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Religious Ecologies in the Era of Climate Crisis

Comparative Perspectives from Africa and the Asia-Pacific

Edited by
Timo Kallinen, Tea Virtanen and Jenni Mölkänen

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Introduction

Exploring Religious Ecologies in Sub-Saharan Africa and the Asia-Pacific

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Introduction

This edited volume brings together 12 chapters based on ethnographic research exploring the relationship between religion and the environment in the era of the climate crisis. Aiming to highlight new comparative insights to understanding climate change, its concomitant environmental destruction, and diverse responses to it, our book focuses on Sub-Saharan Africa and the Asia-Pacific region. The strength of anthropological climate research lays in its ability to capture specific local understandings and experiences related to the climate crisis (see, e.g., Dove 2014, 2–3; O'Reilly et al. 2020, 14–15). Adjacent to this strength lies the understanding that the actions needed to overcome or adapt to the climate crisis must be initiated locally, or, as the late T. H. Eriksen (2020, 2) stated, 'any successful social change has to begin with an appreciation of local life-worlds and has to be developed not for, but with, the people affected'. In this book, we share these views and objectives.

Although not all environmental problems of our time result from climate change, clearly the climate crisis has emerged as the most pressing ecological concern, significantly impacting environmental anthropology and the environmental humanities and social sciences in general (see Eriksen 2023). The connection between some of the environmental problems discussed in this book and climate change remain indirect or even distant. But their escalation, the responses to them, and their examination in the era of the climate crisis stand as essential – which is also reflected in the formulation of the title to this volume.

A locally anchored ethnographic perspective provides an opportunity to critically reassess certain preconceived notions related to the climate crisis. When local-level environmental crises are characterised as 'climate-related', a global-to-local causal route is often implied. Recently, such straightforward relationships between global causes and local effects have been questioned. As Adam Branch (2018, 313), among others, proposed, by taking the local experiences of environmental crises as the starting point, we become better equipped to understand 'the dense local, national,

regional, and global forces, both natural and social, that congeal at particular points to cause widespread destruction or suffering through the environment'. Following from Branch's observation, whether a specific natural disaster results from global warming might not be particularly significant to its victims – individuals who live their everyday lives with the concrete negative consequences. Indeed, there might be little reason for those individuals to compartmentalise it from other hardships they face. Thus, lived experiences may contradict the view of current Western crisis discourses, where the starting point seems to rest on the idea of clearly distinguishable crises simultaneously occurring, such as the contemporary notion of a polycrisis (see Henig and Knight 2023; O'Regan 2023). Consequently, adopting a locally oriented view does not simply complicate one-dimensional global–local relations; it also suggests longer multilinear histories for crises, blurring clearcut distinctions between the sociocultural and natural causes of calamities. Furthermore, local aetiologies of natural disasters may link them to various agentive powers, such as God or nature-based deities, which fall outside the purview of conventional climate science.

This last point brings us to the more specific approaches we employ in this volume. Broadly speaking, the chapters herein apply three different approaches to examine the relationship between religion and the environment – that is, different religious ecologies. In the first approach, and perhaps in its most obvious meaning, religious ecology refers to the role of religion in the interaction between humans and their natural environment. More specifically, our focus lies on exploring the dynamics of religious change – whether this implies a wider spiritual transformation or minor shifts in doctrinal and socio-ritual matters – during an era of heightened ecological crises. A monotheistic scriptural religion's view of a hierarchical relationship between humans and nature has often been identified as the root cause of the modern environmental crisis (see White 1967; Toynbee 1972). In contemporary debates, these religions are often juxtaposed against the religions of Indigenous peoples, whose spiritual attachment to land is viewed as exemplary from an ecological perspective (see Lewis and Sheppard 2005; Sponsel 2012). Nevertheless, ecotheologians and activists from various world religions have advocated for viewing the environment as a divine creation with intrinsic value (Nasr 1968; Wolf and Gjerris 2009), whereby various faith communities advocate for 'greener' ways of life. Simultaneously, however, other strands of these religions have embraced climate scepticism or insisted that environmental disasters form a part of a divinely ordained destiny over which humans have no power (Roberts 2012; Shehu and Molyneux-Hodgson 2014). With this in mind, the relationship between religion and ecology remains uncertain, differing widely from one context to the next.

