The Routledge Handbook of Ecolinguistics

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Contents

List of Illustrations
Acknowledgments and Dedication
List of Contributors

Introduction

Alwin F. Fill

PART I
Languages in Their Social and Individual Environment

A Linguistic and Biological Diversity: Minority and Majority Languages, Endangerment and Revival

1 Biological Diversity and Language Diversity: Parallels and Differences
Tove Skutnabb-Kangas and David Harmon

2 The Ecology of Language Contact: Minority and Majority Languages
Albert Bastardas-Boada

3 Language Endangerment and Language Death: The Future of Language Diversity
Suzanne Romaine

4 The Economy of Language Ecology: Economic Aspects of Minority Languages
Alwin F. Fill

5 Language Evolution from an Ecological Perspective
Salikoko S. Mufwene

6 Ecological Aspects of Language Planning
Robert B. Kaplan
Religion, Language and Ecology

Todd LeVasseur

We're running time backward, from Apocalypse to Genesis, as de-creation.
(Larry Rasmussen, 2013: 89)

In this chapter, I invite the reader to consider the rich potential for dialog that exists between the emerging field of ecocultural studies and the more established field of religious studies. To provide but one example, I will analyze a key textual passage from the Hebrew Bible, Genesis 1:26–28, suggesting that evidence garnered from the robust analysis that a religious studies lens provides can help scholars of ecocultural studies. Concomitantly, I hope to provide evidence for how ecoculturalists, focusing especially on the ‘Hallidayan tradition’ that investigates the correlation between language and the use of natural resources, and especially the unsustainable use of said resources (LeVasseur, 2015a: 22), can help scholars in religious studies. Here my focus is especially on those scholars working at the interface of religion and nature issues, where I argue ecoculturalists can help generate a more nuanced understanding of religion–nature interactions.

Religious Studies

The field of religious studies is largely a North American phenomenon, with a professional group, the American Academy of Religion (AAR), having membership in the thousands. Most scholars who study religion in Europe, where the modern university system began, do so from specifically a social science perspective, utilizing lenses from political science, economics, anthropology, and/or sociology, predominantly, or from a theological perspective. This model is typically followed at most non-North American Universities, but not all of them.

When the modern study of religion in a North American context emerged out of the liberal programs in the mid-1900s, it did so largely on the back of a European scholar who immigrated to the United States: Mircea Eliade, who taught over many years at the University of Chicago. Eliade, a Romanian, modeled what has become known as the historical approach to religions. This approach situates religion as a unique, irreducible phenomenon independent of history, where what we define and understand as religion originates in a stand-alone realm of the 'sacred' (Eliade, 1957). In Eliade's reading, which tremendously shaped the subsequent growth of the North American discipline of religious studies, human activities associated with this 'sacred' realm become objects of study. Religious studies scholars thus approach what they see as a unique subject domain, and do so with a variety of methodological tools drawn from a wide variety of disciplines, and do so in stand-alone departments (or those fused with philosophy departments). Today there are many ways to study the phenomenon of religion, with a variety of these being considered within the purview of the humanities, although social scientific and theological approaches are also utilized in many departments.

Overall, many scholars who professionally study the phenomenon of religion may utilize textual studies; comparative studies; feminist studies; queer studies; critical theory; critical race theory; philosophy; archaeological study; ethnographic study; ritual studies; animal studies; postcolonial studies; and many, many others. Two approaches will be highlighted in this chapter, as both have direct bearing on language, ecology and religion: the study of religion and nature/ecology, and hermeneutics/textual study, focusing especially on ecohermeneutics.

Religion and Nature

In 1967, the historian Lynn White, Jr. published what has become a famous, and some would argue, foundational article that helped generate the formation of environmental ethics, ecotheology, and religion and nature/ecology, respectively. In this article, "The History of Religion and the Western Christian Tradition" (1967), White argues that the ongoing destruction of the planet has its roots within Western Christianity, so that if humans are to first halt, and then ameliorate, such destruction, it is not going to be through science and technology, but through humans rethinking their ideas about human–nature relations. More specifically, for White, humans must specifically rethink and redefine their religious ideas about nature, which White opined would then trigger a shift towards more sustainable lifeways. In essence, White was writing himself into an age of ecological crisis, where the world was becoming clear to many that certain human civilizations were in crisis. Other scholars took inspiration from White’s model and effort and began to systematically explore similar questions within their respective domains of scholarly inquiry.

