



## INTRODUCTION

### *Questioning Extinction, Questioning Religion*

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HAS THERE EVER BEEN A piece of news as harrowing and disorienting as the claim that human activities have precipitated a time of *mass extinction* and that this process of destruction may prove to be equal in magnitude to the catastrophes that wiped out the dinosaurs many millions of years ago? The idea proposed by biologists of a “sixth mass extinction” has been around for a long time, of course. It is already a regular feature of media reporting, nature documentaries, and scholarly discussions. And yet, in spite of this steady drip of information, it seems—at least to the authors of this volume—as if scholars have only just begun to take full measure of the impacts that the extinction crisis has had and continues to have on human cultures and the beliefs, values, and doctrines that underpin them. This book is a first step toward addressing a double lacuna: the paucity of explicit engagement with religion in extinction research and the paucity of explicit engagement with mass extinction in religious studies research. A range of questions and ambiguities present themselves: What does living in a “time of extinctions” mean to us? How is that meaning framed by religion? And how is religion—in its doctrines, practices, identities, and legacies to secular cultures—impacted by it?

In pursuit of such questions, we began the research project that produced this volume by *questioning extinction*, not just in scholarly fora but also in everyday spaces and grassroots contexts. This questioning orientation arose from fieldwork with Extinction Rebellion (XR) activists, artists, faith leaders, and scholarly research seminars and public-facing workshops hosted between 2018 and 2020. Across all these contexts, we found that the word *extinction* often referred to quite sharply different things to different people. In some cases, the key concern related to the extinction of the human species. For others, it referred to quite specific regional creatures and habitats. There were also cases where the concept was left unspecified—an undefined horizon of anxieties and concerns about the future of life on our planet. We concluded that not only conceptually but also in its emotional registers, extinction is grasped, understood, and communicated in ways that sometimes appear paradoxical if not merely vague. In spite of this, we often also found an unusual level of solidarity around the demands of the extinction crisis and an implicit sensibility that everyone is working off the same script. So while a quite lively plural sense of extinction may be lurking in the background, people are being galvanized into action due to a shared and somewhat straightforward concern that is perhaps centered on the value of life.

Of course, as a number of other projects and studies have highlighted, there *are* many different faces to extinction. One might choose to begin with the technical criteria provided by the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources, particularly those many species now marked “extinct” on their regularly updated Red List of Threatened Species, such as the splendid poison frog (*Oophaga speciosa*) or the dodo (*Raphus cucullatus*). Interestingly, none of our authors focus on iconic endangered species, though there is a discussion of the desire to *revive* some of them (Sideris, chap. 8), a focus on those lesser mourned because they are lesser known (Jenkins, chap. 1),

and a plea to consider in a different light those of the mysterious “oceanic deep” (Rigby, chap. 6). In conservation studies, there are overlapping categories of *extinct in the wild* and *regionally extinct*, making the boundaries of extinction even more fuzzy. Many endangered species, including those now referred to as “ghost species”—such as the last two remaining and same-sex white rhinos—rely on habitats and microclimates that are irrevocably lost so that their eventual extinction is inevitable. The meaning of extinction does not stop at the level of species. There are now landscapes and landforms such as glaciers facing extinction (Kidwell, chap. 2). Furthermore, the death of languages, cultures, and other forms of memory are recognized to be inseparable—as both cause and effect—from those losses of so many life relations (Leduc, chap. 4). As we move further along this continuum toward imagined extinctions and extinction-as-metaphor, we find an increasingly wide range of losses (Hatley, chap. 7), culminating in what is for many activists and scholars the ultimate concern: the loss of human life, or, more ambiguously, the collapse of civilization (Nita, chap. 3).

