If you are looking for reasons to believe that humans can fi nd a way through the unfolding catastrophe, this is your book, your hope, your answer.

— Kathleen Dean Moore, author of 
Great Tide Rising and Wild Comfort

Why are we in such a predicament? The contributors to this volume trace our discontents to a kind of cultural amnesia. In our rush to progress, we have forgotten deeper sources of wisdom, and with it the calm awareness that humankind is a part of the larger community of life in the unfolding cosmic story. We’ve been looking for meaning, as it were, in all the wrong places. From varied perspectives, the essays here shed the bright light of remembrance and reverence.

— David Orr, author of 
Hope is an Imperative, Down to the Wire, and Ecological Literacy

This book is a celebration of the diversity of ways in which humans can relate to the world around them, and an invitation to its readers to partake in planetary coexistence. Innovative, informative, and highly accessible, this interdisciplinary anthology brings together scholars and educators across the sciences and humanities, in a collaborative effort to illuminate the different ways of being in the world and the different kinds of knowledge they entail—from the ecological knowledge of indigenous communities, to the scientific knowledge of a biologist, and the embodied knowledge communicated through storytelling. This anthology examines the interplay between Nature and Culture in the setting of our current age of ecological crisis, stressing the importance of addressing these ecological crises occurring around the planet through multiple perspectives. These perspectives are exemplified through diverse case studies—from the political and ethical implications of thinking with forests, to the capacity of storytelling to motivate action, to the worldview of the Indigenous Okanagan community in British Columbia.

Living Earth Community is essential reading not only for researchers and students, but for anyone interested in the ways humans interact with the community of life on Earth, especially during this current period of environmental emergency.

As with all Open Book publications, this entire book is available to read for free on the publisher’s website. Printed and digital editions, together with supplementary digital material, can also be found at www.openbookpublishers.com

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16. Sensing, Minding, and Creating

John Grim

Sensing, minding, and creating are integrated ways that the human perceives, thinks about, and finds novel pathways in the immensity of the world, and, more immediately, with the ‘tangled bank’ of life. I have used two different styles to notate this: namely, sensing-minding-creating (connected by dashes), and sensing, minding, and creating (distinguished by commas). Each style refers to this process of universe emergence (please note that here I am aligning this happening in the human with the happening of the world). Sensing-minding-creating emphasizes, through connective dashes, the simultaneity and interwoven character of this threefold interaction; whereas the use of commas emphasizes the distinctive manifestations of the three processes that make up this interaction. Although the integrated actions of all three are simultaneous and interactive dimensions, sensing is placed first, and thus emphasized, to draw attention to the world’s multisensory experience of itself as foundational to existence. That is, sensing, or ‘reaching out’, characterizes both inorganic and organic existence, and minding, or ‘inner patterning’ or ‘consciousness’, characterizes all reality from the primal flaring forth of our universe. Creating, or emerging, follows from the bending back of sensing-minding on themselves giving rise to novel space for existence to flourish, change, and evolve.

Sensing and the woven fabric of sensations occurs, for example, in the need for material forms to bend back towards and into one another. In the lifeworld (the whole fabric of reality expressed in individual subjective responses to the world), sensing cells discern, through their
reaching out, that which also enables pattern and flourishing. Patterning or consciousness (what I call minding) arises in the formation of galaxies, in the need for cells to discern, and in human reaching out in thought. Creating results from that reaching out and discerning, which returns, or bends back, in ways that open new possibilities for patterning and flourishing.

In some cultural modes, the role of sensing has been considered as ancillary to minding and creating. In this exploratory statement (sensing-minding-creating), I seek to reposition our sensing of the world as central to understanding the human. Moreover, I want to emphasize ways in which humans, following material forms in the emergence of the universe, and the evolution of life, have been brought to new places of questioning and knowing by the world.

