

## Book Review

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Taylor, Bron. *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future*. University of California Press, 2010.

Bron Taylor is a renowned scholar in the field of religion and nature, a professor in the University of Florida's Graduate Program in Religion and Nature, and Fellow of the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society in Munich, Germany. He edited the award-winning 2005 *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, and founded the International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture, as well as its affiliated publication, the *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture*. He has written several other titles, but *Dark Green Religion* is probably his most important book to date. A wide-ranging work of interdisciplinary scholarship, it draws together diverse literary, cultural, and religious sources in order to trace the emergence and evolution of green and dark green religions in North America.

But what exactly is "dark green religion," the reader might ask, and how does it differ from "green religion"? According to proponents of *green* religion, environmentally friendly behavior is a religious obligation; in *dark* green religion, nature itself is sacred, and has intrinsic value. According to Taylor, "dark" implies depth – "a deep shade of green concern" that reaches further than surface-level environmentalism or greenwashing – but it also suggests that such a religion can have a shadow side, for example it "might mislead and deceive; it could even precipitate or exacerbate violence" (Preface ix). Many people are afraid of the dark, and in a religious or mystical context, darkness implies mystery and unknowing. "Dark" here might also allude to the Jungian shadow: that which is unspoken or repressed. The reference to this shadow side of dark green religion points to the "concern that inheres in all holistic ethics – that the well-being if not rights of individuals could be endangered by efforts to ensure the flourishing of some supposedly sacred whole" (12). Think for example of the occasionally dark association of neo-paganism, apparently an earth-centered spirituality, with nationalism and even ethnic purity.

Regardless, there is not always a clear line between green and dark green religion, and in this book the term seems to have been deliberately left open enough, inclusive enough, to encompass a variety of philosophies, belief systems, and cultural movements. If anything, however, it might be a little *too* inclusive. After identifying dark green themes in everyone from Benedict de Spinoza to Edward Abbey to Ariel (Disney's Little Mermaid), one might be tempted to suggest that pretty much everyone and everything contains dark green religious elements. And if this is the case – if it can be found literally everywhere – then is dark green religion even a useful category?

Perhaps anticipating this critique, however, Taylor does not insist on the dark green terminology itself. He suggests that it does not matter what the philosophy or movement is called, or who uses the terminology, or even if the term *religion* is appropriate to the phenomena he is describing. What matters, he claims, is “whether people are moved and inspired when they encounter such spirituality. What matters is whether they find meaning and value in its beliefs and practices, whether they identify with it and are drawn to others engaged in it, whether it will spread and influence the way people relate to, live from, and change the biosphere” (220). The disparate sources of dark green inspiration, or the seemingly unrelated locations in which it might be observed, are not the point.

This refreshing sense of humility on the author’s part comes through elsewhere in *Dark Green Religion*, for example when Taylor describes the universe as a Great Mystery – a nod to Loren Eiseley, who confessed that even though the theory of evolution is the “best explanation for the beauty, diversity, and fecundity of the biosphere,” it still remains that “nothing in the world fully explains the world” – and also a reference to the belief in a Great Mystery or Great Spirit as observed in various North American Indigenous traditions (220). For Taylor it is more important, it seems, to recognize the sense of awe and mystery associated with dark green religion, wherever it may be found, than to maintain it as any specific ideology or dogma.

Yet as the book’s title suggests, he does recognize the future potential of dark green religion as a force for good in society, and more importantly, in our present age of ecological catastrophe, as a necessity. Taylor puts dark green religion forward as a reasonable candidate for a scientifically-sound nature spirituality, a “post-Darwinian religion” that is both sensible and sensory – rational, embodied, and capable of engaging the whole of human being and culture – a system of belief that is “rationally defensible as well as socially powerful enough to save us from our least-sensible selves” (222). To borrow a phrase from Gary Snyder, dark green spirituality represents a religion (or a religion-resembling phenomenon) that fears not science.

