

FROM THE CALIFORNIA BEACHES TO DARK GREEN RELIGION

An Interview with Professor Bron R. Taylor



WRSP: Growing up in southern California, you worked as a lifeguard for almost fifteen years before securing a PhD in Social and Religious Ethics from the University of Southern California in 1988. What led you from the beach to an academic career?

Prof. Taylor: On my thirteenth birthday I was fortunate to move to Ventura, California, a short walk to the beach. I spent a lot of time there which led to a love of, and knowledge of, the ocean and the kind of skills that enabled me to land a coveted ocean lifeguard job. In California, ocean lifeguarding is a well-paying blue-collar job, which enabled me to go to college and eventually to graduate school.

During high school, I became involved in evangelical Christianity. In a religious studies class at college, however, I was introduced to a completely different variant of Christianity known as liberation theology; it blends leftist social analysis with what these theologians consider to be the economically radical message of Jesus as a basis for resisting authoritarian and plutocratic regimes. I was surprised to learn about this sort of Christianity and for my own reasons, identifying with those who are marginalized and struggle for justice, I was attracted to it. Liberation theology helped to kindle my long-term activist interests and eventually, my scholarly curiosities, especially about how social movements, including religion-related ones, might promote positive social change. Not long ago I was asked by the editors of *The Ecological Citizen* to write an autobiographical essay about my pilgrimage. Given the sometimes embarrassing details this involved, I only reluctantly agreed; it was published as "[An Eco-centric Journey](#)."

WRSP: Your first book was *Affirmative Action at Work: Law, Politics, and Ethics*, brought out by the University of Pittsburgh Press in 1991. This is quite a different topic of research than that which you are well-known for—how did it come about?

Prof. Taylor: As a blue-collar guy, I never really expected the academic thing to work out, although as I left college, I did have the idea that I would love to teach and open the world to others in a way similar to how my professors had done for me. Nevertheless, I loved lifeguarding, a job that, despite the tragedies one experiences, has many satisfactions, so I assumed it would be my lifelong career. I turned permanent, which with State Parks involves becoming a peace officer. This, I also valued, since it involves protecting park visitors and the park itself. But I was also open to adding to these responsibilities as one who was studying ethics and interested in analysing issues related to state power and violence not from the ivory tower but from in the midst of real-world contexts. Southern California beaches are places where all the problems from that highly populated urban society appear.

As it happened, the State Personnel board had officially sanctioned State Parks for having discriminated against women and people of color and consequently, our department had established an Equal Employment Opportunity Committee to work toward establishing a workforce that represented the diversity of California's population. Because I had become known as an academically inclined park animal who was doing graduate work in ethics, I was invited to serve on the committee. My efforts on the committee, which involved among other things developing curricula and teaching the department's anti-discrimination and affirmative action policies and practices, and the rationales for them, to rangers, lifeguards, and other parks personnel, cohered with my sense of justice. These experiences also underscored my understanding of the extent and ways in which these policies were controversial.

Given my desire to grapple with ethical issues in specific conflictual contexts, I pitched to departmental leadership the possibility of doing a study that, I hoped, would illuminate the various ways our employees thought about these policies, with the idea that such a study might even help us to make them more effective and better accepted. Both the department director and the chief affirmative action officer were supportive: they let me interview over fifty employees "on the clock," and send a unique survey instrument that I designed to test hypotheses developed from the literature about such policies and my interviews to over one thousand randomly selected employees. Almost no one was doing mixed methods research at the time and it led to my testifying to the US Congress in favor of the Civil Rights Act of 1990, which was being debated at the time. My findings undercut many of the most common arguments against affirmative action policies that philosophical and political opponents of such policies had advanced. Although I shifted my scholarly focus to environmental issues, I have sought to integrate diverse disciplines and methodologies into my research ever since.

