

# Religion and environmental behaviour (part two): Dark-green nature spiritualities and the fate of the Earth

It has been claimed that a ‘greening of religion’ is underway within Earth’s predominant world religions. As the first part of this article (in Vol 3 No 1 of *The Ecological Citizen*) showed, there is little evidence to support such a claim. In sharp contrast are individuals and groups animated by ecocentric or dark-green nature-based spiritualities, which are discussed in this, the second part of the article. The rapid growth, increasing influence and ecocentric priorities of these actors suggest that they could be the vanguard of a successful sustainability revolution – perhaps even of the formation of a politically powerful civil Earth religion. However, ideas and practices endemic to world religions that hinder environmental mobilization, the power and nature of the world’s prevailing ideologies and the shrinking time for effective action, all darken the prospect that any particular religion or alliance among them will arise soon enough to avert the collapse of Earth’s biocultural systems.

I began the first part of my exploration of religion and environmental behaviour by explaining how I arrived at these research questions:

- What might lead humanity to stop degrading Earth’s environmental systems?
- What is the role of religion in environmental behaviour?
- Is it possible for religion(s) to play a positive role in the quest for sustainable biocultural systems, and if so, how?

I then focused on the world’s largest and most prevalent religions (henceforth referred to as ‘world religions’), paying special attention to whether they were promoting ecocentric values and political mobilization. I argued that the weight of available evidence showed the following. First, most individuals and groups affiliated with world religions do not express and promote pro-environmental values and behaviours. Secondly, those trying to nudge their traditions toward pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours are constrained by deeply-rooted beliefs, anthropocentric values, countervailing economic ideas and political ideologies, material interests and understandings that to be effective they must maintain credibility with their co-religionists, and, thus, fidelity to the

tradition’s tenets – including those tenets that hinder environmental concern and action. Thirdly, as a consequence these religious greens rarely prioritize biodiversity conservation, challenge existing socio-economic systems or focus on political mobilization; instead they prioritize acts of environmental virtue, such as reducing personal, familial and congregational environmental impacts.

Before shifting focus to ecocentric or dark-green nature-based spiritualities, I should briefly explain the ‘family resemblance’ approach to the study of religion that underpins this research.<sup>1</sup> This approach encourages the analysis of diverse social phenomena with traits and characteristics typically associated with religion (such as cosmologies, rituals and ethical mores), while refusing to establish a crisp boundary between what counts as religion and what does not. In taking this approach, I need not accept, for example, the untenable but common approach that attempts to sharply distinguish *religion* (organized, institutional and involving an appeal to supernatural beings) from *spirituality* (individualistic and concerned with meaning, healing and transformation). It also enables me to illuminate the affective and perceptual dimensions of

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human experience, which leads to beliefs that some practices, times, places, objects or beings are sacred – even when such beliefs do not involve immaterial divine agents, as is often the case with non-theistic Buddhists, Pagans, Animists and environmentalists.<sup>2</sup> This illustrates a key reason why I value the ‘family resemblance’ approach: it allows me to include those who do, and those who do not, believe in deities or divine forces but who share many other characteristics – and this will enable me to illuminate the diversity of ecocentric nature spiritualities.

### Ecocentric or dark-green nature spiritualities<sup>3</sup>

Largely outside of world religions, I have found actors who are animated by ecocentric values, who consider non-human organisms and ecosystems to be intrinsically valuable, and who strive to protect them through vocational choices and political organizing designed to shape and inspire the socio-economic changes that are essential if a path is to be found to sustainable and equitable biocultural systems. While observing these actors, I noticed that their experiences, worldviews and lifeways had many dimensions that resembled religions. In Taylor (2010b) I analyzed the worldviews of a tremendous diversity of such actors, including environmentalists and scientists, politicians and diplomats, artists, writers, filmmakers, business people, professors, museum and aquarium curators, farmers, mountaineers, surfers and many more. I also pointed out that these people often enjoy institutional support, even though there are no official dark-green institutions. This support comes from public sectors – including governments and international institutions and through programs they support in education, science and the arts – as well as from private sectors – including non-governmental organizations, corporations and media companies. And I observed that dark-green themes are also incubating and spreading within what I have called the global “*environmental milieu*,” namely, the contexts and venues

where environmentally concerned officials, scientists, activists, and other citizens, connect with and reciprocally influence one another” (Taylor 2010b: 13–14).

The common elements I have found among the most passionate environmental advocates, and within the environmental milieu, are ecocentric values inspired by experiences of awe and wonder, feelings of belonging and connection, and love for and loyalty to the Earth and its living systems.<sup>4</sup> I also found a widely-shared ‘spiritual epistemology,’ holding that, although there are many paths to proper spiritual perception, the best are through:

- 1 direct, visceral, *sensory experiences in nature* – including personal encounters with non-human others – which lead to appreciation of the beauties and value of relatively intact ecosystems, and a realization that all organisms have their own forms of intelligence, and therefore deserve respect;
- 2 *the sciences*, which displace human beings from the centre of the universe and challenge notions that human beings are more valuable or spiritually advanced than other organisms;
- 3 *the arts*, which awaken or reinforce the above mentioned experiences and understandings in a way that is evocative, intellectually compelling, and meaning-conferring.