Within religious studies, this avenue of questioning led to the formation in the 1990s of the "Religion and Ecology" section of the AAR. The history of this move within religious studies is expertly shared by John Grim and Mary Evelyn Tucker (2014), and is also rightly criticized by Bron Taylor (2005). Taylor, along with others, subsequently formed the International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture in 2005, spearheading the exploration of human–nature–religion interactions that are not as apologetic as the religious and ecology approach, and it is within the religion and nature approach that I received my own professional training. Regardless, both religion and nature/ecology have similar research agendas, and both at this stage are predicated upon the realization that religions do not simply appear and exist on their own, sui generis, but evolve in conversation with other social and natural forces. Religions and other cultural systems, in turn, shape how human beings choose to think about, relate to, and treat the natural world. In sum, human cultures matter greatly to how the very concept of 'nature' gets
constructed, and the natural world itself matters in how the concept of ‘religion’ is constructed.

(Bauman et al., 2011: 2)

This insight from Bauman et al. is mirrored in a meta-analysis of the field of religion and environment, where Willis Jenkins and Christopher Key Chapple argue that scholarly investigation into the variables of religion, nature, ecology, and environment all reflect “controversies over interpretation,” yet “[s]hared amid the debate is an investigative interest in connections between patterns of environmental thought and practice as well as patterns of religious thought and practice” (Jenkins and Chapple, 2011: 42).

Both of these quotes suggest similarity with the emerging and contested field of ecologistics: how are lexical terms understood; how does the use of language, broadly conceived, influence conceptions of and relations with the natural world; and what possible connections exist between human thought–language–culture and the natural world? These seem to be shared guiding questions among both religion and nature/ecology scholars, and ecologistic scholars, especially those in the Hallidayan lineage. If the latter is focused on how discourses shape and influence human abuses of the natural world (what Steffensen and Fill call “the natural ecology of language” (2014: 4–5)), then these insights have much to offer scholars who are attempting to better understand how religious systems, including religious discourses, have and continue to influence human conceptions of and interactions with the more-than-human world.

For example, as the leading ecologist Arran Stibbe shares, “language, rationality and the general ability to manipulate symbols form the core of what it means to be human” (2012: 2). Besides language and use of symbolism, another meta-human trait appears to be the creation of religious systems, which are at their core largely symbolic, with a domain-specific language. Further, it appears that such human-created systems that are tethered to concepts of the sacred or supernatural agent/s actively shape and structure an individual’s understanding of self, society and the world (Berger, 1967). Thus, we can ask: What might symbols, language, ritual, material culture, and experience that are tethered to religious systems have to do with human treatment of the natural world, both past and present? This is a guiding question of religion and nature/ecology, and is one that parallels guiding questions in ecologistics.

Stibbe further explains that

[b]y ignoring ecological embedding and embodiment, humans have managed to develop another unique characteristic: the ability, single-handedly as a species, to alter the conditions of the land to make it less hospitable for human life and the life of countless less other species.

(2012: 2)

This realization is implied in White’s 1967 article, and is an insight being taken more seriously by some religious practitioners the world over, as seen in the pope’s environmental encyclical of 2015. If religion and nature/ecology deal with investigating the proper nature, environment and religion, then it can be assumed that how humans respond to the emerging eco-crisis via the vehicle of religious systems is an object worthy of study. What might this response look like, and how may it be influenced by ecologistics? My exploration of Genesis 1:26–28, later, attempts to help offer preliminary answers to these questions.

First, however, we must briefly explore hermeneutics within the context of religious studies and ecologistics within the context of society-at-large (and by default, ecologistics, since ecologistics can in part be seen as a subset of ecologistics).

(Eco)hermeneutics

I want to begin this section by returning quickly to the work of Arran Stibbe, who shares that “discourses are ways of speaking about the world that encode a particular model of reality” (2012: 3). This is a key insight from linguistics, broadly, upon which ecologistics builds one of its key research regimes: how do various discourses help frame, encode, and enforce upon those embedded within said discourse a certain model of reality? More so, what model do the natural world emerge in such a discourse, and what types of human treatments of reality?

