Introduction

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This issue of the *Journal of Dharma Studies* provides entryways into understanding the field of study and action which is known as ecotheology. One might argue that theology, as a field of study and as an experiential phenomenon, is inherently *ecological*. After all, the living fabric of creation is literally foundational to the phenomenon and experience of religion, especially in its theological key. Every religious tradition and community is forged and formed by creation myths, by ontological and epistemological frameworks which directly emerge from the practitioner's experience of the living reality of Earth's ecosystems and the cosmic processes which have brought our galaxy, solar system, and planet into being. Even if certain religious expressions tend towards varieties of dualism which attempt to deny or transcend Earthly/cosmic realities in the service of non-material transcendence, the reality of reality cannot be denied. In this issue, we approach ecotheological perspectives which attempt to help us better understand how Dharmic traditions, especially from Vaishnava and Vedanta perspectives of Hinduism, understand immanent conceptions and experiences of divinity as divinity emerges directly through the fabric of creation.

For those unfamiliar with the conception and terminology of ecotheology, a brief introduction may suffice. The field, as academically forged and formed, emerges from the foundational work of such scholars as Lynn White, Jr., John Cobb, Thomas Berry, and especially the work of Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim of the Yale Forum of Religion and Ecology. Ecofeminist and ecowomanist keys, especially from the work of Rosemary Radford Ruether, Karen Baker-Fletcher, and Melanie L. Harris, have helped bring the field into the intersectional twenty-first century of climate change and climate justice.

The primary experience of ecotheology is the experience of empowerment which emerges from intimacy, regeneration, and devotion in the spaces and places where

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the earth and the divine meet. The Potawatomi elder and botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer writes that “it is not enough to weep for our lost landscapes; we have to put our hands in the earth to make ourselves whole again. Even a wounded world is feeding us. Even a wounded world holds us, giving us moments of wonder and joy. I choose joy over despair. Not because I have my head in the sand, but because joy is what the earth gives me daily and I must return the gift (Kimmerer, 2013).” (*Braiding Sweetgrass*, 327). To ecotheologize is to ground the language and experience of faith in the soil which gives us life. There are no unnecessary abstractions or dualities here.

The field of ecotheology emerges from the diversity of approaches which foreground planetary creation as being of exquisite concern for theological formation. Ecotheology is what emerges when Earth is foregrounded as a being of theological concern and religious devotion. Ecotheology is a constructive, co-creative theology which comes from the touch, embrace, and smudge of Earth upon our theological concern. Ecotheology “means precisely to resist any reductionist account of the earth and its geobiological bodies: and by the same token to smudge every metaphorical body-social, textual or theological-with its terrestrial ground (Keller, 2007).”

In this issue, we especially foreground the unique and creative depth of ecotheology from Hindu Dharmic perspectives. The groundwork laid by such scholars and activists as O.P Dwivedi, Lina Gupta, the women of the Chipko movement, and the late Sunderlal Bahugana is rich and fertile for our contemporary scholars to further develop. The recent work of David Haberman on the worship of Govardhan *shilas* (sacred stones) (Haberman, 2020) highlights not only the long-standing everyday ecotheology of many Hindu practitioners but also its decolonial key in deconstructing Abrahamaic-centered conceptions of idolatry.

In our first essay, “An Intra-Hindu Comparative Analysis of Caitanya Vaisnavism’s Eco-Theological Motifs” by Akshay Gupta draws us into a broader ecotheological key of the traditions of Hinduism in dialogue with the specific elements of the Caitanya Vaishnava tradition. Gupta’s work is specifically constructive, as he argues that the Caitanya Vaishnava tradition contains numerous elements which can help us to develop an active Caitanya Vaishnava ecotheology. The work is not without its hurdles, as Gupta acknowledges, as both Hinduism more broadly and the Caitanya Vaishnava tradition in particular present numerous conceptual obstacles to developing a constructive ecotheology. By providing a foundation for exploration and reflection on these motifs and challenges, Gupta provides us with solid ground for our readers to dive into some of the specific themes our fellow authors will present.

Our second essay, “Substance and Shadow: Resources for Developing a Vaisnava Ecotheology” by Gopal K. Gupta, continues in the rich vein of constructively building a specifically Caitanya Vaishnava ecotheology. Gupta’s essay demonstrates his commitment towards a more nuanced understanding between interpretations which tend to degrade creation and those interpretations which tend to fully divinize creation within Vaishnava traditions in particular and Hindu traditions more broadly. Gupta’s primary critical and constructive gift to our ecotheological understanding comes through his work with the classical concept of *māyā* as it appears in relation

and in contrast between Advaitin and Vaishnava traditions. Drawing upon the rich conceptual history of the concept of *māyā* across the broader Hindu spectrum, Gupta then specifically turns towards the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* to explore understandings of the concept of *māyā* which can provide constructive elements for developing a Caitanya Vaishnava ecotheology.