Regardless of their wellsprings, such dark-green spiritualities typically cohere with, and are shaped, reinforced and sometimes precipitated by, scientific understandings. These understandings may or may not be fused with religious beliefs that divine beings or forces govern the universe or animate aspects of it. The most important sciences contributing to dark-green worldviews are as follows.

- **Cosmology:** This reveals that our Earth is just a speck in an immense and ever-expanding universe.
- **Biology and evolutionary theory:** This teaches that we are latecomers in the history of the Earth, and that all living things share a common ancestor. For many, this understanding – that every

living thing is biologically related – leads to feelings of kinship and related ethical obligations, while also eroding self-serving notions that our own species has greater moral value than others (Taylor, 2017).

- **Ethology** (the study of animal consciousness and behaviour): This depends on understandings of evolutionary continuity and shows that many organisms are more like us – affectively, cognitively and in other ways – than we used to think. Such understandings erode anthropocentric assumptions of human superiority and contribute to what I have called naturalistic Animism – namely, the view that rich forms of communication, and even communion, with non-human organisms may be possible.
- **Ecology**: This teaches that we are nested within and utterly dependent on an interconnected web of life – and, indeed, that we are ourselves symbionts, hosts to myriads of other organisms, many of whom depend on our bodies for survival just as we depend on theirs. This view leads quite logically to appreciating and valuing biodiversity.
- **Atmospheric science and climatology**: These in their own ways teach ecological interdependence and, in this case, that the wellbeing of the biosphere's diverse inhabitants is utterly dependent on the health of the biosphere itself. Like ecology, such understandings reinforce ecocentric values. I have called this sort of perspective 'Gaian naturalism' because it has been advanced in no small measure due to the popular reception of the Gaia Hypothesis, which likens the biosphere as a whole to a living organism, in which its diverse lifeforms and systems work together to maintain the atmospheric conditions they, and the biosphere itself, needs to survive.<sup>5</sup>

Those who have had experiences and developed understandings akin to the preceding summary, including many who do not consider themselves to be religious, nevertheless often rely on religious terminology to express their

deepest feelings and moral sentiments. For example, many may refer to the biosphere and earthly life as 'sacred' and 'worthy of reverence.' The most radical of those holding dark-green worldviews (including Earth First! and Earth Liberation Front activists), quite often call Earth as a whole, or specific places they are defending, 'sacred' while referring to places destroyed by humans as 'desecrated.' Indeed, Earth First!'s best known slogan, 'No compromise in defence of Mother Earth!', is itself a reflection of such a religious viewpoint – after all, compromise is untenable when defending *sacred ground*. Such views also make human laws penultimate and justify civil disobedience and sabotage as permissible, if not obligatory, tactics. Whether politically radical or conservative, conventionally religious or with an entirely naturalistic worldview, ecocentrics share a reverence for nature and place a high priority on protecting, and where possible restoring, Earth's living systems.

### The future of religion and nature

After years studying the most ardent environmental actors, identifying commonalities among them, and coining 'dark-green religion' as an umbrella term for their worldview, I had gathered, as well, considerable evidence that those with such experiences, worldviews and values were growing significantly in numbers, gaining social momentum and exercising sometimes significant political influence.<sup>6</sup> It is apparent from this research that these trends have the greatest cultural traction in regions of the world with relatively well-educated populations and less homogenous (and hegemonic) religious cultures. The growth of such 'deep green' spiritualities is especially impressive when one recalls that the theory of evolution by natural selection – the scientific advance most responsible for eroding anthropocentric conceits and values – is only 160 years old, dating from the publication of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* in 1859.

Given the increasing number of actors and organizations promoting such worldviews and values, the many creative ways they are

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doing so, and how rapidly ideas can spread in this age of global interconnectivity, there is reason to expect these trends to continue. An even more important reason for this expectation is that for many, worldviews rooted in the senses and sciences are simply more compelling than those based on experiences or events that happened to others long ago.

As I studied these trends, I began wondering whether we might be witnessing the nascent early stages of what could become a planetary civil *Earth* religion. The idea of a ‘civil religion’ is a theory inspired by Durkheim (1995), but developed more theoretically by Robert Bellah (1975). Civil religion refers to a kind of nationalism in which the nation is invested with transcendent meaning and sacred purpose through a variety of means – including myths, texts, rituals, designed landscapes and buildings, and regular references to the divine that are generic (not specific to any particular religious tradition and therefore not divisive) – all of which foster a shared identity, and enjoin loyalty and ethical obligations to the nation and its citizenry. In contrast, according to political theorist Daniel Deudney, a civil *Earth* religion would supplement, or even supplant, identities and loyalties based on ethnicity, religion or nationality with allegiance to the biosphere.<sup>7</sup> This would necessarily include the construction of international laws and enforcement mechanisms to protect atmospheric and marine commons.

If the worst predictions of massive extinctions and the collapse of biocultural systems are to be averted, then it may be that something like a civil *Earth* religion is needed. But for this to occur, a significant proportion of those in world religions would need to rise up and contribute to a chorus demanding dramatic change from political and other leaders around the globe. My research, however, suggests that this is as unlikely as the world’s religious leaders uniting and convincing large proportions of their followers that protecting the environment is now a sacred duty.