As with linguistics, religious studies also seeks to explore and understand the impact that religious discourses have in creating and encoding models of reality. These scholars texts. One of the foundational assumptions of the humanities is that a text is always ‘alive’ use of discourse analysis (Hjelm, 2014), document analysis (Davie and Wyatt, 2014), and texts and audiences is not an end in itself, but a means to say something about religion and religious processes in society” (Gillius, 2014: 275). This means that understanding discourse scholars can better understand how religious processes shape social views about and treatment of the natural world.

Given the earlier claim, we must recognize that historically, due to a Protestant-bias that still clouds the field of religious studies, most scholars, especially early religious studies scholars, assumed that a ‘legitimate’ religion was one that was based on a sacred text, and that sacred text (or texts) of a religious tradition. Such a view obviously has flaws, not the least it a so is flawed in that reducing religion to a sacred text privileges literacy, male scribes view leaves out other valuable and legitimate discourses, texts, and viewpoints within a oppressed women, is a valid text that encodes a view of reality. Thankfully rich ethnographic and hermeneutics studies have emerged in recent years that have expanded what be studied by scholars.

Another residue of the Protestant bias in religious studies, and a bias mirrored within the field of linguistics that ecologistics attempts to remedy, is the assumption in religious texts, have no agency and have not played a determinative role in the creation and maintenance of religious systems (for more on this, see LeVasseur, 2015b). The development of engaging texts and viewpoints within a oppressed women, is a valid text that encodes a view of reality. Thankfully rich ethnographic and hermeneutics studies have emerged in recent years that have expanded what be studied by scholars.

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a hermeneutics of the environment might look like for those working in the humanities. For them, environmental hermeneutics contains five synergistic and overlapping domains, where environmental hermeneutics is:

1. The extension of principles of interpretation to environments of any kind (natural, built, cultural, etc.) [where] hermeneutics is a rationale and framework for interpretive activity in general.
2. Environmental hermeneutics is the interpretation of actual encounters of or within environments.
3. Environmental hermeneutics refers to a form of nature writing.
4. Environmental hermeneutics provides accounts of the approach of various disciplines to environments . . . Different disciplines interpret the natural environment in different ways according to their own internal logic . . . Environmental hermeneutics can critically mediate between different disciplinary interpretations so as to suggest fuller and more robust understanding of environments [this is a guiding premise of this chapter].
5. Perhaps in its most robust sense, environmental hermeneutics [deals with] the ontological framework [of recognizing our own embedded situatedness within environments] which necessitates such interpretation. (Clingerman et al., 2014: 3–4)

Given these five overlapping definitions of ecohermeneutics, we can see that there are multiple ways to approach, understand and interpret discourses about the natural world. Furthermore, we can expect that religious discourses about the natural world are complex and varied, as religious systems themselves are complex and varied, and all in some way contain understandings of the natural world that are open to interpretation by both practitioners and scholars.

Nonetheless, texts are representations, and often they reflect dominant motifs of a culture, thus helping to shape that culture’s understanding of reality. As John Gold and George Revill explain,

“representation” . . . means to speak or campaign for something . . . we may say that [representation] is a political process. To elaborate, one function of culture is that it is the framework through which the real world is experienced, and intrinsic to that framework are ideas about the social order and about who possesses power.

(2004:82)

One thing that is important to recognize when thinking about religion, language, and ecology is that most humans have historically lived in cultures where ‘religion’ was not seen as a separate domain, rather ‘religion’ was intimately wrapped up with politics, economics, gender relations and locations of social power and often provided a functional cosmology for a community. In other words, seeing religion as a private affair is an outgrowth of European Enlightenment thinking, and this norm is not globally shared today, and was the norm for almost all human communities throughout history, up until modernity. Of this, here, too, is the cosmology of a religious community presented (represented) a counternarrative that explained to adherents how the visible cosmos appeared, and often, whose natural agents were involved in its creation. It was not until 1859 when Charles Darwin published his theory of evolution that a naturalistic understanding of the visible cosmos became possible at large scales. Therefore, how ecology, or nature, is represented harms discourses has been thoroughly shaped by religion, and thus religious views of nature also shaped the political and social order of human societies, past and present, including how human societies conceive of and treat the natural world.

