed the basis for norms, values, and social behavior. In fact, spiritualism and religion are the cornerstones of our social cohesion and cultural identity. Apart from these generic features there are of course also many differences between the various beliefs. One could state that roughly each (sub)culture or (sub)-population has its own spirituality or religion with its own set of dogmas and assumptions.

Within the context of sustainability there is nothing wrong with that, because there is no religion or spirituality that in its core aims at the destruction of nature of which man is part of. Actually, the diversity of beliefs should be celebrated because we need all of them to regain the balance with nature.

It goes wrong when a few of us use the social power of spirituality and/or religion for its own gain. Unfortunately, the history of mankind is interlaced with this kind of incidents where wars, or "friendly" takeover of someone else's resources (colonialism) are justified "in the name of God". This underlines once more the importance of a better and wider understanding of how spiritualism and religion came to live, what they entail, and how they can help to restore the balance between mankind and nature.

Within this context, the book Varieties of religion and ecology, Dispatches from Indonesia is an important source of information. It helps us realize a better intercultural understanding and mutual respect between The Netherlands and Indonesia. Additionally, it provides guidelines on how to join forces in a concerted action to save our planet and with that the future of the human race.

Toine Smits,
Professor of Sustainable Water Management,
Radboud University, Nijmegen

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INTRODUCTION
THE VARIETIES OF RELIGION AND ECOLOGY

Zainal Abidin Bagir

This book opens with a case examining the construction of the New International Yogyakarta Airport. It was built to accommodate more than 4 million tourists per year who visited the city, known in tourism books as a university town and the Javanese "cultural capital" of Indonesia. The building of the new airport, however, caused controversies over acquisition of the site because of dramatic conflicts with the people, mostly Muslim farmers and fishermen, who live in the area. Chapter 2 studies a similar case of the reclamation of the Benoa Bay in the Hindu majority Bali.

Most other chapters in this book are similar in the sense of being based on empirical research on particular recent problems related to the environment in Indonesia. Not all of them may seem to be natural cases of "religion and ecology", but all chapters show the different ways religions—in their many dimensions—engage with ecological concerns—in a broad sense.

This introduction locates the chapters in an attempted map of the field. It goes without saying that there are many ways of drawing a map of this kind due to the intent of the cartographer. My purpose here is simply to show the varieties that are less developed and emphasize areas which are less known in the literature.

The Field and its Recent Developments

Religion and ecology as a field of study may be said to have begun in the 1960s, not long after the emergence of awareness of a global environmental crisis the decade before. Since the beginning, the study of religion and ecology has never been a purely academic field. Instead, it is tied to engagement with real life problems, and has often been closely associated with environmentalism.

Religion relates to the environmental crisis in several ways. First, as seen in the earliest analysis of the relations between the Muslim and Christian worlds where (some form of) religion, or its rejection, was identified as among the

causes of the environmental crisis. In 1966, the Muslim philosopher Seyyed Hossein Nasr delivered four lectures at the University of Chicago, which were later published as *Man and Nature: the Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man*. He saw that the crisis originated in secularized modern science, which emptied the cosmos of its sacred character: "The world view of modern science, especially as propagated through its vulgarization, itself contributed to this secularization of nature and of natural substances" (Nasr, 1967/1990, p. 21).

A year later, in 1967, the American historian Lynn White, Jr., published an article in *Science*, which specifically blamed Christianity for the crisis: "By destroying pagan animism, Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects" (p. 1205). As such, "Christianity bears a huge burden of guilt" in today's ecological crisis (White, 1967, p. 1206). While this controversial argument may seem simplistic, it stimulated responses which animate the discourse on religion and ecology even to this day. Beyond Christianity, one of White's (1967) widely quoted statements is: "What people do about their ecology depends on what they think about themselves in relation to things around them. Human ecology is deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny—that is, by religion" (p. 1204).

Second, partly as a consequence of the first, religion is expected to contribute to the solution of the problem. Religion may contribute in ways that are different from how science, technology and policy engage with the environment. In this regard, as two pioneers of religion and ecology, Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim (2018), put it:

> [t]he work in religion and ecology rests in an intersection between the academic field within education and the dynamic force within society. This is why we see our work not so much as activist, but rather as "engaged scholarship" for the flourishing of our shared planetary life. (p. 10)

The maturity of the field today is evidenced not only in the emergence of reference works on the field,[1] a few hefty handbooks,[2] journals (or many

[1] The Harvard series Religions of the World and Ecology (1997–2004) edited by Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim is an obvious example, which is also constitutive of the field. Also see The Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology: https://fore.yale.edu/

[2] The *Routledge Handbook of Religion and Ecology* (2017) edited by Willis Jenkins, Mary Evelyn Tucker, and John Grim, *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology* (2006) edited by Roger S. Gottlieb, and the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature* (2005) edited by Bron Taylor.

special editions on the topic in more general journals)[3], and courses, but also works that self-reflect on this development. In *Inherited Land: The Changing Grounds of Religion and Ecology* (2011), the editors perceive their work as a reflection on the field, the land they inherit. It describes the work of scholars in the field as "[paying] attention to contemporary environmental degradation and [connecting] these challenges to the beliefs and practices of religious communities and traditions" (Bauman et al., 2011, pp. 10–11). It is interdisciplinary and academic, but also engaged.