WRSP: From your earliest publications, your interest in environmentalist movements, both in the U.S. and elsewhere, has been clear. Your articles on the subject first appeared in 1991 and an edited volume of yours, *Ecological Resistance Movements: The Global Emergence of Radical and Popular Environmentalism*, was published in 1995. If I understand correctly, you were one of the first scholars to write about radical environmentalist groups such as Earth First! Where did this research interest come from, and how easy was it to conduct fieldwork with activist groups who can be fairly cautious about their interactions with outsiders due to fears regarding infiltration by law enforcement?

Prof. Taylor: While still in graduate school and working for the park service during the late 1980s, I began to notice efforts to sabotage environmentally destructive activities by self-described radical environmental activists operating under the moniker Earth First!. I was intrigued, in part, because I had long found something missing in the writing and activism of the self-described liberation theologians, namely, a concern about non-human organisms and environmental ecosystems themselves. I arranged to get Earth First!'s tabloids and quickly realized that there was something deeply religious (or at least religion-resembling) animating these wildlands activists. I thought, after I wrapped up the affirmative action work, that I would go find these folks and study them and their claims, in part, so I could begin to work out my own environmental ethics, which was on my radar but undeveloped because none of my professors were focused on such ethics and related social movements.

Soon after receiving my Ph.D. I was fortunate to join the faculty at the University of Wisconsin, Oshkosh. During my second semester there, in the Spring of 1990, the most charismatic of Earth First! founders, Dave Foreman, was slated to give a public lecture. Foreman had recently been arrested by the FBI for allegedly orchestrating an attack on a nuclear power station, and was at the peak of his infamy. Although I had nothing to do with the invitation, I knew more about the movement than anyone at the university and managed to arrange to be his escort, interview him, and introduce him before his rabble-rousing talk. Afterward, I hosted him and a dozen of his rather feral associates at my home. On that occasion, one of the regional leaders invited me to a gathering which took place soon after in a National Forest in northern Wisconsin. There I was able to introduce myself, my interest in learning about the movement and using it as a muse for my own efforts to figure out my own environmental ethics and political views. Fortunately for me, the leader who had come to hear Foreman speak and who had invited me to the gathering, vouched for me, which helped to create the conditions of trust that I was able to build on subsequently. This trust was dramatically enhanced when in 1991 the first article I wrote about the movement, "[The Religion and Politics of Earth First!](#)," was published in a British journal, *The Ecologist*, which was then the most widely distributed environmental journal in the world. Activists in the United Kingdom and the United States viewed the article as accurate, fair, and insightful (despite a few quibbles), and it was widely distributed among them. It had the effect of opening doors because I was then considered to be a fair-minded analyst whose writings were, on balance, good for the movement, especially since they were so used to being pilloried by their adversaries and much of the media as well.

I am more than willing to say that the movement has indeed been a valuable muse—it has posed a host of critically important questions that I needed to consider as I sought to work out my own environmental values and spirituality. The movement is exceptionally diverse, despite some unifying beliefs and shared practices, so a discussion about its strengths and weaknesses, contributions and mistakes, promise and peril, cannot be put briefly.

WRSP: You are the editor of the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, which appeared in 2005. How did this project come about?

Prof. Taylor: Knowing of my research interests, in the late 1990s Jeffrey Kaplan, a colleague of mine in Oshkosh who had recently completed an encyclopedia of his own, suggested that the area of religion and the environment would be a great focus for an encyclopedia. I loved the idea and he offered to help so we pitched the idea to several publishers, all of whom were interested. Most of them, however, had a template for their encyclopedias that did not fit our vision for it, which included inviting practitioners of various religions, not just scholarly analysts, to write for it. These

contributions were labelled practitioner entries and this was an innovation that some traditionalists likely thought was inappropriate for an encyclopedia. Janet Joyce, however, who was then with Continuum International publishers, loved and supported the approach and offered a generous contract. This enabled me to hire and create a website with what were then innovative online tools to manage what became a monster project.