My own particular concerns for the study of religion and ecology opens an awareness in me of ways in which the human becomes attentive to the world as both integral to itself, and other-than itself, through sensing-minding-creating. I focus here on religion and ecology as an approach for understanding sensing-minding-creating, not as a final or ultimate exemplar of these integrated dimensions. Rather, the study of religion and ecology explores human experience as a bridging of inner experiences and external relatedness to a world perceived as filled with sacred meaning. Religions in various ways acknowledge the integral dependence of all of life’s communities on a larger whole. Now, through the empirical search of modern science, we learn of life’s dependence on Earth’s ecosystems. This is an historical dependence of reaching out in need and patterning our responses. This is a dependence that arises from what came before, but which gives rise to radically new emergent forms among non-living and living existence.

This approach to studying religion and ecology explores the ways in which humans interrogate the world. This is a search, as I see it, for ultimate transcendence within the boundaries of existence in the universe. Human encounters with the natural world, as well as engagements with their own social and built worlds, all stand in relation to one another as sensed realities that give rise to thought, doubt, and question. Perception of the world via our senses arouses commitments that the world is as our sensations reveal. Yet, that commitment to perception continually flounders as our senses themselves rise up against our efforts to order rationally the changing world.
The paleolithic cave paintings, grave offerings and extensive feasting of our hominin ancestors demonstrate a reaching out into the world some 30,000 years before the present (BP), to 2 million years BP. Wouldn’t we also say that that life manifest in the ordered styles of paleolithic cave paintings is also filled with doubt, contestation, and question? All this questioning has not simply occurred in some speculative realm, but in direct relation to our ancestors’ lived-experience of the celestial realms, seasons, landscapes, and in the migratory patterning of biodiversity. These are the relational manifestations of sensing-minding-creating.

This questioning begins with human space — that is, the space of the human person in the world, a space in which the search for religious ultimate presence and meaningful pathways appear. This human space cannot be separated from the surrounding world. Transformed by the mutual perceiving of self, world, and other, a neutral space — formerly empty and formless — emerges. The term hierophany has been used in religious studies to suggest the human experience of the sacred, which is a reflexive place of sensing-minding-creating.

Religious hierophanies are examples, then, of the ways that somatic sensing reaches out, somatic thinking orders in patterns of meaning, and, emerging in the world, opens into an emptiness capable of flourishing. In these ways the human and the world come to understand and clarify themselves. In this process, they continue to reveal and to question the deeper structures of reality in relation to each other. Truths are composite narratives expressed in the sensing-minding of existent beings subject to constantly change. This change, arising from out of the inherent foaming into existence of the particulate world, is charged by that foaming emptiness. In this charge a dynamic bending occurs in sensing-minding back upon themselves into the foaming emptiness that is also towards creating.

For the human, sensing-minding-creating are responses within the world as a communion of subjects.¹ In the study of religion and ecology, sensing-minding-creating presents a ‘process approach’ (in which the wholeness of universe processes predominates); whereas sensing, minding, and creating present an attempt to preserve the need

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¹ The idea of the world as a ‘communion of subjects’, as opposed to a ‘collection of objects’, is at the heart of Thomas Berry’s work: see, for example, *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco and Berkeley, CA: Sierra Club Books, 1988).
among existent beings for individual subjectivity. In these mutually aligned frames (sensing-minding-creating), the diverse religions can be interrogated regarding: (i) the sense of the human and the world for each other, which leads to an awareness of their mutual kinship and their dependence on each other; (ii) the capacity of human intelligence to frame, conceptually, the sensible world so as to creatively renew itself in ultimate transcendence; (iii) the human quest to return creatively to the revelatory place of ultimate transcendence for transformation even as the flow of perceived events carries their world forward.

Sensing, minding, and creating are presented as specific modes of questioning for understanding the diverse religions in their formative and ongoing contacts with different ecosystems. Religions are, after all, composed and transmitted by human beings with bodies who experience the world, and who, according to the particularity of religious traditions, experience a revelatory message with regard to the world. That aspect of religion, namely, its relevance to the world, is a primary consideration here, though it may not be situated as primary within a given tradition. For example, Torah was given to the Jewish community in both oral and literate forms as a questioning-knowing covenant between the Divine, the Creation, and the Chosen people. Among Indigenous Tewa peoples, for example, of San Juan Pueblo, summer lineages interact and vie with winter lineages in questioning-knowing relationships. Native Koyukon peoples speak of a watchful world that may obscure meaning in perception, yet reveals in an oral tradition of ethical stories of the ‘long ago’. Confucian-Daoist sages suggest interactions with the Dao may reveal interior landscapes with cosmological implications. The ground upon which these questioning-knowing relationships occur in the world is a way of interpreting these covenant-community relationships.