There are a range of possible reactions to this inherently pluralistic approach to extinction. On the one hand, it might be tempting to form a working group and develop the one true definition, excluding all others as reflecting a different *kind* of concern. There is, justifiably, strong criticism of such attempts. Some scholars, including authors in this volume, would argue precisely that the search for a universal definition partakes in those tendencies that are connected to the extinction crisis itself—an internal loss of diversity that spreads outward. Another option might be to develop a relativistic account of extinction that is so generic that it includes all phenomena labeled as such. Steering between such extremes, another prior research project, the Extinction Studies Working Group, which has some overlapping membership with our project team, argued that “there is no singular phenomenon of extinction; rather, extinction is experienced, resisted, measured,

enunciated, performed, and narrated in a variety of ways to which we must attend.”<sup>1</sup> Their response to this complexity was to focus on stories as a nexus containing “detailed case studies of complex processes of loss, exploring the ‘entangled significance’ of extinction” in “specific sites of loss.”<sup>2</sup> Key to their approach was paying attention to particular human-nonhuman (moral and material) entanglements in specific locations where particular creatures have disappeared or are facing extinction. Reflecting in a similar way, another working group surmised that extinction is a resolutely anthropological affair. Extinction stories, they suggest, are also about the loss of “indigenous languages, vehicles of entire cosmologies.”<sup>3</sup> Both of these volumes also highlight the ways extinction can carry forward in a number of registers. This includes the sort of mourning that is driven by a reckoning with loss but also an awareness that extinction, as Charles Darwin himself believed, was a phenomenon that can be “generative, as well as degenerative,” as “the coterminous extinctions of biotic species, indigenous cultures, and specific cultural formations . . . create voids that direct attention to certain paths forward and are filled by emergent forms of life.”<sup>4</sup> So, it is possible to swing from the register of lament toward something more positive: “The destructiveness of extinction to social group cohesion, livelihoods, and ecosystems can simultaneously be productive, insofar as it may yield new thoughts about temporality and existence, inspire creativity, propel technological advancement, and mobilize social movements.”<sup>5</sup> Our authors also engage their writing with a wide spectrum of responses to extinction, from gut-wrenching lament (Hatley, chap. 7) to gleeful excitement (Sideris, chap. 8). And in the midst of this potentially confusing array of responses, it becomes all the more important to articulate, as many of our authors do, the ethical and political dimensions of extinction—for instance, the need to consider the global extinction crisis not as a tragic inevitability but as an act of ecocide made possible by global systems of injustice and exploitation.

What is interesting across these and many other subsequent explorations of extinction is the near-universal lack of references to religion. Authors may implicitly include religion and spirituality among other features of *culture*. They might reference culturally specific rituals of death and mourning, for instance, or ceremonial practices of indigenous cultures. But religious ways of knowing and critical framings of religiosity are rarely explicitly in view in scholarly treatments of extinction. Given all this plurality and ambiguity, it might be reasonable to question the wisdom of bringing a potentially contested concept like religion into what is already such a chaotic space. Yet, as we explored this question in our research, we were consistently struck by how religion often appears implicitly in the cracks of extinction studies, where one finds ghosts, resurrections, rituals of lament, and questions of affective self-transcendence. Often, what might be called religious frames appear to tacitly consolidate or organize concern about extinction and lurk just behind scholarly framings but are never explicitly addressed.

This lurking of religion among extinctions is true not just of scholarly discourse but also in public. In a similar way, extinction itself has implicitly provoked the formation of what might also be called, without disparagement, new religious movements. To take one example, the manifesto for the Dark Mountain Project, written by Paul Kingsnorth and Dougald Hine in 2009, highlights the way that “religion . . . that bag of myths and mysteries . . . was straightened out into a framework of universal laws and moral account-keeping.”<sup>6</sup> The authors have gone on to highlight the ways that ecological crisis and extinction in particular are a result of a great failure of imagination and call for new forms of ritual and mythmaking in response, including “religious stories that used to be at the heart of our culture.”<sup>7</sup> Such a response has been witnessed more recently in the appetite for ceremony, ritual, and liturgical forms of protests within XR—the international activist movement that began in the United Kingdom in 2016.<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps more than any other ecologically focused social movement, extinction activism seems to have revitalized a desire for performative engagements with death and mourning, as publics seek both intelligible and visceral responses to the extinction crisis (Nita, chap. 3). Some of these engage liturgies of “established” religious institutions, whereas others are more syncretistic and performatively fluid.

