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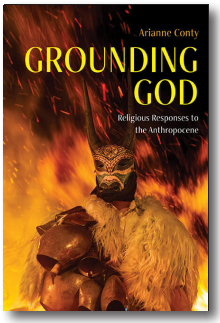
BOOK REVIEW

Grounding God: Religious Responses to the Anthropocene.
By Arianne Conty. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2023. 230 pp. ISBN 978-1-4384-9574-3. $88.00 (hardcover); $34.00 (e-book).



How can we survive the impending apocalypse? By reversing direction, learning from the past rather than rushing to The End? Conty reminds us that "for indigenous peoples the end of the world is old news; it has already happened." Five centuries ago, for example, she notes, viruses and gunpowder "massacred 95 percent of the peoples of the Americas, along with most of their traditional ways of living" (29). What can we learn from their stories of solidarity and kinship?

Conty cites John Cobb's contribution to Roger Gottlieb's *This Sacred Earth*: "a truly ecological consciousness was far more clearly and efficiently present in hunting and gathering societies than in our traditions" (52).[1] Hence, we turn to animist rituals and stories for "new" ways to restore our original connections to religion and civilization. There are seemingly hundreds of citations like this in Conty's monumental work of scholarship and philosophy which may prove to be one of the most helpful, hopeful, and popular scholarly books of this era. For example, in her chapter on Christianity, she cites Lynn White Jr, Pope Francis, Matthew Fox, Mark Wallace, Anne Peterson, Anne Primavesi, Stuart Kauffman, and Nancy Ellen Abrams.

Among the other organized religions (Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, and so on), Buddhism apparently has the most to offer now to those committed to saving the planet. Conty draws from both Nagarjuna (the founder of Mahayana Buddhism), who categorically rejected binary thinking, and the twentieth-century Japanese philosopher Tetsuro Watsuji, whose theory "deconstructs the Western understanding of environment altogether, and is

1 John B. Cobb, Jr, "Protestant Theology and Deep Ecology," in Roger S. Gottlieb, ed., *This Sacred Earth: Religion, Nature, Environment*, second edition (Routledge, 2004), 248–261.

thus able to move beyond the dualistic dilemmas of Western ideology" (58). County lists the "confluence of science and Eastern ideas [such as] the ideas of interdependence of Taoism and Buddhism, the Jewel-net of Indra; the attribution of soul…to all beings; the interspecies relationships intrinsic to the idea of reincarnation; and the Buddhist idea that all things lack inherent existence and thus are constituted through relationality" (56–57).

Conty also demonstrates the relevance of naturalism, analogism, Neopaganism, panpsychism, the indigenous animism of the Amazon basin, and the *machinic animism* of Felix Guattari. As she traces all this back to goddess worship, she integrates shamanism, Druids, Wicca, Gaia, nineteenth-century Romantic poets, and New Agers (77). Finally, she proposes new ecological values to replace modern binaries.

Many centuries ago, Buddhists demonstrated that "individual" human beings are ever-changing stories told by unreliable narrators ("there is no *you*"). Nevertheless, these stories can supply the examples and models needed to balance philosophical abstractions and convince a wider public of their innate ability to cross the boundaries between self and other. We now know that empathy is triggered by mirror neurons in each member of a group. Intense awareness of other beings can also be observed in animals, whether they be the hunters or the hunted. Shamans cultivated this sympathetic imagination to the point where they could easily cross species boundaries. (Some of us moved in that direction when "spirit animals" were taken seriously, as they still are in Rudolfo Anaya's classic, *Bless Me Ultima* [1994].)

In her fifth chapter, on Animism, Conty highlights the thinking of historian Dipesh Chakrabarty, author of *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (2021), who has observed that the sympathetic imagination is an ability "only the humanities can foster: the ability to see something from another person's point of view" (113). Carefully reading a book activates the sympathetic imagination as we "leave the self" and "see as other" (112). Conty also draws our attention to Nobel Prize winning novelist, J. M. Coetzee, author of *The Lives of Animals* (1999), who demonstrated that "the humanities foster the inclusion of all other beings within humanity, just as indigenous animism does, and that such an inclusion is indeed constitutive of what it means to be human" (113). In other words," the sympathetic imagination, rather than rational calculation, is what is required to see things from the point of view of a jaguar, a flying ant, or a forest" (113).

Hopefully, Arianne Conty's *Grounding God* and related books will facilitate the widespread cultivation of empathy for all beings that will make "the Anthropocene Era truly human" (117).

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