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Book Review: Joerg Rieger & Terra Schwerin Rowe (eds.) *Liberating People, Planet, and Religion: Intersections of Ecology, Economics, and Christianity*.

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Rieger, Joerg and Rowe, Terra Schwerin, editors. *Liberating People, Planet, and Religion: Intersections of Ecology, Economics, and Christianity*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2024, 264 pp.

This volume is an intervention into the causes and consequences of some challenging contemporary intersections of economic, religious, and planetary systems. Joerg Rieger, a professor of theology and the director of Wendland-Cook Program in Religion and Justice at Vanderbilt University in Tennessee, and Terra Schwerin Rowe, a professor of philosophy and religion at the University of North Texas, have assembled within this volume a set of perspectives whose scope is sweeping, even as the range of academic, religious, and geographic backgrounds of its contributing authors is comparatively narrow. Given that the project stems from an academic conference that had been planned for the spring of 2020 at Vanderbilt but which had to be canceled because of the Covid-19 pandemic—an ongoing context referenced in many of the chapters—this relatively parochial quality is not a surprise. With the exception of George Zachariah, who is based in New Zealand, all of the book's contributors live and work in the United States (though contributor Whitney Bauman divides his time between Florida and Germany), and most are scholars of theology, religion, and ethics—particularly in liberal Protestant varieties—with a bit of social science and a lot of public engagement represented, as well.

The themes, aims, and structure of the book are clear and easy to represent. Across the triad of ecology, economics, and Christianity found in the subtitle of the book, there is a progression of normative positions that moves from the more unequivocal to more ambivalent: ecology (an absolute disaster), economics (deleteriously dominated by capitalism, which degrades the planet and corrupts religion, but which can sometimes be reimagined or mitigated), Christianity (ambivalent: errant in either ignoring the toxic link between capitalism and ecological devastation or in actively participating in it, and in some accounts even foundational to this link because of a deeply rooted anthropocentrism—an argument made famous by Lynn White—yet also possessed of alternative inheritances by which to reimagine the human/nonhuman dualism, learn from other cultures in a spirit of solidarity, and promote emerging liberative practices). These positions are reflected in some of the references that appear throughout the book: e.g., in ecology, Jason Moore's notion of the Capitalocene (a more polemical alternative to the Anthropocene); in economics, Herman Daly's steady-state economy; in Christianity, Sallie McFague's ecotheology, Catherine Keller's relational theology, and the liberationist theological tradition.

These positions are consistent with two key commitments shared by Rieger, Rowe, and the nine contributing authors in the volume. First, one must never fall into

pessimism, as there are counter-impulses to attend to that are worth celebrating and emulating. Second, one must focus on these forces holistically—for example, attending, in economic terms, to modes of production as well as well as habits of consumption. Fittingly, the structure of the volume seeks to place diagnoses and analyses of large-scale problems alongside descriptions of embedded practices. Even if the distinction between parts I and II of the book is not always clear, the volume's structure generally succeeds in this task. This combination of worldviews and practices reflects, respectively, the two parts of a typology that Christian ethicist Willis Jenkins has called the "cosmological" and "pragmatic" approaches to religious environmental ethics. Both of these types are represented within the volume, which is to its credit. The general progression across the book is from the abstract to the concrete, the large to the small scale.

Following the editors' introduction, the volume consists of eleven chapters structured across three parts. Part I, "Global Historical and Contextual Approaches," begins with a chapter from Rowe, which provides an overview of how the production and consumption of energy has been represented within the cultural imagination across history. Rowe's argument is that unsustainable extractivist economic practices are deeply rooted in the Western psyche. In her telling, the topic of energy need not be the preserve of engineers and technocrats or commercial interests but a basic theological occupation, too. Therefore, although the production and consumption of energy has been a site of unjust relations, it is at least possible for theologians to bring the resources of their tradition to bear in linking energy practices with moral commitments. The next chapter comes from sociologist Nathalia Hernández Vidal, who provides a detailed social history of Colombia as she traces changes in liberation theology in becoming less androcentric and more erotic, which is to say engaged with other-than-human worlds. Of particular interest to Vidal is pedagogy, which is represented as an ambivalent but vital means of taking a place-based approach to reimagining unjust economic practices. Part I's final chapter, from George Zachariah, focuses on the notion of the commons, with a cultural grounding in the traditions of the South Pacific. Zachariah argues that a *moana* perspective (*moana* means "water body") warrants a critique of ecotheology's separation of ecological and social concern. For Zachariah, what one ultimately finds in this vision is the "commons" as an ecological justice paradigm that might be applied in other cultural and geographic contexts.