Inherited Land proposes a different way of doing religion and ecology, not focusing on particular religions (such as the Harvard series), but reflecting on methodological issues and interrogating the very conception of "religion" and "ecology". As an example, the chapter by Eleanor Finnegan (2011) criticizes the world religion paradigm which has biased the field. The world religion paradigm has also very significantly coloured a certain way of looking at religion, which does not seem to be well informed by critical discussion of the term "religion" in religious studies. She quotes Gottlieb's *Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology* which formulates the main questions in religion and ecology in this way: "What have the world's faiths believed about the human relation to nature? And how must beliefs (and actions) change as we face the environment?" (Finnegan, 2011, p. 67)

Such a formulation, which is representative of a large portion of the discourse, is not only biased toward particular (world) religions, but also the major representatives of the tradition, and tends to rely on (theoretical) construction of religious (theological, ethical) responses to the problems. In contrast, Finnegan's study, based on her empirical research on Muslim farms in the US, moves beyond that construction of the field. It does not look at the expression of religious texts but focus on the practice of communities; it does not focus on the mainstream, but on double-minority religious communities (sufi Muslims in the US). With this, she also tried to move beyond what may be perceived as Western (mostly Christian) conceptions of the field, which are based on particular construction of what "religion" is.

To continue another example of a different "Islam and Ecology" conception, one may look at Anna Gade's recent excellent work, *Muslim Environmentalisms*, published in 2019. Gade (2019) notes that, "With few exceptions,

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[3] *Worldviews: Global Religions, Culture, and Ecology* and *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature, and Culture*.

work in this area tends not to discuss living people or detailed particulars" (p. 4). While criticizing the over-emphasis on textual-analytical study of main Islamic texts, she does not abandon that type of study but weaves it with an ethnography of Muslim lives to show the diverse Muslim landscapes of environmentalism, in which text and context are inseparable. Ethnographic work also helps to sift Eurocentric bias in studies of environment and religion. Rather than trying to find comparable terms, such as the central term "stewardship", in the Qur'an, she listens to how Muslims read the scripture and interpret their surroundings. Islamic norms are found, or re-constructed, not only through studies of key terms in the scripture but as expressed in lived traditions. In this way, rather than submitting Islam to the dominant discourse (in her book, her central attention is environmental humanities), she tries to bring Muslim voices forward to contribute to shaping the discourse. Needless to say, this observation applies not only to Islam (in Indonesia or Southeast Asia as her main sites), but also other religions, including Christianity, as chapters on Christianity in this book show to some extent.

The Book: Varieties of Religion and Ecology

The chapters in this book are not guided by a common theoretical framework, but intend to portray varieties of "religion and ecology" which follow some of the new trends depicted above. They are based on ethnographic or other empirical research and cast a wide net of what is understood as religion and ecology. The meanings and many dimensions of each of these terms are also contested. The varieties of religion and ecology stem from the many dimensions of each term, "religion", "ecology" and, not the least, the "and", which depicts the relation between the two—some cases do prompt questions about whether we can truly separate what is religious and what is ecological.

First, the chapters here represent diverse religious traditions/communities, which include Islam, Hinduism, Christianity and indigenous religions. But there are also deeper pluralities at play. Ilham's chapter looks at a group of progressive Muslims, who identified themselves as Marxist, but at the same time are deeply grounded in Islamic tradition—more specifically the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) tradition. NU is a variant of Indonesian Islam and the group is a variant within it, which is not always accepted by the main, official representative of NU.

The Islam of the Muslims in the area of Citarum river, discussed in Frans Wijsen and Haryani Saptaningtyas' chapter, is of a different variant. There are local Muslims, but also a Muslim painter, grounded partly in their Sundanese tradition, all responding to the polluted river which affects their daily lives. The community which does rain harvesting in Yogya, discussed in Rani Hapsari's chapter, represents yet a different religious community. While the activists/member of the Banyu Bening community are mostly Muslim, they are not specifically identified by their religion; yet some use religious, especially Islamic, language to describe their ecological awareness. Interestingly they learned rain harvesting from a Catholic priest well-known for his ecological works.

The chapter by Singgih and his colleagues looks at a Christian village in Malang, East Java, while the Christian communities discussed by Tarigan and Simbolon show tensions with indigenous religions in two different districts of North Sumatra. They all are different representations of Christianity. Some observers group the communities in North Sumatra into the same ethnic group (Batak), but actually they are different: one is Karo Batak (Tarigan's chapter), the other is Toba Batak (Simbolon's). In general, they may be identified as Christians (especially when a different identification was not possible under Indonesian law), but they also represent two different indigenous traditions in the area that are in tension with Christian churches which regard them as practicing un-Christian traditions. It is interesting to compare it with Ribka's case, in which the Christian church in Central Maluku adopts the *adat* (customary tradition) of *sasi* (abstaining from taking natural products, such as fruits and fish, for a certain period of time).