In the second approach, we also use ecology as a compelling metaphor for denoting the massive and dynamic interrelationship between individuals, groups, institutions, and processes affecting religious ecologies. Accordingly, we recognise that religious practices and understandings relating to the environment are politically and materially embedded in their social environments. As such, how religious groups respond to environmental concerns is influenced by and affects dynamics far broader than the religious realm alone. Each specific location exhibits its own ecology – that is, a unique set of relations between religious, political, economic, and civil society actors. Obviously, this dynamic must be examined from a historical perspective. This

is particularly important when considering that the regions under discussion have experienced major political and economic upheavals in the past, including the ravages of the slave trade, colonial rule, and post-colonial violence, whereby the current situation converges with historical patterns of crisis and adaptation. In this regard, many of this book's chapters draw from political ecology. Thus, we adhere to the idea that religious ecologies are political in the sense that religion's role in shaping human–environment relations and addressing environmental issues can only be properly understood when examined within the relevant political-economic context.

In the third and final approach, the title's plural form – 'religious ecologies' – refers not only to the variety of environmental relations represented by the peoples discussed herein, but also to the idea that people are not bound to a single conception of their natural environment, but can move between many – whether religious or nonreligious. In modern Western modes of thinking, a natural sciences' perspective on the environment is habitually elevated to the position of the only 'real' reality, which individuals inhabiting different times and places view through their own cultural lenses. By contrast, recent anthropological research has aimed to take non-Western conceptions of nature 'for real' and examine how people in various situations rely on different understandings of ecology (see, e.g., Kohn 2015; de la Cadena and Blaser 2018), some of which are strongly tied to religion – whether to translocal religious belief systems or local cosmological world views. Furthermore, from an environmentalist point of view, we can state that the way out of a crisis involves abandoning conventional solutions, necessitating the adoption of new categories of thought (see, e.g., Escobar 2020; Mendoza and Zachariah 2022), the search for which demands that we turn to different religious ecologies.

Before proceeding, we feel compelled to note that he use of the term 'religious' (and 'religion') brings a certain kind of baggage with it, consequently requiring justification. Firstly, the term's usage has its own background in the colonial past. During the early period of European expansion, colonised peoples were viewed as lacking religion and assigned with allegedly inferior forms of thought, such as 'fetishism', 'totemism', or 'animism'. Later, these forms were re-categorised as 'tribal' religions (see, e.g., Chidester 1996). Thus, in the (post-)colonial context, religion may appear as something imposed from the outside – both as a foreign belief system and as a concept. Secondly, in recent decades, both in anthropology and in the study of religions, the concept of religion has been the subject of thorough and critical re-examination. Scholars have directed their critical attention, among other things, to the term's ethnocentricity, rendering it historically and culturally specific (to Western Christendom) or, alternatively, to its vague usage, which in turn leaves it overly ambiguous or even meaningless (see, e.g., Asad 1993; Fitzgerald 2003). Although acknowledging and agreeing with many of these criticisms, in this volume we have not sought to replace religion with any other concept. Nor have we engaged in a detailed discussion regarding which worldviews should be classified as religions or to what extent the term would correspond to the self-definitions of informants. After all, many of this book's chapters focus directly on local expressions of so-called world religions – that is, Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism. Even those chapters dealing primarily with indigenous cosmologies discuss them in relation to global religions, whether as competition, complementarity, coexistence, or

something else.[1] Therefore, we believe that using the term 'religion' here in its general sense is sufficiently justified.