Sensing, minding, and creating provide us with interrogative approaches appropriate even for the seemingly transcendent orientations of religious traditions. A transcendence, I sense, whether it be heaven-oriented or not, is still reaching out from bodies for novel flourishing. This approach, then, acknowledges the questioning process at the heart of our human experience of a changing world, even as it creatively searches for that abiding place where ultimate knowing resides. In this sense, our approach is not a quest for philosophical insight as much as an opening to the multiple ways in which
ecosystems and world-pictures have affected the quests of religious life. Acknowledging the seminal roles of empirical observation, or sensing, and of thought, or minding, in the emergence of religions, this approach also emphasizes the particular turns in religions we call creating. One move that appears evident in the religions is the bending back of sensing and minding that effects a doubling in the flow that opens out into creative mystery.

The intention of this approach is to bridge the divide that has been established between the human and the natural world, culture and nature. Sensing the world, and attention to the world as sensing the human, are presented as a unifying ground, that place from which minding, or thought about the world, meets itself. Such an opening to religions as complex interactions of sensing-minding-creating presumes experiencing bodies, thinking minds, and creative engagement on both sides of the encounter. Such a generative place is not without doubt and questioning. But it is also a shared ground, and a sense of shared bodies gives perceptual depth to doubt and question. It is the case that anthropological studies have described cultures in which distinctions are made between the realm of human society and the nonhuman world.

While not ignoring these meaningful, symbolic, pragmatic distinctions, a more radical nature/culture separation may be a modern turn. Thus, a deeper, human sense of difference from ecology may pervade our religions, and this merits reconsideration. As the Indigenous scholar Jack Forbes writes, ‘People can be, and indeed are, part of “nature.” The objective is to understand that together-doing of the balanced kind and the Away from People have never been mutually exclusive and that “nature needs people” (just not too many of them!)’.

This differs from a variation on an older, comparative religions approach that is often identified with Friedrich Max Müller. In that

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nineteenth-century view, religious thought and language relate to ecological realities as corrupted remnants of lived-experiences in the world. From this perspective, thought, or minding, would faintly echo the sensed, experienced world. The position taken in this chapter, and presented in the process approach of sensing-minding-creating, emphasizes the seminal role of creative doubt and questioning in the lived experience of the world. Rather than experiences of the natural world frozen in language, religions transmit the capacity for ongoing experiences and expressions of body-mind in the intertwined worlds of culture-nature. Yet, the established patterning guiding a study of mutual influences of bioregions and religions is often masked in the mystery of bending back upon themselves. Certainly, patterns are developed in the traditions themselves for expressing places of ultimacy and transformation. It also evident that historical studies describe the many ways in which religions relate to ecosystems. These can be described using categories from scientific ecology and even more pointedly using terms drawn from the particular religions themselves. What this chapter seeks to elucidate here is that the underlying dynamics that have generated such patterns of interaction between religions and ecologies mask as much as they reveal. Their contemporary relevance, and the ongoing doubt and questioning they present, are subject to our own rising up into that emptiness holding the potentiality for flourishing.

While Bertrand Russell, in his autobiography, stood at the edge of a dark ocean crying into the night of his fading nineteenth-century Protestantism, the larger prospect of all the human religious communities may be more poignantly described by the chasm we have created between selves and the world. Climate emergency, and the larger environmental diminishment, confront us like a chasm between ourselves and all that we have known. As W. G. Sebald described in his novel Austerlitz, it is ‘truly terrifying to see such emptiness open up a foot away from firm ground, to realize that there was no transition, only this dividing line, with ordinary life on one side and its unimaginable opposite on the other. The chasm into which no ray of light could penetrate...’

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Bibliography


