

Earth Spirituality and Nature

A book commentary by David Orton

Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future,
by Bron Taylor, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2010, 338 pages,
paperback, ISBN 978-0-520-26100-6.

“Dark green religion – religion that considers nature to be sacred, imbued with intrinsic value, and worthy of reverent care – has been spreading rapidly around the world. I label such religion ‘dark’ not only to emphasize the depth of its consideration for nature (a deep shade of green concern) but also to suggest that such religion may have a shadow side – it might mislead and deceive; it could even precipitate or exacerbate violence.” (Bron Taylor, Preface, ix)

“My idea of spirituality for post-industrial society is not linked to a defined religion but is Earth-centered. This is a kind of animism, or worldly ecological spirituality, or pantheism, as opposed to the inner and other-worldly spirituality of the socially recognized religions.” (Orton, “[The Left in Left Biocentrism](#)”, Green Web Bulletin #78, September 2008)

Introduction

If you believe, as I do, that, to avoid ecological and social catastrophe, humans have to come to a new relationship with the natural world, then Bron Taylor’s book **Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future**, shows that such a relationship is well underway, and at an international level. This relationship with the natural world can perhaps be summarized as “animism” – which is a very old relationship closely intertwined with the survival of diverse aboriginal societies for many thousands of years,

What is exciting about Taylor’s book, and makes it worth a read, is that he makes a case and gives examples (including from surfing culture with a love of “Mother Ocean”), to show that this Earth-derived relationship or understanding is being consciously embraced by many people. He also shows the importance of deep ecology as part of the newly emerging Earth consciousness: “nature is sacred and all species have intrinsic value.” (p. 129) Taylor writes of “the emergence of a global, civic, earth religion.” (p. x) Unfortunately, he chooses to call this dimension “religious”, although this definition remains his own: “My definition of religion is more flexible for the simple strategic reason that it serves my interpretative purposes.” (p.177) He frequently uses the term “bricolage”, which conveys an eclectic patchwork of beliefs.

What I observe in the environmental and green movements, is that people who see themselves as part of this rising Earth consciousness have a sense of self as Earthlings, for want of a better term. Personal egos shrink, as does desire for “status” in this world;

and personal humility can increase. This has also been my personal experience of living in Pictou County, Nova Scotia for the last twenty five years – we have an old hill farm of approximately 130 acres, which has gone back to forest and which we treat as a wildlife sanctuary. One gets the sense of having an expanded relationship of one's self to the Earth and of feeling some responsibility and accountability for the preservation of this beautiful and mysterious network of life surrounding us becomes commonplace. Human identity becomes derivative and subordinate to Earth self. Nature ceases being a "resource" for humankind's pleasure. Resolving the ecological crisis, if this indeed is possible, will require a mind shift which will necessitate all of us to accept such a re-sacralization of the natural world. Contrary to the basic message in Bron Taylor's book though, this is a spiritual, not a religious, transformation.

In what seems to be a pandering to a Homeland Security state, or perhaps a personal declaration of loyalty, Taylor raises the issue of an alleged "dark" side of Earth "religion", linked to violence, which his book explores. The lead quote for this book comment illustrates this. This dark side ultimately turns out to be a tease, although the grist for a number of articles, because Taylor finds not "much evidence of the feared despotism of teleological and holistic ethics." (p. 294) Personally, I remain quite uneasy, from an ethical standpoint, with this dalliance by the author.

Those who link a new ecocentric Earth spirituality with a hand-in-hand stand against industrial capitalism, based on its structural promotion of unending economic growth and increasing consumerism – as do left biocentrists – will find this linkage missing in **Dark Green Religion**. Yet deeper activists, who see the approaching ecological and social Armageddon must be questioning and seeking alternatives to "politics as usual" in the capitalist 'democracies'. Why is it for example, that the guardians of the industrial capitalist anti-ecological status quo have the only 'legitimate' monopoly on violence, and that those who contest this are relegated to the shadow side?