In the following section, we provide a more detailed discussion of what these three approaches to religious ecologies entail and the theoretical thinking upon which they are based. We also include examples of how these approaches have been employed in different chapters herein. Then, we turn to discussing the observations that emerge through regional comparisons. Toward the end of this introductory chapter, we provide an overview of the book's structure and the thematic grouping of the contributions. In this context, we also outline the primary contents of each of the chapters.

Approaches to religious ecologies

The three approaches introduced above allow us to offer the reader a more holistic understanding of the relationship between religion and the environmental problems characterising the climate crisis era. In addition, through these approaches, we can highlight significant commonalities across different research traditions – at times, even transcending disciplinary boundaries. These perspectives are, nonetheless, rooted in distinct theoretical frameworks accompanying underlying assumptions. In the subsequent sub-sections, we describe these for the reader.

Religious change and the environmental crisis

At its core, the term religious ecology refers to the role of religion in the interaction between humans and their natural environment. The study of the relationship between religion and the environment enjoys a rather long history within the humanities and the social sciences, extending to a time well before the emergence of the global environmental crisis. For instance, the origins of religion were explained through human emotional and intellectual reactions related to the natural environment. As such, the beginnings of religious thought were traced back to, for example, a sense of human dependence on nature (Feuerbach 2017 [1846]), the experience of infinity and sacredness evoked by nature (Müller 2002 [1870]), or the human need to find explanations for natural phenomena (Hume 1993 [1759/1775]). In early anthropology, beliefs and rituals related to the natural environment were often interpreted through various utilitarian perspectives. For example, beliefs concerning different animal and plant species were examined in terms of their nutritional value or the danger they posed to humans (Malinowski 1948). In later materialist research drawing from Marxism, the emergence of certain forms of religion was related to the different ways in which people made their livelihoods from the environment (Meillassoux 1972).

In the latter half of the twentieth century, environmental anthropology as a new subdiscipline became increasingly interested in crises and upheavals. Initially, this

1. Some scholars speak of indigenous religions as a distinct category of world religions. In these cases, the defining features of indigenous religions include the centrality of ancestral kinship and a mythical identification with a specific land or place (see, e.g., Laack 2020). This distinction is not merely an academic question given that many indigenous groups themselves promote a notion of indigenous religion as a part of globalised indigeneity (see Johnson & Kraft 2017).

was not linked to environmentalism as such, but instead researchers sought to understand the role of culture in local-level ecological catastrophes, with religion and ritual significantly featuring in these studies. For example, anthropologists from the cultural ecology school were interested in explaining the existence of certain religious beliefs or institutions through their adaptive function in the face of ecological threats (see Harris 1968; 1991). Taken further, such thinking led researchers to examine religious and ritual life as parts of local ecosystems via which the environmental impact of human populations was regulated (see Rappaport 1984 [1968]). In current research, attempts to explain the origin or existence of religious phenomena through their ecological functions are considered overly deterministic. However, this does not mean that researchers should not examine the ecological impacts of people's religious lives. Accordingly, several chapters herein note how local beliefs regarding the sacredness of natural sites or ritual practices related to the natural environment can be viewed as benefitting the environment. For example, Francis Veriza and Laurent Couderchet, in their chapter on the sea-nomads of the southwest coast of Madagascar, demonstrate how a complex system of taboos protects marine spaces and species from overexploitation.