A more prominent though less overtly religious example can be found in the Deep Adaptation movement sparked by a 2018 paper written by Cumbria University Professor of Sustainability Leadership Jem Bendell. After summarizing recent climate change and extinction research, Bendell surmises that it is “sobering that humanity has arrived . . . where we now debate the strength of analyses of our near-term extinction.”<sup>9</sup> The piece is noteworthy for its attention to “emotional and psychological responses” to environmental crises and recourse to spirituality as a resource.<sup>10</sup> In confronting the hopelessness that environmental crises can precipitate, Bendell points to the potential for adaptation and the pursuit of new culturally generated “alternative hopes” alongside the acceptance of unpredictable futures and of death and a redirection of spiritual energies toward clear-eyed reflection on the end times.<sup>11</sup> In a way, so-called post-denial attitudes toward “Inevitable Near Term Human Extinction” serve as the successor to late-modern philosophical conceptions of the sublime.<sup>12</sup> That is, extinction has come to signify not just one ecological crisis among others but the horizon of all our concerns, a catalyst for reflection on matters of ultimate importance. As Bendell suggests, it can “lead me to focus on truth, love and joy in the now” or “it can also make me lose interest in planning for the future.”<sup>13</sup>

These examples reflect a broad sympathy for religious or spiritual orientations to crisis, often in response to what they perceive as the secular roots of Western crisis response. In today’s context, such secularism might refer to the persistent belief that technological ingenuity, some Green version of neoliberalism, genetic

de-extinction (as Sideris addresses, chap. 8), or the colonization of other planets will save us. In this sense, we are seeing an emerging extinction awareness that is arguably already postsecular and very consciously seeking discursive and imaginative frameworks that lie outside of secular reason. For scholars of religion in the public sphere, this is interesting in its own right. For religious insiders and particularly those already committed to taking some sort of action on the ecological crisis, it clearly looks like religion is being *mobilized* in response to the extinction crisis. This can be seen as an extension of what sociologists Conrad L. Kanagy and Fern K. Willits first called the “greening of religion.”<sup>14</sup> But there is another side to the phenomenon we are describing. For many people, including those who consider themselves to be located outside religion (personally or academically), the extinction crisis pushes the meanings of religion and its interaction with publics in new directions. It is arguably the latter concern that has most motivated this book.

If it is true that religion is becoming increasingly visible as a public, performative, or discursive mode of responding to extinction, an important preliminary question arises: Whose religion is this? As several of our authors acknowledge, contemporary movements of extinction protest are not globally representative or even, some argue, diverse. The demographic of the leadership and membership of groups can often be overwhelmingly white and higher-income. This provokes a deeper question as to the connection of extinction and *religions*. Is extinction everybody’s concern, or does the very framing of the problem in the language of possible “human extinction” belie a certain white, Global North conceptualization of otherwise intersectional protests that go under other names?

A recent attempt to describe extinction activism as a “global” movement can illustrate this point. XR’s debut in the United Kingdom was linked by some in the print media with a very different mobilization on the other side of the Atlantic in the same

year: the Indigenous uprising against the Dakota Access Pipeline running through ancestral land in the Standing Rock Sioux reservation. Journalists were evidently delighted by what this comparison offered to a global extinction narrative. Indigenous peoples have themselves faced extinction, and extinction of their cultures, knowledge, and practices will also spell threats to ecosystems to which such knowledge is bound.<sup>15</sup> But Indigenous scholars themselves have cast suspicion over the categories of both extinction and religion, precisely because the implied ghettoization of religious belief on the one hand and the hard scientific facts of the extinction crisis on the other are problematic. XR's relationship with religion, while in many ways novel (see Nita, chap. 3), follows a familiar pattern in European environmental activism whereby religious rituals serve to draw attention to or accompany telling the (scientific) truth about climate change. On the other hand, Standing Rock was described *first and foremost* as a prayer camp, enacting the ancestral right to practice defense of life on sacred land. Its participants called themselves not activists but Water Protectors, and their actions were in defense of land, water, custom, and belief.<sup>16</sup> So while activists in Minority World cultures (such as XR) might be accustomed to conceptually distinguishing religious practice from environmental action, this appears like something of a category mistake for many other cultures around the world. What this comparison reveals, therefore, is that we need to explore not only how extinction might relate to religion (and vice versa) but also how the moment we are in challenges the very way in which we think about the relation between those words. As Timothy B. Leduc argues in chapter 4, our understanding of religion as a way of life is bound up with the historic colonial roots of our understandings of nature and place and the resulting conceptions of extinction that follow.

Where does religion exist? Is it in what certain people do (its public performances) or what they believe (the privacy of faith)?