Given globalization, most humans now exist within multiple discourses that offer competing views of reality, and the model of reality that holds supremacy may shift given changing duty to protect a divine deity through loving service, as seen at the Yumana River in India (Haberman, 2006). A devout practitioner may hear this discourse, and have it model their view of the river. Yet, this practitioner may then go to the store and be under the sway of media discourses about status, and advertising discourses about a sense of self, and buy a product whose production directly contributes to the pollution of the Yumana. This experience is most likely the norm for many today, and gives credence to the insight offered by Anna Peterson, who states that “[t]he problem is that when different elements of worldviews or ethics are separated from their ecological, historical, cultural and narrative setting, they rarely hold together, philosophically or practically” (2001: 16).

Other exploratory questions should be raised in the context of thinking through religion, language and ecology. For example, how many laypeople deeply read religious texts and theological commentary about these texts? It is most likely fanciful thinking to assume they do and will subsequently change their views of nature. Rather, data suggest that the social environment in which religious messages are shared and embodied is important (Djupe and Hunt, 2009). Also, there is no clear analog correspondence between religious identity and views about the environment.

If one of the leading branches of ecolinguistics seeks to explore the impact human discourses have had and continue to have on the natural world, where there is a recognition of anthropocentrism and unsustainable relationships, then ecolinguistics must look at religious representations and discourses, past and present, about the natural world. Such a move will help lead those working within ecolinguistics to a more nuanced, historically accurate understanding of human–nature interactions. I turn now to an example of a religious discourse about the natural world and share a variety of views about this discourse and how it has possibly shaped human–nature interactions, past and present, as a way to help bridge this gap between ecolinguistics and religious studies.

Genesis 1:26–28—and Some Ecological Interpretations of It

Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air; and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.” So God created mankind in his image; in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.”

Genesis 1:26–28

begins the first of the two creation stories found in Genesis of the Hebrew Bible, and is a discourse that structured human understanding of the natural world and the place within it for millions of humans over hundreds of years. The actual creation in the Hebrew Bible demands books in and of itself, as does tracing its religious, political,
Todd LeVasseur

social and environmental influence, especially once what we now call Christianity emerged as the religion of empire in the 300s CE, helping to spread the Genesis understanding of reality throughout the Roman Empire, and subsequently, the entire planet. We do know that the various scribes who wrote Genesis lived in an arid desert environment that was influenced by rivers and weather patterns affected by the Mediterranean Sea (Hillel, 2006) and that the Hebrew peoples who authored Genesis were an agrarian people bound together by language, custom, kinship and the sacred temple dedicated to Yahweh that resided in Jerusalem (Davis, 2009). The evidence also suggests that many of the motifs found in the Hebrew Bible are based upon oral folklore and myth that were traded throughout the various empires and cultural groups of the Near East, so that the Genesis creation story is one of many that existed, with a variety of shared characteristics among the stories (Dundes, 1999).

Lastly, the vision of the human animal encoded in this Genesis passage is part of a larger mythological cosmology, where the Hebrew people came to understand how the universe was created, by whom and what their relationship with this Creator (Yahweh/Adonai/God) was to be—specifically, as a chosen people bounded together under a covenant promised between Adonai and Abraham.

As we investigate this passage from Genesis, we must be cautious and not assume ‘myth’ means a fable or story that can be proved right or wrong. Rather, I use myth in the sense that myths are

(1) not special (or ‘sacred’) but ordinary human means of fashioning and authorizing their lived-in and believed-in ‘worlds,’
(2) that myth as an ordinary rhetorical device in social construction and maintenance makes this rather than that social identity possible in the first place and
(3) that a people’s use of the label ‘myth’ reflects, expresses, explores and legitimizes their own self-image.

(McCutcheon, 2000: 200)

In other words, the early Hebrew peoples created a story that helped them make sense of their social, political, religious, economic, and natural worlds, and did so in a way that reflected and legitimated their own image of being God’s chosen people. What is worth exploring in a way that fuses together guiding research questions from both etic linguistics and religion

and nature/ecology is what model of reality is encoded in the discourse and text of this foundational passage and how has this text shaped and influenced human–nature interactions, past and present? How has the discourse of being God’s chosen people, made in his image and given dominion over the rest of creation, fashioned and authorized the lived-in and believed-in experience of, first the Hebrew people/Israelites, and then Christians, over the centuries?