More recently, research has focused explicitly on examining the relationship between religion and the environmental crisis, simultaneously taking on a more normative tone. The issue is no longer simply about an external researcher observing and describing religious phenomena from an environmental standpoint; rather, more often researchers are expected to contribute to solving environmental problems through their work. For example, ecotheological studies have always remained quite normatively oriented, but nowadays even anthropology, which has traditionally refrained from making any evaluative judgments about its research subjects, has increasingly begun to defend religious phenomena considered positive vis-à-vis mitigating and resolving environmental crises. In environmental anthropology, Roy Rappaport (1979; 1999) completed pioneering work (see, also, Lambek and Messer 2001). In his view, a culture dominated by science and technology no longer had any real restraints on the exploitation of nature, which would inevitably carry destructive consequences; therefore, he called for a new ecological religion that would reconstitute the sacredness of nature (Rappaport 1979; 1999). This view resonates strongly within ecotheological research seeking to re-evaluate the teachings and practices of various religious traditions through an ecological lens. Within such a framework, nature is regarded as a divine creation, with an intrinsic rather than instrumental value, whereby the human relationship with the natural world is articulated through religious norms and ethical principles (see, e.g., Conradie 2006; Johnston 2012). Various forms of ecotheology are, in fact, a highly significant example of how environmental change appears to advance positive religious transformation from an ecological perspective. In this volume, Mayke Kaag examines Islamic ecotheology in Senegal, and more broadly across Africa, considering its role in local environmental activism. In turn, Ben-Willie Kwaku Golo explores the nature-related religious concepts of the Akan peoples of Ghana from an ecotheological perspective, juxtaposing them against secular policies to promote environmental sustainability.

As a counterpoint to ecotheological approaches, research has also attempted to identify the root causes of environmental problems within religion(s). The most prominent example of such a perspective is the environmentalist critique levelled

against Christianity by historian Lynn White (1967). According to him, in Western culture, a new exploitative relationship toward the environment arose through the adoption of Christianity. The Judeo-Christian myth of creation separated humans from nature, facilitating a view according to which everything in the physical world existed for the benefit of humanity. This lead White (1967: 1206) to conclude that 'Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen', which, consequently, carries 'a huge burden of guilt' for the global environmental crisis. Our book aims not to assign blame for climate change and the resulting environmental crises to any singular ideology.[2] However, several chapters do explore the relationship between religious transformations and negative environmental change, scrutinising the role of monotheistic world religions.

Religious ecologies are also political ecologies

When examining the significance of religion for human–environment relations, it is important to understand how the interaction between humans and their natural environment intertwines with other types of relationships. Accordingly, as the early scholars of the political ecology school observed, peoples' subsistence not only depends on local ecosystems, but also on 'outside systems' – that is, 'larger and more complex social and economic systems' (Nietschmann 1973, 2–3, 236–237). Thus, the notion of ecology can be metaphorically extended to encompass systems of relationships among the global-, regional-, national-, and local-level actors and institutions. While herein we do not collectively take a position on the presumed systemic nature of economic or political relations, we nonetheless strongly subscribe to the idea that religious groups, institutions, and practices are politically and materially embedded in their social environments, significantly impacting their relationships with the natural environment.

Moreover, considering the man-made quality of the climate crisis, it is, of course, crucial to recognise how the environmental calamities people encounter closely relate to the maladaptive and exploitative nature of the larger economic systems of which they are a part. This was also acknowledged early on in the study of local-level climate catastrophes. As Michael Watts (1983, 43) pointed out, from the political ecology perspective, 'natural hazards are not really *natural*', since climate phenomena such as droughts may trigger a series of events resulting in famines, but the crises themselves should also be considered a 'reflection of the ability of the socio-economic system to cope with the unusual harshness of ecological conditions and their effects' (Watts 1983, 43).[3] Such approaches are also applied in this book. For example, in their contribution, Pujo Semedi, Hery Santoso, and Novilatul Ramadhani examine how Javanese farmers' cash crop cultivation, previously a source of prosperity, is proving unsustainable and unresponsive to changing climate conditions. They also discuss how

2. As one might expect, White's ideas have sparked much criticism. A useful review of such critiques can be found in Elspeth Whitney's (1993) work.
3. In the 2000s, research in political ecology focused more intensely on environmental degradation (Benjaminsen & Svarstad 2021, 3–4). Accordingly, several subfields related to the global environmental crisis have emerged, for instance, the anthropology of climate change (Crate & Nuttall 2023) and the anthropology of oil (Behrends et al. 2011).

the farmers' religious lives change along with environmental and economic upheavals, but not in ways which help them better adapt to the new kind of crisis.