How could one test whether a given phenomenon is a distinctively religious (and not merely cultural) thing? And how is our judgment of what counts as religion framed by a certain cultural experience of dominant religions? In light of the unexpected (to sociologists of the Global North) resurgence of religion in the twentieth and twenty-first century globally,<sup>17</sup> these are not idle questions. Furthermore, the legacy of modern ways of thinking about religion sketched earlier—that is, the legacy of secularism (e.g., as easily identifiable, measurable, and separable from other phenomena)—weighs heavily on the kinds of questions that have so far addressed species extinction and religion. For sociologists of religion and those identifying more broadly with the study of religion, the practices and behaviors of people who identify as “religious” really matter. It matters a great deal what counts as religious if we want to find out, for instance, to what extent religious practitioners change their behavior in light of the specter of a planetary extinction crisis or whether their holy scripture speaks to the challenge of the crisis and offers guidance. Such scholars want to know what identifiably religious people and institutions are doing about or how they are impacted by anthropogenic extinctions. This would necessarily open a vast field of research. In *The Routledge Handbook of Religion and Ecology*, the editors impressively capture the particularities of ecological thought, not only of specific traditions with their doctrines but also of specific place-based and problem-based approaches. What is fascinating in such a survey approach is that it parallels the very way that the category of religion is increasingly seen to defy simplistic binary definitions. Especially when explored in relation to specific ecological contexts and problems, the traditional divisions of religion as private versus public and belief versus practice and references to the transcendent versus the material really start to break down. It is notable that in similar ways, it has increasingly become the case that the environmental sciences have acknowledged that the concept of extinction is at work in multiple and

overlapping contexts rather than constituting an easily identified and specific ecological problem.

In light of such challenges, we have become skilled at knowing what sort of study we are *not* engaged in with this volume. We have not sought to represent specific faith traditions' teachings about a phenomenon that is, as we have argued, only just beginning to register at the level of public discourse. One cannot interrogate what scriptures, doctrines, or ritual practices have to say about the extinction crisis in the same way that one interrogates what they have to say about animal cruelty, deforestation, or pollution. Extinction is also different from a number of other issues in environmental ethics. On the other hand, the extinction crisis is implicated in so many of these adjacent issues both as cause and effect. Perhaps extinction can mean multiple things to people in different contexts precisely because it is implicated in pretty much all of our lives, even if it is not conceived or discussed as such. We might consider extinction as something like one of Timothy Morton's "hyperobjects"—an entity that both defines our existence and is too big to theorize independently of ourselves. This ambiguity does not drive one away from religious or theological forms of thought. However, appreciating this requires some reflection on the relationship between *certainty* and the lived complexity of these traditions. The status of extinction as an elusive meta concept relates to specific affective responses. We can fear hyperobjects for their hegemony and for the introduction of persistent forms of uncertainty and ambiguity, as Morton suggests. Alternatively, as Catherine Keller asserts, we can find the pursuit of "some practice of mindful unknowing" to be a salutary exercise.<sup>18</sup> And this turn need not imply an anti- or postreligious formulation. Extinction, in its all-encompassing nature, does not *necessarily* press us toward a more postreligious space. Rather, it unexpectedly implicates religion in a way that forces the latter back to some of its most fundamental principles—the study of "ultimate things" or a questioning of the very building blocks of

religious explanation—which are more familiar to theological and philosophical study: creation, time, life, death, the human, God, the apocalypse.

There have been some prior attempts in theological scholarship to address a theology of (species) extinctions alongside discussions of evolution and suffering.<sup>19</sup> A theology of mass extinction would be a very different endeavor from the one we have undertaken in this project. While the essays in this volume do not seek to provide this, neither do our inquiries rule out the possibility of such a thing. A number of chapters contribute something to a kind of theologically attuned debate. Some of our authors discuss what the reality of mass extinction does to beliefs in the goodness of creation (Hatley, chap. 7; Skrimshire, chap. 5), while others directly comment on the relevance of theological ethics (Jenkins, chap. 1) and theological notions of the creaturely (Sideris, chap. 8). And some discuss whether the prospect of human extinction tallies already with eschatological and apocalyptic narratives or simply mobilizes it in new imaginative and activist ways (Nita, chap. 3; Skrimshire, chap. 5). These approaches are also reversible. We can ask whether and how a certain theological framing of the world affects the ways that we perceive the extinction crisis itself. There are arguably presentiments of apocalyptic, eschatology, wonder, mystery, faith, or hope lurking inside some of the more secular responses to extinction, from the search for solutions to the predictions of the future.