Rather than attempt a systematic answer to these questions, I am instead going to present a sample of views from both scholars and theologians who have analyzed this Genesis passage and in so doing have tried to answer these questions in their own way. As Leonard Greenpoon shares, Genesis 1:28 is “one of the most discussed (if not the most discussed) example of the deleterious nature of relying on the Bible to help resolve the contemporary environmental crisis” (2008: 161). Through this process of quickly summarizing and skipping four of countless extant views on this Genesis passage, it is hoped that the reader may see how etic linguistics and religious studies are in many ways already in dialogue, even if not expressly called such. Both fields attempt to find out how we make sense of our external environment (Simmons, 1994), and how this is done through language, story, myth and discourse.

Taking Ecology Seriously: Possible Interpretations of Genesis

Lynn White, Jr. (1907–1987) Historian at UCLA

White’s “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis” (2003/1967) remains standard reading in most introductory classes in religion and nature/ecology, as well as in environmental ethics; and environmental theologians (theologians working within a specific religious tradition who chapter 7) are largely in a reform-based dialogue that was triggered by the claims made as being inimical toward nature in its use by humans, is built upon bedrocks laid down in willingly use science and technology to destroy the planet, we must recognize that “What things around them. Human ecology is deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny—that is, by religion” (White, 2003: 33).

What, then, according to White, does Western Christianity condition as to believe about the environment (think here, too, of Stibbe’s insight that discourse structures reality)? One answer is that as Christianity spread through Europe, it killed off paganism, so that revering nature based on animism ended. White also claims that Christianity created the eschatological goal of reaching heaven, so that actions in this world were not as important, leading to that “Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen” (2003: 34). This and control over the rest of nature, so that this “not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God’s will that man exploit nature for his proper ends” (2003: 34). If how nature is represented in discourses matters, and if certain discourses gain power in society, and if these discourses shape reality, then the anthropocentrism of Genesis, thus, for White, to overturn these problems, we must challenge the hegemony of religious-sanctioned anthropocentrism.

Jeremy Benstein, Founder and Associate Director of the Heschel Center for Environmental Learning and Leadership

In his excellent The Way into Judaism and the Environment (2006), Benstein points out that relationships “between humanity and creation, between people and the world (adam and adama), are quintessential religious issues, even as they are the overarching categories of environmental discourse” (2006: 33). With the destruction of the Second Temple by Rome in 70 CE, what we now call Judaism, with its foundations built upon a minority tradition that began with the first Babylonian exile, began in earnest. Importantly, Judaism since then is largely a legal tradition, but one that is living and open to interpretation. Part of this interpretation is for Jews to grapple with how to interpret and understand the varied commandments, parables, psalms, and myths found within the Hebrew Bible, including those in Genesis.

Benstein shares that Genesis 1:28 is “the most ecologically notorious” (2006: 42) part of the Hebrew creation myth, and points out that “[i]there is no linguistic way to get around the
central terms here. They cannot be reinterpreted to align with twenty-first-century environmental sensibilities" (2006: 42). Indeed, according to Benstein the Hebrew words used in this passage of Genesis translate to master, rule, conquer, dominion, trempale, and crush—all roles given by God to his chosen people. If discourse shapes reality, then according to the core meaning of the Hebrew terms of Genesis 1:26–29, the human role is to trample, use, abuse, and dominate nature! However, Benstein offers a caution:

This verse, mandating conquest and dominion, is categorically a blessing, and an uplifting and empowering one at that. Some three thousand years ago, this vision promised hope and dignity for a society with a short average life span and great susceptibility to natural threats... The promise of human mastery and dominion over the natural world—a total pipe dream at the time of its promulgation was therefore reassuring, and even liberating.

(2006: 42–44)

More so, for Benstein, when Genesis 1 is read with and synthesized with the second creation story of Genesis 2, then "[h]uman dominion can only mean stewardship, because we are not autonomous or sovereign rulers in a world that is not ours" (2006: 49).