Ribka contends that while studies of *sasi* abound, many are colored by Christian/world religion/colonial biases. She uses an indigenous religion paradigm to try to dig deeper into the practice and its ecological significance. The entanglement of *adat,* religion and environmentalism also appears in the chapter by Sihombing, which looks at an environmental movement in Bali. The movement started as a secular environmentalist movement, but was later supported by official Hindu arguments, put forth by the national Hindu religious council, as well as international discourse on "sacred sites". All these chapters show how rich and deep the plurality of "religion" is on the ground and always reminds us to avoid generalizing or essentializing it.

The *second* origin of the varieties is the term "ecology" (or environment). Chapters in this book depict quite diverse and broad meanings attached to the

term. It concerns land (Ilham), river (Wijsen & Saptaningtyas), sea (Ribka), bay (Sihombing), rain water (Hapsari), mountain (Tarigan), forest and lake (Simbolon), mangrove forest (Singgih et al.) and health (Northcott). They refer to kinds or qualities of beings and places which are part of nature, not only "spaces" but places which are always tied to the people living there. Despite the differences, they all show how the issues taken up are linked in different, complex ways with the broader social, political and economic contexts. These are clearly not just about religious views on nature /environment, but how the religious is entangled with the ecological.

Third, as the field of religion and ecology is activist or engaged, one may also ask how the entanglement impacts the people, the religion, and the environment. Sihombing's chapter, on resistance to a business developer's reclamation of the Benoa Bay, shows how a completely secular understanding of issues such as this does not work in Hindu majority Bali (and one may surmise, in Indonesia in general, with different religious majorities in different areas). The secular environmental movement readily uses the argument of "sacred site" (which is religious, but at the same time may also be "publicized" by reference to international UN norms on sacred sites, and officiated by the national Hindu religious council) to help their cause. Wijsen & Saptaningtyas' chapter shows that, not only in advocacy, but in environmental policy making, a good understanding of the religious dimensions (and their pluralities) of the community is important. In this regard, Ilham's case is fascinating in a different sense, as it shows how an environmental movement is combined with an agrarian movement in resisting the building of the new airport in Yogyakarta. The hybrid movement represents a creative interpretation of Islamic traditions, informed by a Marxian understanding, and puts emphasis on the values of social justice and standing with the victims of development.

Ilham's and Sihombing's chapters represent the "hard" case of environmentalisms, which are not only about promoting "green religion", but challenge the mighty state and corporations frontally, and sometimes responded to violently—in Bali they won, in Yogya they lost. But the main issue here is surely not about whether a case is hard or soft, but how they help us dig ever deeper into understanding both religion and ecology. Studies of this kind also show how the environmentalist practice of individuals and communities investigated here disrupts the strict sectoral segregation of a secularized paradigm and opens possibilities to see interactions between

religion and ecology, to the point of, in some cases, blurring their differentiation.

The last stage of the preparation of this book took place during the Covid-19 pandemic, which is not only an issue of public health but has ecological significance. As such it is fitting to end this book with a chapter on religion and ecology after Covid-19. Michael Northcott's article opens with a recap of the history of Indonesian environmentalism since the Dutch colonial time to the present day. He investigates the relationships between public health, environmental justice and the non-recognition of indigenous people—all of which are connected by way of aspiration for development and modernisation. He argues that the Covid-19 experience should help refocus environmental action, awareness, policy making and regulation on human health, and that "religion remains a huge source of 'social capital' in Indonesia" in this direction.

The editors hope that these studies will contribute to the growing religion and ecology discourse and, based on Indonesian experiences, enrich the global conversation. This publication has taken more time than we envisioned in the beginning and gone through different stages, but we are very happy that it is now published. We hope this will be followed by more publications on religion and ecology in Indonesia, as there are surely many more avenues to be explored.

Acknowledgment

Five chapters of this book come from Master's students' theses at the Center for Religious and Cross-cultural Studies (CRCS), Universitas Gadjah Mada (UGM). The initial idea was to collect some of the interesting theses on religion and ecology, which we first discussed in March 2017 with Whitney Bauman when he visited CRCS. The project did not go further for some time after the workshop. In 2019 we continued with another workshop with Frans Wijsen, assisted by Daan van der Leij, a Radboud University M.A. student who was at CRCS for a semester. At this point we conceived this project as part of the work of the Ecology Working Group of the Netherlands-Indonesia Consortium for Christian-Muslim Relations (NICMCR). Emmanuel Gerrit Singgih (Duta Wacana Christian University) and Rani Hapsari (UGM lecturer in political ecology) joined the group and each contributed a chapter in this book. We also want to thank Dewi Candraningrum, the editor of a series on

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