And it is here, in the messy entanglements of science and religion, that the book gets even more interesting. How *do* spirituality and science coexist? And what exactly is a “post-Darwinian religion”? Some people would call that an oxymoron, or worse. But Taylor is not afraid of the grey areas; indeed, as a truly interdisciplinary scholar, he seems to thrive in them. Rather than choosing sides in the war of words between religious fundamentalists and anti-religious fundamentalists, Taylor points to a middle way. Perhaps dark green religion can be understood as an ecotone, a sort of liminal space between two distinct ecozones, or two seemingly opposite systems of belief.

Taylor suggests that religious language is unavoidable when human beings (including those with scientific training) experience the beauty and mystery of life: “Even though I am a naturalist, in

the absence of any compelling explanation for the universe as a whole or the life that is in me and around me on this little blue planet, I can think of no better term than 'miracle' to describe all I perceive. Even the bizarre fact that I am here to perceive it, reflect on it, and share my musings strikes me as nothing less than miraculous. In this, I fully understand the impulse of scientists and others who fall back on religious terms to express their deepest feelings of delight and wonder at all they sense and know" (221).

This entanglement of science and religion is not especially new, or radical; it can be traced back to some of the earliest environmental thinkers. For example Ernst Haeckel (1834-1919), the zoologist and philosopher who first coined the word "ecology," envisioned a pantheistic and atheistic nature religion in which the natural world would be revered for its own sake. Taylor provides many similar references, for example to Lynn White Jr.'s 1967 conviction that "[s]ince the roots of our trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious, whether we call it that or not." Indeed, *Dark Green Religion* might be read as a response to White's claim that we as human beings "must rethink and refeel our nature and destiny."

Taylor's rigorous engagement with this entanglement of science and religion results in a wide-ranging interdisciplinary survey of environmental history and philosophy, popular culture and spirituality. There are references to the classics of nature writing, including authors Rachel Carson, Aldo Leopold, and John Muir; to deep ecology, ecofeminism, and ecopsychology; to Gaian belief (in both its religious and scientific personas) and radical environmental movements. There is an appendix devoted entirely to Henry David Thoreau, with excerpts and commentary summarizing the major themes and the dark green themes in his writings. For readers already steeped in ecological literature, much of this will begin to feel like déjà-vu. However, for those readers unfamiliar with Bron Taylor's work, the chapter on Surfing Spirituality might come as a pleasantly unorthodox surprise.

"There appear to be a number of affinities between surfing and dark green religion. The sport has a sacred story wherein an earlier, ecologically harmonious culture, which was spiritually attuned to nature, was nearly exterminated during the colonial mission period. Surfing was revived and spread globally by charismatic spiritual leaders during the twentieth century, leading many surfers to increasingly assume a religious and environmentalist identity" (114).

Surfing is not only associated with environmental activism, but with ocean spirituality. In this view surfboards are sacred tools, and surfing itself is not a sport but a ritualistic practice, both embodied and meditative, and associated with a close connection to the natural world. The ocean is seen as a powerful and mysterious force, elemental and dangerous, but also as a nurturing mother figure. For Taylor, surfing itself is a nature religion, and the epitome of dark green religious thinking.

This book might be read as a kind of mosaic, bringing together a number of seemingly isolated and unrelated pieces – not just the familiar nature writers and environmentalists, but also religious philosophers and scientists, athletes and activists, social trends and pop-culture phenomena – to point to a much larger picture. These chapters will undoubtedly include much that you have already encountered, and some things you have never heard of. At times you may be unsure of where Taylor is taking you; by the end of the book you will see that it was worth the wait (and the 360 pages). The disparate elements are carefully collected and arranged, and the image takes shape; yet Taylor is not proselytizing, or forcing his personal views on his readers. Depending upon your perspective, dark green religion might be a novel way of thinking about a perennial philosophy, it might be a dire warning, or it might be a bright hope for the future. Perhaps all three. It might even be the foundation upon which new thinking and writing and action can begin.

The finished product isn't flawless, and Taylor readily admits to the cracks and fissures. But *Dark Green Religion* paints a fascinating picture, a vast and colourful mosaic of religion and religion-resembling phenomena, and people and books and happenings, that posits – or confirms, for some readers – the existence of a deep undercurrent of dark green spirituality in North American literature and thought.

— Kelly Shepherd