This said, religions – even the largest ones – are malleable, and each one has

themes within it that can be understood or re-constructed in environmentally friendly ways. And, to varying degrees, most religions already contain some ardent environmental advocates within their ranks. It is also possible that the accelerating impact of anthropogenic environmental change will force dramatic changes to the worldviews of religious individuals and groups, clearing the way for the green revival that some have ardently sought.

But we should also recall that most religions evolved millennia ago, and sought to address and answer the challenges of their day. It is unsurprising, when examining what they believe and purport to do for their devotees, that promoting environmental concern and action has not been a high priority. This is the case with many of the moral causes in recent generations. Religions and religious people were, for example, seldom in the vanguard in the fight against slavery, or for civil rights – notwithstanding the tendency to celebrate the few from within those traditions who were. This said, sometimes religions do change significantly and make a positive difference.

In this light we should remember that religions reflect the societies they inhabit. Buddhists in the West, for example, have been more environmentally engaged than in most other regions, and this is likely because it is in the West that Enlightenment-rooted scientific understandings and environmental concerns have been leavening the cultural bread the longest. After all, it is in more pluralistic cultural contexts that people more freely hybridize ideas and insights from different knowledge systems. So, as dark-green and other environmentally friendly worldviews spread, over time and increasingly, we can expect more religionists to move in such directions. It may be that for religions to make a significant contribution to the sustainability revolution they need only get out of the way, which is in no small measure already occurring in many countries, as increasing proportions of

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young people drift from the religions of their birth, or mix them up with environmental awareness and concerns, and their elders pass away.

Despite these possibilities, however, it is unlikely that environmentally passionate actors within the world religions will succeed in turning their traditions decisively green. Nor should we expect them to join in alliance with those who consider Earth and its living systems to be sacred and their defence a religious duty. This is because, even during the present time when social change can happen with greater rapidity than ever before, it is unlikely that such changes will occur rapidly enough to prevent the worst of the changes already unfolding in the biosphere. This is also because religious greens of every sort face a powerful adversary: a religion-resembling modern faith that considers money sacred, its pursuit a divine right, economic growth the path to paradise, and in the case of difficulty, technology to be salvific. It might seem that green religions – whether light-green and anthropocentric, or dark-green and ecocentric – are no match for what has been called ‘the religion of the market’ (see Foltz [2007]). This is in part because most religions are either in league with it, mystified by it, or constitutionally unable or disinclined to challenge it.

And yet... the current global socio-economic system, despite its powerful incentives, underpinnings, persuasive power and enforcement mechanisms, is unsustainable, for it is utterly dependent on the ecosystems it is voraciously destroying. Hence, it must change with unlikely rapidity or it will collapse. To paraphrase an argument from the anthropologist Roy Rappaport (1979): *maladaptive cultural systems kill their hosts*. For our species to survive in the long term, it will have to develop environmentally sustainable lifeways along with worldviews and values that cohere with and reinforce them. Perhaps as it becomes more apparent that the collapse of today’s biocultural systems is underway, and that our existing worldviews and lifeways have precipitated that collapse, we will take radical action to avert much of it. Perhaps it will take a truly

catastrophic collapse to force such a change. But if our species is to learn its manners and find a way to live within Earth’s carrying capacity, it will take a much more radical spiritual and moral transformation than most people promote or realize. It will, in fact, take an ecocentric revolution (cf. Taylor, 2010c; Washington *et al.*, 2017). ■

### Notes

- 1 For further discussion of this approach, see Saler (1993; 2008) and Taylor (1997; 2010a). The term was coined by Wittgenstein, who explained that this approach seeks to analyse “a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of details” (Wittgenstein, 1958: §66).
- 2 The sacred is rooted in experiences of transformative or healing power, and it often includes a perception that some place, object or time is holy. People often establish things as sacred that they want to protect, including buildings, animals and natural environments – as, for example, with National Parks (Gatta, 2004; Mitchell, 2007; Ross-Bryant, 2013).
- 3 As noted in part one of this essay, for more details of the extensive research underpinning this overview, see this cultural history (Taylor, 2016), the related comprehensive review (Taylor *et al.*, 2016), and this study of ecocentric spiritualities (Taylor, 2010b). Most of my publications are available at [www.brontaylor.com](http://www.brontaylor.com).
- 4 On wonder see Carson (1965) and, for a very recent discussion, Washington (2019).
- 5 The Gaia Hypothesis was developed foremost by Lynn Margulis and James Lovelock (Margulis, 1970; Lovelock and Margulis, 1974; Lovelock, 1979). For a history of the idea, see Joseph (1990).
- 6 For a review of the evidence, see Taylor *et al.* (2016), and a for a follow-up empirical study see Taylor *et al.* (2020).
- 7 Deudney has also referred to the idea variously as ‘Gaian religion’ and ‘planetary civilization’ (Deudney, 1995; 1998; Deudney and Mendenhall, 2016). My reflections here are adapted from Taylor (2010a).

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