Our third essay from Ravi M. Gupta, “Battling Serpents, Marrying Trees: Towards an Ecotheology of the Bhāgavata Purāṇa,” offers an intriguing ecotheological view through the lens of a brief narrative episode from a central classical Purāṇic text. In contrast to the Sanskrit epics’ seeming indifference to nature conservation and Purāṇic emphasis on the necessity for pious royalty to engender natural abundance, the ten Pracetās princes’ marriage to Mārīśā, “daughter of the trees,” highlight the trees’ personhood and agency. Thus, much as the boundary between two families is blurred through marriage, the boundary between humanity and nature is blurred through a bond of commitment comparable to that of marriage in human society.

With a similar interest as Ravi Gupta to recognize a traditional Hindu means of undermining human-nature dualism to uncover a viable ecotheology, Neil Dalal, in our fourth essay “The Ritual Roots for an Advaita Vedānta Ecotheology,” examines through the Advaita Vedānta interpretive lens the ritual “sacrificial wheel” described in eight aphoristic verses of the Bhagavad-gītā’s third chapter. By showing how human beings are exhorted to take conscious, responsible positions of inseparability from the workings of this cycle, they honor and uphold the cycle upon which world maintenance depends, thereby reshaping self-identity in such a way that one can, with creative freedom, practice meditative forms of identification with one or more physical substances such as water, tracing them through their various natural cycles, leading one to full freedom from self-interest as an agent of “eco-resilience.”

Sri Chinmoy, a prominent modern exponent of Hindu thought and practice, is the subject of our fifth essay from Kusumita Pederson entitled “Sri Chinmoy’s Philosophy of Nature.” Drawing from some fifty-seven published works of Sri Chinmoy, including his poetry, Pederson shows how the rich tapestry of his thought (which holds kinship with both Śaṅkara’s Advaita Vedānta and Rāmānuja’s Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta) weaves a strong image of hope for environmental renewal based on a non-dualistic yet strongly theistic foundation for constructive action and contemplative practice. Out of such action and practice can arise genuine love for Nature and compassion for all beings, in which nature’s intrinsic value is recognized as the manifested world of the qualities of the divine Plenitude.

Cogan Bohanec’ essay “Bhaktivedanta Swami and Buddhism: A Case Study for Interfaith Dialogue and Peacebuilding,” while not addressing this issue’s main theme of dharma and ecology directly, nevertheless relates at least tangentially to this theme in its treatment of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava’s concern to uphold practices of vegetarianism. This concern highlights an appreciation of what is seen as a central tenet of early Buddhism and also a cause for Bhaktivedanta Swami’s criticism of contemporary, non-vegetarian Buddhist practice. This is but one of several concerns that Bohanec examines in order to show, on the one hand, a starting point for interfaith peacebuilding between Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism and Buddhism in what he calls “inclusive primacy,” and on the other hand, the limits of such an approach that

Bhaktivedanta Swami seems to affirm in his exhortation to “not analyze that one religion is first class or that another religion is last class.”

We are also honored to include essays from fellow contributors to the *Journal of Dharma Studies*. Kumar Alok’s essay “Svabhāvo’dhyātmam ucyate: Defining human personality through Sāṃkhya” is an original constructive contribution to conceptions of Indian-rooted psychology from the Samkhya tradition. In his essay, he argues that *bhāva*-based conceptions of personality interpretation are more epistemologically consistent with the fabric of the Samkhya tradition. He proposes the concept of *svabhāva* as a helpful frame to understand individual personality conceptions of concepts like *prākṛta* and *vaikṛtika-bhāva*. His essay provides original constructive contributions to the fields of Indian psychology and the scholarship of the Samkhya tradition. Our final essay in the volume, “A Pneumatological Kālī-logy and Imago Dei: Contribution of the Yoginī Tantrā and Hindu Goddess traditions to Understanding the Feminine in the Christian Trinity,” comes to us from Arunjana Das. In his essay, utilizing his unique interpretations of the seventeenth-century Tantra text *Yoginī Tantrā*, he argues that the role and presence of the feminine deity of Kali provide unique opportunities for fruitful comparative analysis for understanding the role of the feminine in Christian conceptions of the trinity. Das’ analysis is an explicit attempt at a comparative feminine-centered *theology* rooted in the common presence of *pneuma* (spirit) that is found in Tantric and Christian traditions.

We hope the contributions in this volume help the reader to understand the vitality and relevance of ecotheological approaches from the *Dharmic* traditions, especially as we enter more precariously into the uncertain circumstances of our planetary climate emergency. Even though ecotheology as a field of study and engagement is still relatively new, we hope the reader will understand that the traditions of Hinduism have been deeply rooted in the care and worship of creation as a source for understanding divinity for many centuries. We are especially grateful to the *Journal of Dharma Studies* team for their patience and guidance through the process of producing this issue, with special thanks as always to Laura Dunn and Dr. Rita Sherma.

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