The process began with brainstorming an initial list of about two hundred entries and dozens of possible contributors, after which I recruited a diverse editorial board and hosted several meetings at conferences, adding to the prospective entry and contributor lists. I also orchestrated some religion and nature panels at the 2000 meeting of the International Association for the History of Religions in Durban, South Africa, which was an enriching event that contributed to the encyclopedia eventually including 97 Africa-focused entries. The project was originally under contract for 350 entries but through a multi-year snowball method, it was published with one thousand entries and over 1.5 million words. It also won awards, which I attribute in part to its historical, geographical, and interdisciplinary range, as well as its innovative nature, which included “perspectives” essays from scholars that were more provocative and went beyond the standard encyclopedia entry, which are supposed to remain neutral with regard to the interpretive disagreements scholars may have about the given subject matter.

WRSP: In 2006, you founded the International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture, and were subsequently elected to serve as its president from 2006 to 2009. What was the impetus behind this and what do you see as the society’s impact within academia?

Prof. Taylor: The idea goes back to the late 1990s and a conversation with Northwestern University Professor Sarah McFarland Taylor (no relation apart from our long-term friendship). We shared a frustration that at the huge annual conferences of the American Academy of Religion it was difficult to find and have extended conversations with those most interested in the religion and nature nexus. A few years later, in 2002, I was hired as an endowed professor at the University of Florida and charged with helping to launch a new PhD program with an emphasis on religion and nature. By then, the encyclopedia project was well under way and had grown far beyond my original expectations for it, so I thought the time was ripe to create a democratically structured scholarly organization, to build on the ferment unfolding in the encyclopedia. With the modest funds then available to me I orchestrated several meetings to refine the idea, develop bylaws, and officially established the non-profit organization the year after the encyclopedia was published. The ISSRNC, as we abbreviate the organization’s name, was launched with a major conference at the University of Florida in 2006. Scores of individuals helped to bring the society into existence. The [ISSRNC history](#) is available at the society’s website as are more details in the early [ISSRNC newsletters](#).

Since its inaugural conference, the ISSRNC has held meetings, which are usually co-hosted with universities, in Morelia, Mexico (2008); Amsterdam, The Netherlands (2009); Perth, Australia (2010); Vatican City, Rome, at the Vatican Museums (2011); Malibu, California (2012); again at the University of Florida for its tenth anniversary meeting (2016); New York City (2017); Cork, Ireland (2019); and a virtual one in collaboration with Arizona State University in 2021. The society website provides more details about the [ISSRNC conferences](#), which have played a significant role in increasing interdisciplinary scholarly collaborations and research exploring the natural dimension of religion and religion-resembling social phenomena.

WRSP: Through the society, you launched the *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* (JSRNC) in 2007 and which you still guide as editor. Was the journal your idea and what do you see it as having achieved?

Prof. Taylor: I had the idea for the journal well before initiating the meetings that led to the society. I felt that much of what was going on within what some called the field of religion and ecology was insufficiently critical, too narrowly focused on the world's predominant religions, and too little informed by the evolutionary and other natural sciences. I initially expressed this point of view in a "scholarly perspectives" essay adjacent to an encyclopedia entry titled "[Religious Studies and Environmental Concern](#)." A few years later I expanded on this perspective in the [JSRNC introduction](#). In it, I called for a taboo-free, interdisciplinary inquiry into the complex relationships between religious and religion-resembling social phenomena and Earth's socioecological systems. I think the journal has fulfilled its promise of providing a valuable venue for such inquiry and, like the society, has helped to build scholarly capacity for such research.

WRSP: In 2010, the University of California Press brought out *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future*, perhaps your most important work. Here you promote "dark green religion" as a concept through which to understand "religion that considers nature to be sacred, imbued with intrinsic value, and worthy of reverent care." You then set forward four sub-types—Naturalistic Animism, Spiritual Animism, Gaian Spirituality, and Gaian Naturalism—through which you interpret a range of past and current thinkers and communities, from Edmund Burke to the surfing subculture. What led you to write this book and what do you see as the value of your concept of dark green religion to scholars of religion more broadly?