Here we see important considerations that can make complete a simple analysis of the discourse contained in a sacred text, let alone one so foundational and that speaks about human-nature interactions. One is that the modern environmental movement is largely an offshoot of a post-materialist, English-speaking culture. This means that modern environmental concerns are often shared in English and are built upon modern insights from ecology, the natural sciences and North American views of nature, including especially a unique Christian-based heritage (on this, see Stoll, 2015). However, this is scaffolded upon a diverse Christian European background, which is itself grafted upon both European folk and pagan traditions, Greco-Roman philosophy, and a root stock of Hebrew society, language and worldview. Thus, when analyzing a creation story that when translated to English urges humans to have dominion over the created world, it is important to see what the original language says. According to Benstein, the original Hebrew is actually very clear in our role, so that the translation of dominion that implies domination and control and exploitative use of the natural world holds. And despite Benstein offering an apologetic reading, in that if Genesis 1 is read with Genesis 2, where an understanding of humans as stewards of the natural world emerges, we must pause and ask how many laypeople are making such a reading? How many laypeople who are religious, over the ages, have even been literate and more so, how many know Hebrew, Greek, Latin and/or English, and are putting various Biblical passages in dialog together to better understand the author’s intent of Genesis? We must also recognize that it is possible that some readers focus more on the Genesis 2 creation passage and not as much on the dominion passage—ethnomethods will have to bear this out, however.

The Australian ecotheologian Norm Habel is clear about the impact of Genesis 1:26–28 and how the discourse contained therein has directly led to the exploitation and domination of the environment. As he writes,

I recognize [sic] that there may have been many other factors involved in the development of our Western drive to exploit nature, and I appreciate that the Bible has been used in many ways to support many different causes and attitudes. However, we also need to acknowledge that there has been a long line of interpreters who have found the

the Genesis 1 mandate to dominate, and similar biblical texts, are grounds for humans harnessing and exploiting nature.

(2009: 1–2)

Habel continues, arguing that Genesis 1:26-28 “is a grey text a text that is ecologically destructive, devaluing Earth and offering humans a God-given right to harness nature” (2009: 2). This is because Habel sees three parts of the Genesis passage that codify and reinforce a view of the environment and the human place and role within it. The first is that rate and distant from the rest of nature, so that “[t]he image of God clearly separates humans and, in so doing, devalues the rest of creation” (2009: 5). Upon this view of reality comes Hebrew word wohod, which means ‘to rule’ like a king, means the rest of creation is seen as an enemy to defeat, subjugate, and rule over (2009: 5).

For Habel, this passage, when read in concert with other passages that reinforce its messages (1 Kings 4:24; Genesis 9:20; Psalm 8), has helped to over-determine anthropocentric cultural views of nature which have justified the exploitation of nature. That such views are seriously. Knowing the original language and the culture in which foundational religious doctrines regarding human–nature interactions emerged, and tracing interpretation of these centuries, will help ecotheologians better understand modern discourses about the environment, whether religious or secular. Furthermore, ecotheologians can analyze creation story of Genesis and comes to a similar conclusion: in that discourse, humans are to be stewards (2009: 70–71). So which story is more important? Which discourse human–nature interactions (all three religions accept the Genesis creation accounts)? But gious, as argued for by Whitney Bauman, who states that, “There is a sense ... in which portions” (2014: 36). If this is true, then what religious structuring of reality is occurring capitalism and other outgrowths of modernity be in dialog with the worldviews contained within Genesis?

Ellen Davis

In her nuanced reading of the Bible as an agrarian treatise, Biblical Professor and Professor of Theology Ellen Davis makes a credible argument that the Hebrew for ‘dominion’ found in the Genesis passage can also be read as “mastery among” (2009: 55). This image, but in an image that required being emplaced in a covenantal Promised Land, where culturally includes the land” (2009: 56). For Davis, and in her writing she directly criticizes Norm Habel’s interpretation of Genesis, “Genesis 1 is a poem in the transcultural tradition of life... Life created in God’s image is meant to conform, with other forms of life, into a single harmonious order” (2009: 57). Davis, and to be fair, together with the
other writers summarized earlier, claims that Genesis 1:28 must be read in dialog with, and in the context of, the rest of the Hebrew Bible. Once that move is made, then it is clear that