Any mention of theology in this context reminds us that belief comes from particular (albeit dynamic and fluid) traditions and that any attempt to speak to the question of faith, belief, or religion *in general* is bound to sneak in the prejudices of a particular tradition as representative of the whole. This is one of the reasons we have not attempted to represent distinctive faith traditions in the project. We also struggled with our use of *religion* in the title, since we were so clearly not providing a comprehensive representation of a diversity of religious traditions.

Many of these chapters comment directly or indirectly on Jewish and Christian traditions, and all the authors are residents of the Global North whose conceptualization of religion is steeped in a Christian-centrism. As scholars working within certain cultural and religious contexts, such biases must come to the fore and be interrogated for what they are. We quite consciously want to interrogate what the category *religion* has come to mean and by what means it is now being co-opted through the European dominance of that discourse. Neither does our volume attempt to tackle head-on a crucial dimension of this broader topic: the entanglement of religion with contemporary nationalisms, right-wing political movements, and white supremacists, all of which play a continuing role in current drivers of extinction.

Nevertheless, *questioning religion* in the context of mass extinction means, for the authors of this volume, examining what legacies of the term *religion* are radically undermined, challenged by, reaffirmed, or call for reinterpretation. This means questioning not only the mostly Christian-centric language of religion that inhabits such discussions but also the historical and continuing legacy of colonial religion and theologically underwritten racism as themselves drivers of global extinction. Religion might well signify for some people an expression of those death-dealing forces upon the Earth that are the very focus of extinction studies—that is, as inextricable from colonial practices in virtually every continent that led directly and indirectly to the extinction of life forms, including Indigenous human cultures and populations. For us, as white, European, and American scholars researching a topic that is explicitly linked to a history of capitalism, extractivism, and environmental injustice, it is imperative to acknowledge the ongoing role in such injustices of ideologies that frequently go under the name, if not the legacy, of religion. The questions raised by such persistence are complex and not easily resolved or resolvable. Even though they are all specialists in these subjects in various ways, the authors of this volume share a sentiment

that the task of thinking about religion and extinction proved more intellectually and emotionally challenging than was first expected. The careful labor needed to unpack those questions is reflected in the length of some of the chapters; they are longer than some edited volumes, to be sure, but richly rewarding.

It is also fair to say that each chapter in this volume is testimony to the *persistence* of the power of religion—via a critical consideration of the doctrines, practices, identities, and legacies of which we have experience—in shaping how publics are facing the extinction crisis. And for many of us, the task is also to identify, where we can, those elements of religious life that, in responding to them, point away from, not toward, the death-dealing cultures that give rise to it.



A thinker whose scholarly influence and personal friendship looms large for several authors of this book is that pioneer of extinction studies, the late Deborah Bird Rose. She passed away at the same time that we first met as a group, and that news reached us even as her insights were being shared around the table. In the construction of this book, we have often pondered a connection that she makes, in *Wild Dog Dreaming: Love in a Time of Extinctions* (2011), between extinction and religion. Rose wonders whether—if it is true (as conservation biologist Michael Soulé puts it) that we “save what we love”—humans might be capable of loving the very creatures and ecosystems that they are also destroying. For “love,” she says, is “complex and full of problems as well as possibilities.” But then, in a following paragraph, writing of her constant fascination with religion as a source of ethics, she says her approach has always been “seeking meeting points between what I value in religion and what I love in the world.”<sup>20</sup> Perhaps the intention of this book is to extend the connection that is latent if not explicit in the way Rose makes it. For religion, too, is “complex and full of problems as well as possibilities.”

Perhaps our task is to begin discerning where religion leads us in our engagements with extinction and where extinction leads us in our engagements with religion—and to discern, in both directions, where the dangers lurk.

## NOTES

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19. See Christopher Southgate, *The Groaning of Creation: God, Evolution, and the Problem of Evil* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2008).

20. Rose, *Wild Dog Dreaming: Love and Extinction* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2013), 16.