Prof. Taylor: By the late 1990s, having been studying environmental movements around the world, as well as other actors seeking to understand and protect environmental systems, I had observed patterns that were common among them. These included religious, or at least religion-resembling beliefs, perceptions, values, and practices. Indeed, these patterns existed despite great diversity among the environmental milieu, which included those who believed in non-material spiritual beings and forces as well as atheists and others who were entirely naturalistic in their methods and views. Indeed, there were so many similarities among these actors that it seemed to me that I was witnessing the emergence of a new kind of global, nature-based worldview. The historian in me recognized that most of what I was observing had continuities with earlier thinkers and movements around the world, of course. But there were many innovations, including the ways that perceptions were being shaped by evolutionary and ecological understandings, and new means of expressing and promoting these nature-reverencing spiritualities. Impressed with its increasingly global reach and fledgling global influence it dawned on me that, with the right analytic lenses, we might be able to identify the rise of a new, planetary, Earth religion. The notion of nature religion, a trope introduced by American religion historian Catherine Albanese, is an important form of religion that is too little recognized, studied, and taught by scholars of religion. Moreover, the forms of contemporary nature religion that prioritize the protection of non-human organisms and environmental systems are especially important if religion scholars are to keep up with the religious dimension of human experience today, and think about not only the future of religion but of the coevolution of religion and Earth's living systems.

WRSP: As you acknowledge in the book, your use of the term “religion” is a fairly broad one, one that encompasses many atheists, agnostics, and those who do not believe in any form of supernaturalism. Could you give us more of an understanding of how you employ this term and what you see as the advantages of such a broad definition?

Prof. Taylor: There is no scholarly consensus about what constitutes religion, and thus, no consensus about where the boundary of religion ends and that which is not religion begins. I am not interested in boundary setting or its enforcement. Rather, along with others who take what is called the “family resemblances” school of social analysis, I have found that it can be illuminating to examine the diverse traits and characteristics typically associated with “religion” when analysing social phenomena that have many of these dimensions and dynamics. It is fine with me, by the way, if some other scholar wants to borrow or make up a definition of religion, analyse phenomena based on that analytic template, and conclude that some or all of the examples of dark green religion exemplify it. Scholars should be at liberty to deploy the definitions in ways that they find lead to insights.

What I have been doing is focusing attention on social phenomena taking place under the global environmental milieu (which I define as the contexts in which diverse actors working to advance environmental protection encounter, engage, and typically influence one another). And when I do this, I think that when spotlighting environmental social phenomena it has tremendous explanatory power to do so with the analytic tools that have typically been deployed by those who study religion.

Those within this milieu, for example, typically use religious terminology to express and promote their most profound experiences, understandings, and concomitant values, and they often promote and participate in ritualizing and ethical practices that are religion-resembling. In the aforementioned [JSRNC introduction](#), I provide a pithy primer to the “family resemblances” school of religion analysis, which I have learned has been useful to many readers. *Dark Green Religion*, of course, provides many examples—including in the lives of scientists, environmental philosophers, activists, historians, artists, musicians, filmmakers, nature writers, literary critics, museum and aquarium curators—who in their own ways express and promote such spirituality. I think this research illustrates why scholars with narrow definitions of religion cannot illuminate the full range of nature-related spiritualities.

WRSP: You’ve expressed hope that dark green religion will spread internationally and thus help move us all towards more sustainable ways of living, but I’d be interested to hear more on what you thought was the future of what you describe as “green religion,” i.e. religions which posit “that environmentally friendly behavior is a religious obligation” without actively regarding the natural world as sacred. (Might we call it “light green religion”?). Christianity and Islam are both huge and, on a global scale, are unlikely to contract substantially in the next century—what are the prospects for a greener Christianity and Islam, especially as many of the countries where these religions are strongest are going to be hit really heavily by climate change?

Prof. Taylor: I have spent a great deal of time examining these issues and, with Gretel Van Wieren and Bernard Zaleha, two colleague-friends, produced the most comprehensive review of extant social scientific research focused on the environmental potential of the so-called world religions, including Christianity and Islam, in [“The Greening of Religion Hypothesis \(Part Two\): Assessing the Data from Lynn White, Jr., to Pope Francis.”](#)

Unfortunately, the evidence is not encouraging.