[what is stated in Genesis 1:28 is that humans play a special role, both powerful and responsible, in maintenance of the order that God has established [...] what is left unsaid, but is clarified in the third chapter of Genesis and then reinforced time and again through the rest of Scripture, is that humans are the primary source of opposition to God, the source of most if not all threats to the integrity of the created order. (2009: 62–63)

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have invited the reader to consider potential possibilities that can emerge in terms of generating important research at the interface of religion, language and ecology. Although my focus was on a key passage from an important sacred text, this was for heuristic reasons. Although Genesis does indeed have immense cultural power, to this day, the reality is that there are multiple religions, and multiple religious texts, and a rich history of ongoing interpretation of these varied texts by both insider practitioners and learned scholars. The same exercise undertaken earlier can be applied to varieties of Islam, or Buddhism, or Shintoism, or “insert religious tradition here.” More so, exploring how religious practitioners have and continue to conceive of nature, both past and present, is still a relatively young program within religious studies, and this exploration can benefit from adopting insights and entering into dialogue with ecologists. The moral authority typically granted to religious discourses is still powerful, even in ‘secular’ countries, and what these discourses say about the natural world is still highly relevant—whether these discourses encourage sustainable actions or not is another question worth exploring, but that does not bear easy answers.

As we see with the various views of Genesis, there are important insights to tease out that can help research in both religion and nature/ecology and ecologists, both; but then these insights must be put in dialogue with other interpretations of other relevant texts and discourses, as all of the scholars reviewed earlier do with their larger work. Therefore, to really understand religion, language, and ecology, longitudinal studies that control for a few key discourses must be undertaken. Lastly, the gender, race, economic and educational background and geographical location of who is receiving a religious discourse about the environment will matter. Notice that the analyses of Genesis that I found all come from Caucasians (three male, one female) who speak English and are worried about environmental metrics—this background will influence their interpretation of a text.

Research data to date are suggestive that there are indeed correlations between religious beliefs, attitudes and values and environmental concern. These range from the correlation between biblical literalism and anthropocentrism (Schultz, Zelezny and Dalrymple, 2000), conservative religious views and mistrust of governmental intervention to protect the environment (Weeks, Jennifer (2014, March 5), LeVasseur, 2012); the presence or absence of egoistic, altruistic and biospheric concerns (Smith and Leiserowitz, 2013); and religious concerns about purity and morality (Rottman, Kelemen and Young, 2015; Rottman, 2018), among a variety of factors. If there is one trend that emerges, it is that, just as with any discourse, finding clear-cut causations, let alone correlations, between religious identity and environmental concern may have to be tested and discussed on an issue-by-issue basis on a congregation or person at a time (Biel and Nilsson, 2005).

We end by asking how important is religious discourse in shaping human–nature interactions? Historically, such discourse has been largely determinative in some form, as almost all humans have understood reality through a religious lens. Most humans today continue to do so. The next question is thus: Is it possible to generate and engage in religious discourses that aid sustainability and that take ecology seriously? In terms of Christianity, some scholars claim this is not possible in the time we have, before major environmental crises cramp the goodness of creation. But is it possible? (2013: 128). Although this chapter has focused on a passage that is key for both Judaism and Christianity, this same question can, and should be, spread outward, to investigate in all forms of religious discourses. It is in the answering of this question that the rich interface of religion, language and ecology will bear fruit.

Further Reading


For a list of relevant further readings, the reader is invited to visit the Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology: http://fcre.yale.edu/publications/

Notes

1 For more on Eliade and his life, see www.westminster.edu/staff/brennie/eliade/mebio.htm (accessed August 3, 2015).
2 There are a variety of long-standing debates regarding what constitutes the object of study in religious studies/how religion is defined; appropriate methodological and theoretical tools used to study religion; and what power dynamics are at play in how these questions are answered, and by (2003); Capps (1995); Smith (2004); Taylor (1998); and McCutcheon (1997). I also acknowledge that there is no monolithic “religious studies,” but for ease of presentation, I do willingly use this term throughout this chapter, writing from the location of a scholar trained in religious studies as both an undergraduate and graduate student in a North American context.
3 I thank William “Bill” Jordan III for reminding me of the value of this passage from Peterson.
5 Even here, though, we must remember that stewardship can still justify a master–slave relationship (Rasmussen, 2013: 100).

References