Part II of the book, "Alternative Frameworks," begins with a chapter from Rieger. A summary of arguments developed in his 2022 monograph, *Theology in the Capitalocene* (Fortress Press), Rieger's chapter combines liberation theology with social theory, environmental sciences and ecology, and economic theory. Although Rieger's exhortation to "rethink everything, including religion" reads as a bit implausible on practical grounds, his attention to grassroots contexts and belief in the capacity of one's habits and assumptions to be transformed by an encounter from without are more convincing. The chapter extends, to some extent, a cultural critique of Christian anthropocentrism—according to Rieger, Lynn White's famous argument as such "just scratches the surface" (88)—the more fundamental force is that of capitalism. In the following chapter, Jeremy Posadas extends Rieger's focus on capitalism, arguing that capitalism is "the 'ism' that funds all other isms" (109), the root source of problems ranging from colonialism to racism to ecological degradation. According to Posadas, if society depends on the relation between a human "web of care" and a more-than-human "web of life," and if the former depends on the latter, then capitalism's defining trait is to remake that relation into exploitation. In similarly sweeping terms, Posadas argues that capitalism is inherently

incompatible with Christianity, a position that, however admirable as an aspiration, is nevertheless overdrawn. As an alternative, Posadas calls for a Christian-labor alliance, pointing toward an analogy between a union and a congregation.

In an unannounced shift in causal emphasis, the second half of part II comprises a pair of chapters that focus less on capitalism than on underlying religious cosmologies as the root of unjust contemporary ecological, economic, and religious relations. In the first of these chapters, Timothy Reinhold Eberhart lays the ecological and economic ills of our time at the feet of a disenchanted cosmology. According to Eberhart, "the formation of the Western imagination underlying capitalism's cheapening of nonhuman nature cannot be understood apart from its Christian theological foundations" (138). In response to this legacy, Eberhart argues on behalf of a self-conscious animism, invoking a wide range of references—from Jürgen Moltmann in theology to Kate Raworth in economics—in order to rethink fundamental ecological, economic, and environmental relations in the service of a new, re-enchanted vision. With ecotheologian Mark Wallace as his key interlocutor, Eberhart places particular emphasis on the Holy Spirit as the basis for an ecologically restorative pneumatology. In part II's final chapter, Whitney Bauman argues that the drawing of the human/nonhuman boundary has been the site at which many women and people of color become nonhuman: an astute point that corroborates the thesis of Zakiyyah Iman Jackson's book *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World* (New York University Press, 2020). Bauman's key argument is that a theological anthropology of an "omni-God" (155) underwrites the economics that drives ecological degradation and racial exclusions. Accordingly, Bauman calls for a search for a new anthropology characterized by "common grounds" (156) and the promotion of planetary bodies, which, as he sees it, both integrates and entails planetary economics, queer economies, and home economies.

Part III of the book, "Practical Engagements," begins with Gabriella Lettini on the practice of care work amidst pandemic conditions. Lettini is attentive to the intersection of economic and racial disparities that infect such work even at a systemic level (readers of *De Ethica* might recall that LaShaunda Reese, winner of Societas Ethica's Young Scholar Award at its 2021 meeting, explored similar terrain in her paper, "And Yet We Survive: Ethical Reflections on the Double Pandemic of COVID and Racial Brutality* in Black America: Referencing Audre Lourde's Litany for Survival"). Lettini's chapter is followed by that of abby mohaupt, which focuses, refreshingly, on a specific issue: fossil fuel divestment on the part of the Presbyterian Church. Writing in favor of divestment, mohaupt explores the historical context of divestment practices in cases such as South African apartheid. Her chapter's conclusion raises the notion of as divestment as a liturgical resource. The next chapter, from Daniel Jaranko, explores in succession a nested sequence of organizing strategies: intentional communities, community sustainable development, community organizing, and strategic nonviolence. Although Jaranko's chapter does not stay with one single issue, as mohaupt's did, it is similarly drawn from what is clearly a long history of engagement on the part of its author. Perhaps Jaranko's most general comment is the claim that, in the notion of "just mercy," justice and mercy, which he framed as being in tension, can be balanced. The book's final chapter comes from Tim Van Meter, focusing on the MTSO, or Methodist Theological School of Ohio. His chapter tells the story of teaching at the institution and engaging with the built environment, specifically with respect to how the community has been interacting with the land on which it sits. Van Meter argues convincingly on behalf of agrarian commitments and rural perspectives as vital contributions to the intersection of religion, ecology, and economics explored across the volume.

