



EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

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Welcome to the first edition of *Sacred Tribes Journal* for 2011. It is an issue with a special focus devoted to one of the most pressing topics of our day as it touches on the challenge of environmental degradation, the various individuals and groups that have arisen in response to it, and more specifically for our purposes, the religious or spiritual aspects often associated with it.

Several months ago I was reading [Religion Dispatches](#), an online publication that brings together scholars working at the intersection of religion and popular culture, when I came across an interview with [Bron Taylor](#) who discussed what he termed "[Dark Green Religion](#)," and his book on the subject with the title [Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future](#) (University of California Press, 2010). The book includes this summary description:

In this innovative and deeply felt work, Bron Taylor examines the evolution of "green religions" in North America and beyond: spiritual practices that hold nature as sacred and have in many cases replaced traditional religions. Tracing a wide range of groups – radical environmental activists, lifestyle-focused bioregionalists, surfers, new-agers involved in "ecopsychology," and groups that hold scientific narratives as sacred – Taylor addresses a central theoretical question: How can environmentally oriented, spiritually motivated individuals and movements be understood as religious when many of them reject religious and supernatural worldviews? The "dark" of the title further expands this idea by emphasizing the depth of believers' passion and also suggesting a potential shadow side: besides uplifting and inspiring, such religion might mislead, deceive, or in some cases precipitate violence. This book provides a fascinating global tour of the green religious phenomenon, enabling readers to evaluate its

worldwide emergence and to assess its role in a critically important religious revolution.

In answering the question in the *Religion Dispatches* interview titled [“Losing Old Gods, Finding Nature”](#), as to what sparked his interest in the topic for this book Taylor writes:

I have long been interested in grassroots social and environmental movements, and whether and to what extent religious perceptions and moral values motivates their participants. When working on an earlier book, *Ecological Resistance Movements*, I began to see that ideas that found fertile ground within grassroots environmental movements around the world were becoming increasingly influential. As I traveled around the world in the subsequent years, I encountered a fascinating and diverse set of examples that convinced me that something new and critically important was emerging that could decisively reshape the political, environmental, and religious landscape. I called this phenomena Dark Green Religion, and by this I mean religious (or religion-resembling) beliefs and practices that consider nature to be sacred and worthy of reverent care, and non-human organisms to be kin and as having intrinsic value.

When Taylor is asked what he wants his readers to take away from the book, in part he says:

Religion and environmental ethics were transformed forever when on November 24, 1859, Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* was published. It shattered traditional religious explanations for the fecundity and diversity of the biosphere. Where this cognitive shift has been made, traditional religions with their beliefs in non-material divine beings are in decline. The desire for a spiritually meaningful understanding of the cosmos, however, did not wither away, and new forms of spirituality have been filling the cultural niches previously occupied by conventional religions. I argue that the forms I document in Dark Green Religion are much more likely to survive than longstanding religions, which involved beliefs in invisible, non-material beings. This is because most contemporary nature spiritualities are sensory (based on what we perceive with our senses, sometimes enhanced by clever gadgets), and thus sensible. They also tend to promote ecologically adaptive behaviors, which enhances the survival prospects of their carriers, and thus their own long-term survival prospects.



After reading the interview, and considering the description of the book, I recognized that this was touching on a significant subject matter, as well as a movement with tremendous environmental, political, and religious dimensions. It also includes elements that critique “Abrahamic religions” (which includes Judaism, Christianity and Islam) for their failures in regards to the environment and religion, especially Christianity with its long history of dominance in the West. Dark Green Religion needs to be understood, reflected on fairly, brought into self-critical dialogue with Christianity, and responded to accordingly.

This special issue of *Sacred Tribes Journal* seeks to meet this need. In the materials that follow the reader will find my extensive interview with Bron Taylor who describes Dark Green Religion, as well as something of his personal journey that at one point found him studying at a Protestant evangelical seminary. This interview will provide the reader with a basic understanding of Dark Green Religion that will serve as a foundation for further engagement with the subject matter.

From the introductory interview we move to two interactions with Dark Green Religion and Taylor’s thesis by Christians who have a long history of involvement in the environmental movement. The first contributor is [Loren Wilkinson](#), who has been at the forefront of Christian environmentalism, who finds much to commend and agree with in Taylor’s book, but argues that Dark Green Religion can have a place within Christianity, indeed, that this is the appropriate place for it rather than in various forms of what Taylor describes as animism or Gaian Earth Religion. Wilkinson also brings substantial critique to Christianity for its failures in addressing the environment as a natural part of living out the image of God in the creation.

The second essay in interaction with Dark Green Religion comes from [Peter Illyn](#). Like Wilkinson, Illyn has been involved in the environmental movement from a Christian perspective for quite some time. In his essay, Illyn brings a more conversational tone, and along the way finds much to agree with in Taylor’s Dark Green Religion. Through his interaction, Illyn relays his experiences with tribal Christians, and how they may help Christians in the West as they develop a theology of kinship with nature.

Following these two essays you will find Loren Wilkinson’s response to the interview with Bron Taylor, thus providing a dialogical approach, and hopefully laying the foundation for future discussions on this important topic.

This edition concludes with two reviews. The first is my review of the film *Avatar* which set box office records in theaters last year. This

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science fiction fantasy was extremely popular in part because of its inclusion and emphasis on issues related to Dark Green Religion. This example from popular culture helps illustrate the significance of this topic even in entertainment. The second is a consideration of John Walton's book [*The Lost World of Genesis One*](#) and the applications for creation theology and dialogue over Dark Green Religion that come as a result of this book's thesis.

We hope you find the materials that follow intriguing and challenging, and that this serves as an introductory guide to Dark Green Religion as one of the significant cultural and religious issues of the twenty-first century.