Dark Green Religion has a preface, nine chapters, and an interesting Appendix, "Excerpts with Commentary on the Writings of Henry David Thoreau." Thoreau is identified as "most important" for the Dark Green theme of the book. There are extensive footnotes. The book has over 20 pages of bibliography, almost two pages of which are given over to Taylor's own writings. We are told "this is a scholarly book." (p. xiii)

Further Discussion

Bron Taylor was the lead editor for the two-volume **The Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature**, which came out in 2005. **Dark Green Religion** could be seen as following up on the overall work of the **Encyclopedia**. I contributed an article to the **Encyclopedia** about the left biocentric theoretical tendency, showing our understanding of what an Earth spirituality was all about. Taylor quotes Jane Goodall to say that spiritual evolution is "'the final stage of human evolution.'" (p. 29) **Dark Green Religion** will be of interest for that growing number of people who think that it is essential that humankind comes into a new relationship of non-dominance with the natural world and that this has a spiritual dimension.

I am quite uncomfortable and in disagreement with the equation of Earth spirituality with religion in **Dark Green Religion**. This has also been a theme in Bron Taylor's past writings, for example concerning Earth First! I would not accept this comparison as a "flexible definition" of religion. The left biocentric theoretical tendency speaks of the need for a spiritual dimension to deeper ecological politics, not for a religious dimension. Point 6 of the [Left Biocentrism Primer](#) puts it thus: "Left Biocentrism holds that individual and collective spiritual transformation is important to bring about major social change, and to break with industrial society. We need inward transformation, so that the interests of all species override the short-term self-interest of the individual, the family, the community, and the nation."

Bron Taylor does say that, "Most of the world's major religions have worldviews that are antithetical to and compete with the worldviews and ethics found in dark green religion." (p. 178) From my perspective, all "religions" carry too much institutional baggage and have shown historically that they are ultimately grounded in violence, insisting as they do on the position that they have **the** truth, and that non-believers need to be shown the light, if necessary by coercion. Holy texts and the sword have been part of the baggage of the major religions. Perhaps traditional religions – particularly the Vedic religions as compared to the Abrahamic religions – can be made "green friendly" more easily, in a shallow, human-centered environmental sense. Yet even Buddhist "karma" has a decided anthropocentric rebirth tilt – humans have more rebirth merit than dogs. A friend suggested that Taylor perhaps uses "religion" as a hook, to make what he has to say appealing to the followers of the existing established religions, who are now into "greening up" their faiths to try and respond to the rapidly developing world environmental consciousness.

None of the people I know as ecocentric activists, who say that they have a spiritual relationship to the natural world, would accept defining this as "religious". Taylor is often quite uncritical when looking for justification of his thesis, promoting people like Anna Bramwell (hostile to deep ecology see **The Fading of the Greens**), Al Gore (he trashes deep ecology in his book [Earth in the Balance](#)), David Suzuki (has never advocated for deep ecology, unlike his mentor John Livingston) and the [Brundtland Report](#) (an argument for expanded economic growth and human-centeredness). It is also important to note that to see oneself as Earth-centered, or as an Earthling, can also be derived from a purely science-based position, without a spiritual dimension. This is clearly shown in the work done by Ted Mosquin and the late Stan Rowe, summed up and brought out in their important document [A Manifesto for Earth](#). Their *Manifesto* "shifts the value-focus from humanity to the enveloping Ecosphere – that web of organic/inorganic/symbiotic structures and processes that constitute Planet Earth." Perhaps the religious/spiritual typology put forward by Taylor, which includes "Gaian Naturalism" (see p. 15), can encompass the position of Mosquin and Rowe.

I liked the capsule summary of the difference between anthropocentric and biocentric values given below by Taylor. It rings true for me:

"Those with anthropocentric values tend to fear that biocentric values produce indifference to human suffering, and those with biocentric values tend to believe that anthropocentric values lead to indifference to the well-being of the rest of the community of life." (p. 179)

Left biocentrism is a theoretical tendency within deep ecology (not mentioned in **Dark Green Religion**), which tries to bring together these two positions, ecocentrism and social justice. It insists on the primacy of biocentric or ecocentric values, when choices by humans have to be made.

Conclusion

While not quite sharing the eulogistic views to be found on the book jacket, I am prepared to recommend this book to fellow activists. **Dark Green Religion** shows us the welcome news that many people all over the world are starting to accept and identify with an ecocentric worldview, and are moving away from an anthropocentric, human-centered universe. Yet many environmental activists motivated by seeing that deeper green politics must have a spiritual dimension, will not agree with the argument in this book that spirituality and religion can be equated.

The question, whether this spiritual/religious quest should be pursued within or in opposition to industrial capitalism, is not investigated in Bron Taylor's book. I myself do not believe that coming into a new spiritual relationship to the natural world, so essential for human and non-human survival, is ultimately possible under industrial capitalism.

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