In addition to economic systems, attention must also be paid to the political origins of the climate crisis by considering its connections to such things as colonialism, wars, and state violence (see, e.g., Branch 2018; Wisner 2011). This approach also clearly emerges in the chapters of this book. For example, Valentina Acquafredda examines the hardships caused by climate change in rural Ethiopia against the backdrop of state policies and civil war. She also incorporates a religious dimension into her discussion by exploring peoples' own crisis aetiologies informed by Christianity and Islam.

Equally, conservationist thinking and the ecological actions of local religious groups must be placed in the broader context. Since the 1990s, anthropologists have been interested in how transnational environmental movements and campaigns can either respond to or ignore pleas for help from indigenous communities regarding the deteriorating state of their natural environment (see, e.g., Brosius 1999; Tsing 2005). In these instances, matters relating to religion often arise as parts of indigenous identities, approached from the perspective of access to natural resources (see, e.g., Li 2000; Conklin 2002). Similarly, the local-level effects of so-called green capitalism have been under critical scrutiny (see, e.g., Fairhead et al. 2012; Büscher and Davidov 2014). These perspectives are also echoed in this book, where, for instance, Kaag discusses how Senegalese Islamic environmental activists collaborate with European development partners, while Timo Kallinen examines how commercial ecotourism in Ghana employs the traditional religious imagery.

Overall, the political ecology perspective proves valuable when examining, on the one hand, the ways in which people contribute to environmental problems, and, on the other, how they respond to the environmental difficulties they face, seeking to solve or mitigate them. Political ecology emerged in the 1970s as the study of how power relations mediate human–environment relations, and at the time it was markedly materialistic.[4] The more recent post-Marxist political ecology has explicitly renounced that view, according to which symbolic culture should be treated merely as a 'superstructure' and reduced to the relations of material production (Biersack 2006, 3–4). Still, despite abandoning reductionism, topics relating to religion and ritual have been conspicuously scarce from this type of scholarship (for notable exceptions, see, e.g., Biersack 1996; Robbins 2003). This scarcity is particularly striking considering that many political ecologists recognise Rappaport's work, which heavily focuses on religion, as an important precursor to contemporary research.

From the field of the anthropology of religion, however, research can be found in which the adopted approach bears a resemblance to political ecology, even though the researchers in question do not identify with this school of thought. One most prominent example lies in the historically oriented work of Jean and John Comaroff (1991; 1997) on missionary Christianity among the Tswana people of South Africa. Both lauded and criticised for its approach to Christianity as a medium for the spread of capitalism (see, e.g., Peel 2001; Robbins 2007), largely overlooked is that a significant portion of their research deals with issues relating to the environment. The Comaroffs discuss, for instance, the organisation of agricultural production (Comaroff and

4. At that point, political economy sought to differentiate from the cultural ecology of the previous generation, which was considered too 'apolitical' (Biersack 2006, 2).

Comaroff 1991, 140–152; Comaroff and Comaroff 1997, 119–165), irrigation and rain (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991, 206–219), and the cattle economy (Comaroff and Comaroff 1997, 208–212) in relation to the missionary project. Similar kinds of simultaneous examinations of religious, economic, and environmental changes are also included in this book. For instance, Kallinen contextualises his discussion on the arrival of climate capitalism in rural Ghana by giving the historical background, describing how conversion to Christianity radically transformed earlier held views about the sanctity of nature and the utilisation of its resources.

In the context of political ecology, religions should not, however, be approached solely as channels or tools for change; it is essential to also understand religious groups and institutions as political and economic actors as well. This is, of course, one of the central ways in which religions influence environmental relations. For example, mission churches in colonial Africa acquired land on a massive scale, which was hard to distinguish from the land-grabbing of economic entrepreneurs; as such, the transformations of landholding and agriculture cannot be fully understood without also considering the role of churches (Alava and Shroff 2019). A comparable development in this volume is Tuomas Tammisto's discussion of the involvement of missionaries and churches in the development of industrial agriculture in Papua New Guinea, which is closely linked to the processes of religious change.