Having surveyed the book's sections and chapters, it is now possible to offer a brief assessment of the volume as a whole. The book is at its best in its genuine success in demonstrating the plausibility of the following claims. First, religion, economics, and ecology are connected and should be thought together. One should therefore think systematically and holistically about their patterns of interaction, because, as Rieger and Rowe put it in the volume's introduction (1-2), to do otherwise creates false dichotomies, abstracts from lived experience in consequential ways, and contributes to polarization. Second, religion, economics, and ecology intersect in bad as well as good ways. Although the term "intersectionality" does not appear in the volume, the volume's capacity to show how problems can cluster and compound across multiple domains is an effective demonstration of intersectionality as an analytical approach. Third, religion has a vital role to play in this process—a positive one, even as Christianity bears a unique responsibility because of its historical participation in deleterious practices. Each of these claims attempts to address real challenges that are indeed related, and the book deserves praise for pressing them so consistently. Although academic projects that integrate ecological and social frameworks have become more common in recent years, it remains rare for a single project to maintain such a consistently capacious scope with clarity. That this volume manages to do so is commendable.

The success of the book at the level of its basic aims and commitments has the effect of making strengths out of some of its weaker aspects, which include, in addition to the relative parochialism referred to at the top of this review, a certain superficiality by which the category of religion is represented. This is because, in seeking to integrate ecological, economic, and religious challenges as holistically as possible, the volume overcomes its omissions and invites deeper investigation into the work of its contributing authors—especially Rieger, whose recorded output in these areas is extensive—and fits well alongside other recent academic projects whose aims and approaches are complementary. Such projects include Miguel De La Torre's *Shifting Climates, Shifting People* (Pilgrim Press, 2022), Jennifer Quigley and Catherine Keller's *Assembling Futures: Economy, Ecology, Democracy, and Religion* (Fordham Press, 2024), and Gary Slater and Lisa Landoe Hedrick's *Ethics Across Borders: Reimagining Religious, Political, and Ecological Divides* (Routledge, 2025). Readers based in Europe might appreciate how this volume complements the work of such European scholars as Sigurd Bergmann (on theology and ecology) or Ivo Frankenreiter (on ecology, theology, and monetary value).

As for the volume's underdeveloped or inconsistent treatment of religion, this is admittedly curious for a group of contributors mostly employed as scholars of religion and theology. On one level, the issue here is no different than that just noted, which is that greater theological depth can be found simply by reading further into the work of the volume's contributors or that of such frequently-cited authors as Catherine Keller. However, the volume's problem with religion is not simply one of omission. Yes, there is an absence of any critical engagement with the term "religion" itself, which has been subjected to a sustained scholarly critique—by Talal Asad and others—for several years now. This, however, could be addressed by reading, in addition to Asad and others, recent work from comparative theologian John Thatamanil. The more serious issue is, rather, the unacknowledged conflation of Christianity—the only major tradition that receives significant attention—with religion per se (a sleight-of-hand present even in the volume's title, which mentions "religion" in the main title and "Christianity" in the subtitle). Is "religion" equivalent to "Christianity"? Surely not. Along with the editors' arguments that Christianity bears a special responsibility because of its historical participation in unjust

ecological practices, readers of the volume might have been better served if its editors had made the exclusive focus on Christianity more explicit.

The benefit of bringing in further and complementary perspectives applies to what is arguably the volume's largest and most curious omission: the political, which has a claim equal to the economic as a key contemporary mediator of religion and ecology, as well as an equally rich and challenging legacy in the form of territorial sovereignty. Sovereignty receives only slight mention in the volume, yet its combination of associations—colonial histories, post-Reformation religion, and ecological relations—is a vital, arguably even indispensable counterpart to the religion-economics-ecology nexus in the book. Indeed, politics and economics combine in some of the most illustrative and challenging cases at the nexus of culture and more-than-human nature. To name just one example, Ecuador in 2008 enshrined into its constitution the rights of nature, yet the ensuing failure of such seemingly promising projects as the Yasuni-ITT initiative stemmed not just from capitalist economic pressure, but also the political calculations of then-president Rafael Correa. For readers interested in linking the economic focus of the present volume with analyses of politics and especially sovereignty, the work of Michael S. Hogue and Wendy Brown is highly recommended.

In sum, the present volume generally succeeds when its aims, arguments, and commitments come with an invitation to engage further, and it struggles when its occasional overdetermining of the causal relationships among its three key categories risks foreclosing this possibility. This is not only an external problem—that is, closing off the volume to complementary further readings and perspectives from outside—but also an internal one. To the extent that the volume gives the impression that there *must* be a single anchoring explanation for the deleterious intersections of economics, ecology, and religion characterizing the world today, this stifles the fruitful combination of causalities expressed in part II of the book—half of which argues for capitalism as the deepest explanatory factor, the other half of which argue for religious cosmologies—and works against the granular perspectives collected in section III, which is one of the book's strongest sections precisely because it is the most candid about being diffuse. Such reductive or overdetermining impulses within the volume are slight, however. Readers seeking an earnest engagement with Christian-ethical perspectives on pressing ecological-economic-religious intersections would therefore be well served by consulting this volume.

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