

<b>Author:</b>	Gosling, David L.
<b>Year:</b>	2001
<b>Title:</b>	<i>Religion and Ecology in India and Southeast Asia</i>
<b>Publisher:</b>	Routledge
<b>City:</b>	London
<b>Pages:</b>	210 pp.

**Review:** The relation between religion and ecology has become a big subject nowadays, but this extremely mature work represents the well-considered gist of studies which have taken place over many years. The author combines the training of a natural scientist with experience of socially engaged work with the World Council of Churches and, thirdly, a trained perspective in the comparative study of religions which has been enriched by social-scientific field study in Thailand and frequent interactions with Southeast Asia, India and adjacent countries such as Ladakh and Bhutan. All of this comes together in an immensely readable book, full of factual information and anecdotal illustration. There is even an appendix on medicinal plants identified in Thailand and another with an impressively long list of Indian NGO's concerned with environmental questions. Much care is taken to make sure that those unsure of particular political developments in particularly relevant periods or of basic reference points in the major religious traditions considered, Hinduism and Buddhism, are not left floundering. This is an extremely useful and manageable textbook for use in a wide variety of university and college courses. Yet it is so much more than a textbook. The work is based throughout on factual material which is not otherwise easily accessible, though more may be found in David Gosling's own publications as listed in the bibliography.

The assessments of where the Hindu and Buddhist traditions really stand, or could stand, on ecological questions are extremely judicious. The author is well aware that many religious representatives today try to present their own tradition in the best light, especially as far as newly posed questions are concerned. In this book we see the advantage of a viewpoint which is *not* that of a representative of either of these traditions, but rather of a sensitive interpreter who is in a position to weigh up very carefully the ways in which they have been and could be mobilised for ecologically responsible politics. More controversial is the clear favouring of scientifically advanced technology, for example in the nuclear and genetic fields. The warning against ill-informed rejection of such technology by the environmentally concerned is no doubt needed, yet there remain unanswered questions here. After all, the world has known quite enough cases of environmental disasters brought about, in the last analysis, by technologically advanced irresponsibility masquerading as scientifically "informed".

Other readers might seek more on the activities of so-called "strategic groups" in the struggle for the

forests and the environment generally. In the case of the defeat of the ill-advised Khor Jor Kor forestry programme in Thailand by an effective protest movement in the early 1990's, for example, Buddhist monks and religious attitudes played a certain role, apparently without being crucial. We are left with the well-known puzzle as to whether the long-term religious traditions are or can be really influential, or whether the mobilization of monks on both sides is a secondary phenomenon, as assumed in Oliver Pye's *Khor Jor Kor. Forest Politics in Thailand* (forthcoming, Bangkok 2005). But Gosling's work is certainly close to the ground, as for example in the section on urban sects and movements (also in Thailand) where the Santi Asok (or Santi Asoke) movement comes to the fore (on this see also a review of Marja-Leena Heikkilä-Horn's *Santi Asoke Buddhism and Thai State Response* 1996, in an earlier issue of this journal).

Overall, Gosling's work is a fine example of the study of religions (or "religious studies", to use the phrase usually preferred in Britain) at its best: accurate, informed by sustained observations, conversations and interviews, open to interdisciplinary enrichment, and relevant to questions which not only have to be asked but also to be answered. The general tenor of his conclusions is that while the peoples of Asia have caused environmental change and damage as much as other peoples, both Hinduism and Buddhism at their best have shown themselves to be resources, or potential resources, for a reappraisal of human activity in the direction of ecological responsibility. For many answers in detail, the book itself is recommended.

© Michael Pye (2004)