Multiple ecologies

Our discussion on religious ecologies represents a part of larger anthropological discussions concerning the simultaneity and plurality of ecologies in various settings. This discussion originates in Southeast Asian research, especially in a recently published edited volume, *Plural Ecologies in Southeast Asia: Hierarchies, Conflicts, and Coexistence* (Duile et al. 2023).[5] Along with the following discussion, which draws primarily from points outlined in the introductory chapter of the aforementioned volume (Sprenger et al. 2023), we hope to extend the discussion that began within Southeast Asian studies on multiple ecologies to include other geographic areas such as Africa.

The anthropological research focusing on what Sprenger et al. (2023) call the pluralisation of Southeast Asian ecologies is structured around the juxtaposition of local animist ecologies, on the one hand, and modern naturalist ecologies, on the other. While the latter restrict agency to living human beings, with nonhumans appearing as things or alienable resources to be exploited, the former covers relationships in which various nonhumans – whether biological or nonbiological – may appear as moral beings, persons, or powers to be somehow considered. But, as the authors note, the animist/modern–naturalist dualism, while based on the distinction between tradition and modernity, tends to gloss over differentiations, thereby remaining too simplistic (Sprenger et al. 2023). To understand plural ecologies, they argue, it is necessary to pay attention to both local conceptualisations of environment and to translocal power structures. To do so, Duile et al. (2023) combine two strands of theory – that

5. The volume mentioned is not the first work in which the idea of several, simultaneously existing ecologies has been brought out in the social sciences (for others, see, e.g., Andersen 2018; Green 2013). It is, however, the first with an ambitious formulation of a theoretical model for the study of plural ecologies.

is, political ecology already introduced in the previous section, and the anthropology of ontologies, especially in the context of environmental change. While the former, with its strong actor orientation and historical perspective, stresses the embeddedness of human–environment relations in political and economic power relationships, the latter, informed by studies of indigenous peoples of the Amazonian and circumpolar regions, has its origins in the ontological turn of the early 2000s and is known from its critique of anthropocentrism and Western modern dualisms.[6] This turn within anthropological theory was closely related to what is often called 'new animism' (Harvey 2005a), an approach which, while revolving around questions of personhood and agency, views animistic ontologies as complex modes of relational engagement with a world full of sentient persons, both human and other-than-human (Harvey 2005a; Swancutt and Mazard 2016).[7]

In the literature, the concepts of ecology and ontology often overlap. Complying with Sprenger et al. (2023), we argue, however, that the term ecology better manages to take into account the intersection of local, regional, national, or global dynamics than the idea of distinct ontologies. Ecologies are not stable, isolated entities, but emerge, change, and intersect through practice. Importantly, people are not tied to just one ecology, but are often simultaneously embedded in diverse, whether conflicting or cooperating, ecological regimes.[8] This simultaneity is illustrated in the case studies in this volume as well. For instance, Jelena Salmi describes Koli fishers' hybrid theorisations of the changing sea weather in India, while Tea Virtanen discusses the diverse curative or preventive practices of the Mbororo cattle herders in Cameroon in