The problem with those who think differently, who believe that the presence of ardent greens within these traditions represents evidence that a significant greening of religion is underway, is that they do not consider Émile Durkheim's insight that religions tend to reflect the societies in which they are situated. It is not surprising that there are environmentally concerned individuals (and even groups) inside Christianity, Islam, and indeed all of the world's predominant religions, who are trying to convince their fellow religionists about the gravity of the situation and the need to respond. The real questions are whether a religion (1) has ideas and practices endemic to it that tend to hinder, or conversely, encourage, devotees' understandings of and care for environmental systems and the organisms who constitute them; and (2) are the devotees of a religion *more* (or potentially more) proenvironmental than others who are otherwise similar socially and demographically similar but who do not share that religion. With regard to the first of these questions, the weight of evidence is that the world's predominant religions tend to occlude understandings of and care for environmental systems; and with regard to the second question, the weight of available evidence indicates that, in fact, those in the world's predominant religions are less likely to be environmentally aware and concerned than the societies are in general where they live.

The good news is that religions can be brought along when a society is increasingly focused on providing environmental education and explaining why protective action is needed. But there is little reason, as yet anyway, to expect *effective* environmental leadership to dramatically emerge from the world's religions, despite the sincere efforts of some individuals in these religions to accomplish just that. In our review of research, we explored the reasons for these unfortunate findings. The in-depth versions of these studies can be downloaded at my website. I wrote summaries of this research in two short articles that have been published online by *The Ecological Citizen* as "[Religion and Environmental Behaviour \(part one\): World Religions and the Fate of the Earth,](#)" and "[Religion and Environmental Behaviour \(part two\): Dark Green Nature Spiritualities and the Fate of the Earth.](#)"

WRSP: In 2013, the Wilfrid Laurier University Press brought out your edited volume, *Avatar and Nature Spirituality*, in which you assembled contributions looking at James Cameron's 2009 sci-fi blockbuster *Avatar*. You've discussed your interest in the film both in the book and elsewhere, and how you see it as potentially promoting dark green spirituality or related perspectives among a substantial audience, but I wondered if you could provide a little more background on your interest in the film. Did it stem from a broader interest in the relationship between religion and cinema?

Prof. Taylor: I saw *Avatar* shortly after it was released in December 2009, the same month *Dark Green Religion* was printed. I immediately recognized it as a superb cinematic example of the kind of cosmogonies, politics, and Gaian and animistic spiritualities that are common in dark green religion. I thought, had it come out a year earlier, I would have discussed the film in the book. More importantly, I wondered whether, given its blockbuster nature, the film would become the most effective propaganda for a dark green worldview and politics yet produced. I issued a call for papers about the film, expressing special interest in research analysing audience responses and its societal impacts. Several of the contributions did provide fascinating examples of the ways people have responded to the film, including resonating with the film's nature-drenched spirituality.

WRSP: At various points you've talked about your interest in surfing and the spiritual or religious experiences that members of the surfing subculture often have. Could you tell us more about this?

Prof. Taylor: As one who has been deeply immersed in surfing and lifeguarding subcultures, I have long been aware of the religion-resembling aspects of the surfing, such as the ritual-like dawn patrols; reports of experiences using religious terminology to explain them; learning stories about Native Hawaiian cultures and their spiritualities and connections to marine ecosystems and their inhabitants. And I could see that for some surfers, the complex of feelings, understandings, values, and practices was another example of dark green spiritualities. Consequently, it has been quite natural to include these sorts of surfers in my overall analysis of contemporary nature religions.

WRSP: What does the study of religion bring to the table both in understanding humanity's relationship with the broader natural world, but also in seeking to find more environmentally sustainable solutions for how we as a species live?

Prof. Taylor: Extant research is pretty clear that religion plays a significant role in hindering, and sometimes enhancing, human understandings of environmental systems and sustainable lifeways and livelihoods. Awareness of this research could, and I think should, inform strategies to promote sustainable and equitable socioecological systems, including communicative and political strategies for reaching religious individuals who are, of course, important political actors.