6. One such strongly criticised dualism is the Western nature/culture divide, with Eduardo Viveiros de Castro among its prominent critics within the mentioned intellectual framework. With his 'alternative' divide between multiculturalism and multinaturalism, Viveiros de Castro has challenged the Western notion of the unity of nature and the plurality of cultures by drawing attention to the Amazonian Amerindian people in whose conceptions there is a singular culture shared by both humans and nonhumans and multiple natures in the form of bodily diversity (see, e.g., Viveiros de Castro 2015).
7. Much of the outlook of new animism, breaking away from the evolutionary undertone and the spiritual/material dualism of the older Tylorian animism, has been informed by the work of Alfred Irving Hallowell (1960), the first to employ the concept of 'other-than-human persons' in his article on the ontology of the Ojibwe people of North America. Decades later, his way of retheorising animism was continued by Nurit Bird-David (1999), who introduced the idea of animism as relational epistemology. Among others who have developed the field of new animism in anthropology, we can mention scholars such as Viveiros de Castro (1998) with his theory of perspectivism, Philippe Descola (2013) with his ontological typology, and Rane Willerslev (2007) with his emphasis on the animist world views as sources of practical knowledge. For an overview of earlier and more recent research on the new animism, see Harvey (2005b), Laack (2020), and Swancutt (2019).
8. A somewhat comparable idea can be found in Arturo Escobar's (2018; 2020) use of the term 'pluriverse' via which, he argues, the existence of multiple worlds can be made visible. By talking about pluriverse, Escobar (2020, 26) challenges what he calls 'only one world', a concept of globalised universality central to Western modernity. He emphasises that the pluriverse does not include the idea that worlds are totally separate but, instead, interlinked – one cause for that being the way the modern world occupies all the other existing worlds. For Escobar (2020, 27), this does not, however transform them into the same thing as 'worlds may be part of one another – but at the same time be radically different'. For an earlier elaboration of the idea of pluriverse, see, for instance, de la Cadena (2010).

order to assure their cattle's wellbeing in the present climatic-environmental distress. Indeed, referring again to Sprenger et al. (2023), unlike the case in Western modernity, many people in the Global South switch back and forth between different ecologies and the related ontological assumptions in the various contexts of their daily lives. This does not necessarily mean that the navigation between ecologies is always trouble-free. For instance, Anu Lounela applies this argument to the Ngaju Dayak of Indonesian Borneo, in the context of coping with climate and environmental change-related hazards, which represent a source of constant stress among the people.

Bruno Latour (2011, 801) posed the rhetorical question of whether an ecology is 'anything but the deployment of all the attributes necessary for any self-contained entity to subsist'. We could continue his statement, arguing that the composition of entities and attributes that maintain life is understood differently in different ecologies. Crucially, these are also not restricted to modern/naturalist and nonmodern/animist ecologies. One central aim of this volume lies in enriching the discussion of ecologies with the concept of religious ecologies. Contrary to the edited volume on plural ecologies in Southeast Asia discussed above (Duile et al. 2023), in which translocal religions receive relatively little attention, in our anthology they often appear as dynamic ecological regimes interacting with other comparable ecologies. In the contributions herein, the term religious ecologies is not, however, confined to translocal – or the so-called world – religions with their gods, angels, and other nonhuman powers, but also encompasses different local ontologies with varied other nonhuman beings understood as persons such as animals, plants, and spirits. A good example lies in Jenni Mölkänen's analysis from Madagascar, where different ecologies coexist in the rural milieu inhabited by farmers, implying that people's daily lives can be simultaneously affected by the Christian god, ancestors, and spirits, as well as state and foreign nongovernmental organisations (NGOs). Our collection therefore highlights the many ways in which different religious ecologies coexist and interrelate with each other and with ecologies that draw from other sources of knowledge and power, sometimes in an atmosphere of smooth negotiating and networking, sometimes in more awkward or conflictual terms.

Insights from regional comparisons

This book focuses on regions and peoples most severely impacted by the ecological crises caused by climate change. Not only are Africa and the Asia-Pacific region mentioned in climate research as the areas specifically facing the most severe impacts, but this book also centres those vulnerable groups in these particular contexts – that is, small-scale food producers and indigenous peoples (see IPCC 2023, 5). Yet the net anthropogenic greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions per capita and for the total population in these regions are among the smallest in the world, despite also growing significantly during the era of industrialisation (IPCC 2023, 45). The chapters in this book demonstrate that, in Africa and the Asia-Pacific, the anthropogenically induced climate crises have brought about a multitude of changes, such as rising sea levels, frequent cyclones, erratic rains, heavy flooding, as well as rising temperatures, irregular droughts, and forest fires. However, these calamities vary across ecologies and agroecological zones. For instance, Ethiopian farmers struggle with their declining agricultural and