WRSP: How has your work been received by environmentalist activists, whether radical or mainstream? At the same time, how has it been received by scholars of religion (and those working in adjacent fields)? Have you experienced much resistance to your ideas?

Prof. Taylor: I've heard from many environmentalists (professional and not) that they consider themselves to be a part of what I called "dark green religion," and I am unaware of any of them disputing the fairness of my descriptions or my analyses. However, I have heard, from a few scientists and science-rooted activists who fit well with what I called dark green religion, that they feel discomfort with religious terminology because they think any association with religion, and especially with Paganism, would erode their credibility. Of course, as any of the book's readers would know, I was arguing that environmental subcultures resemble religions in many ways, and that there was evidence these could even become a kind of new global religion.

Religion and environmental studies scholars aware of the book have found it provocative if not also compelling. The only scholarly complaints I encountered, really, was with my using the word "religion" when discussing radical environmentalists, when some of them might not consider themselves to be religious. Given that I so carefully discussed the term and how I had used it, I surmise that these complaints, whether expressed by environmentalist actors or scholars, came from those who had not got much past the book's title.

Criticisms aside, the argument and evidence have held up very well, and frankly, the way it has sold and been embraced in many countries, as evidenced by translations of excerpts or even the entire book, suggest that indeed, as I argued, there are people all around the world who feel and act in the ways I conveyed in the book.

WRSP: What topics would you like to see tackled by future scholarship on the relationship between religion and the natural world? Are there any areas of that topic that have been seriously overlooked by prior scholarship?

Prof. Taylor: The quest to understand religion and environmental behavior has expanded dramatically in recent years but huge lacunae remain. There are scores of regions and religious traditions that have received no attention whatsoever. But to me, the most important question is, what if any communicative strategies can mobilize people in general, including religious individuals and groups, to respond effectively to the accelerating erosion of Earth's life support systems? Answering this question would require an ambitious and well-funded group of interdisciplinary researchers.

WRSP: What projects are you now working on that we should look out for in future?

Prof. Taylor: I am working on an ethnographic and historical book about radical environmentalism in North America, as well as developing special issues of the *JSRNC* focused on the Green Man, and on Religion and Covid. I'm also working with others on survey research exploring religion and environmental behavior. Specifically, I have developed a survey instrument that examines how environmental attitudes are entangled within not only nature-based religions but also all of the world's predominant religions. I hope to commence research using these surveys in diverse regions around the world. And I'm working to facilitate translations of *Dark Green Religion* into Russian, Mandarin, Italian, and Turkish, to complement the translation that has already been published as [Dunkelgrüne Religion](#) in German. I hope to eventually revise and expand *Dark Green Religion*, for there is so much more now worth discussing.

WRSP: Professor Taylor, thank you for taking the time to give us more of an insight into your life and work.

Professor Taylor, thank you for participating in the WRSP Forum!

This interview is also being made available at the personal blog of the interviewer,

Dr Ethan Doyle White (<http://ethandoylewhite.blogspot.com/>)

Professor Taylor is Professor of Religion and Environmental Ethics at the University of Florida and a Fellow of the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society at the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität in Munich. Perhaps the world's best-known scholar working on the intersections between religion and environmentalism, he is responsible for formulating the concept of "dark green religion," outlined in his book *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future* (2010). He is also the author of *Affirmative Action at Work: Law, Politics and Ethics* (1992); and has edited or co-edited *Ecological Resistance Movements: The Global Emergence of Radical and Popular Environmentalism* (1995); *Civil Society in an Age of Monitory Democracy* (2013); *Avatar and Nature Spirituality* (2013); and the multi-volume *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature* (2005). He is a founding member of the International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture (ISSRNC) and its *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture*, of which he is editor. More information about Professor Taylor's projects, lectures, and publications can be found at his personal website, <http://brontaylor.com/>.

WRSP Interviewer:

Dr Ethan Doyle White