



*BELLY-BUTTON CHRISTIANITY: TRIBAL CHRISTIANS SPEAK TO  
TODAY'S CHURCH: AN INTERACTION WITH "DARK GREEN RE-  
LIGION"*

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Dr. Bron Taylor, in his book *Dark Green Religion*, defines the subject matter of his book encapsulated in his title as "that [which] considers nature to be sacred, imbued with intrinsic value, and worthy of reverent care." By his definition then, I am a practitioner of dark green religion. By my own definition, however, I am an evangelical Christian simply living out my faith (and I contend a historic Christian faith); a faith that holds true the idea that humanity has been placed in the midst of nature for the purpose of loving, serving and protecting it.

It is, I admit, a rather lonely doctrine in today's evangelical church since most conservative and evangelical Christians hold to the opposite view - one that believes that humanity has dominion over a corrupted earth that has little or no spiritual value and is unworthy of our care or concern. My discussion of *Dark Green Religion* will examine why and how the modern Christian church (in particular the evangelical element) has come to embrace a theological worldview where kinship with nature is an antithesis of true faith.

There is a tendency in the evangelical church to dismiss dark green worldview as pagan, pantheist or New Age and therefore non-Christian. In fact, as I write this paper, a group from the religious right, the Cornwall Alliance, has just released a 12-part DVD series called "Resisting the Green Dragon" that casts aspersions on the "hidden" motives and "secret" agendas of environmentalists who want to take over the world through deception and lies. While I have not watched the entire presentation, from past experience I can assume it will be filled with rhetorical maneuverings such as generalizations, guilt by association attacks, faulty correlations, reductionism etc.

In contrast to their mistakenness, I propose that dark green Christianity is historically relevant, biblical and theologically appropri-

ate, and increasingly urgent in today's global ecological degradation. Admittedly, dark green Christianity is not a priority of the modern church so I will explore some reasons why.

My analysis will be unapologetically biased. I am a former evangelical pastor and the founder of a Christian environmental organization called Restoring Eden. I will touch on the history of ideas and of theology to show how modernity has replaced a sense of kinship with nature with that of a mechanistic, utilitarian worldview. I will make little attempt to position my views as impartial. Instead, I will argue that nature appreciation, environmental stewardship, and grassroots advocacy should be core concerns for all humans, but especially for Bible-believing Christians, who should be faithfully serving God, serving their neighbor, and (I contend) serving the creation. This is the 'good news' of reconciliation; a gospel so holistically prolife that it is concerned about the common good.

### **Compartmentalization versus Integrative**

In *Dark Green Religion*, Dr. Taylor examines differences between spirituality vs. religion, acknowledging that many nature lovers claim to be spiritual while not being religious, with the implication that spirituality is purer than religion. These frames are too dualistic, superficial, and simplistic to offer much guidance in defining an authentic faith in our modern, complex world. I am, however, grateful to see a younger generation of Christians rejecting these polemics and embracing a spiritual journey big enough to make room for paradox and ambiguity, religion and spirituality, service and celebration.

This holistic expression of faith - one big enough to embrace kinship with nature - is not promoted in older evangelical churches. My experience as a Christian environmentalist suggests that a more accurate cultural framework would be better labeled as *compartmentalized* versus *integrative*.

Many of the anti-environmental debates I have been drawn into tend to be with people who have reduced issues of interwoven complexity into artificially simplistic choices: humanity versus nature, jobs versus the environment, government versus liberty. This tendency towards dualism is contrary to the sense of interconnectedness and interdependence. Compartmentalized worldviews blind a person from seeing systems, but the natural world is filled with systems and cycles – watersheds, migrations, carbon cycles, seasons. As stewards, we must care for the whole and not just the parts.

This compartmentalization becomes apparent whenever Restoring Eden has a presence at a Christian rock festival. In a typical weekend, we will have conversations with hundreds of people and it becomes easy to recognize the compartmentalized believers. They are the ones when told that Restoring Eden encourages Christians to love, serve and protect God's creation – pushback by saying, "Christians are not supposed to worship nature!," as if caring for what God created, entrusted to



us, and that supports all of life is somehow a slippery slope to idolatry or earth worship. Or they will respond with a “humanity versus nature” perspective, assuming that since God has chosen humanity, nature does not matter. They seldom seemed bothered by the fact that Jesus never warned about the dangers of loving and caring for nature, but He did warn about the dangers of loving money and possessions.

When speaking at Christian colleges I tell of a conversation I had with a young man who came up and smugly said, “Dude, the earth doesn’t matter because we’re not animals...,” self-assured that he had effectively neutralized my message. Somewhat amused, I replied, “You, my friend, have nipples. You are a mammal and that makes you an animal!” If I had covered his mouth and nose with my hand in 30 seconds he would have recognized his mammalian need for oxygen. In a day, his mammalian need for water, in a week, his mammalian need for food. His lack of even basic high-school biology seems embarrassingly prevalent in the church. In fairness, this view reflects evolution versus creationism debate; since humans did not evolve from ape-like hominids, but instead were specially created in the image of God, we are not animals. We forget that scripture teaches that we were both made in the image of God and created from the substance of the earth.

Before the reader invests much more time in reading my thoughts on *Dark Green Religion*, I will state my bias. That a concern for the common good trumps the pursuit of personal freedom, especially for Christians who should be living by the golden rule – ‘do unto others as you would have them do unto you’. When issues of personal liberty and/or social behaviors do lasting harm to the commons of life, then I believe Christians should choose the collective good. As such, I believe there is a role for good government in creating a just and sustainable society. Sadly, I believe that many fellow evangelicals have chosen an ethos that is short-sighted, self-centered and is flirting with being mean-spirited and hard-hearted.

In addition, I am also an ocular melanoma (eye cancer) survivor, which has colored both my appreciation for the miracle of life and the need to protect it. To self-label, I would call myself a Bible-believing, Jesus-loving, pro-life, tree-hugging environmentalist who believes there is a role for grassroots civic engagement that encourages good government to protect the common good even at the expense of free markets and personal liberty.

I am considering a new bumper sticker that captures these beliefs;

“Worship the Baby,  
Tend the Garden,

Resist the Empire.”

### **Spirituality versus Religion**

*Dark Green Religion* is an academic book but it is accessible for the non-scholar. It looks at the intersection of religious and spiritual sensibilities concerning the notion of a sacred relationship, a kinship with nature. Since Dr. Taylor did not set out to write a theological treatise, unasked and unanswered is which comes first? Do religious sensitivities lead one towards a sense of kinship with nature or does a sense of the kinship of nature lead one towards a religious sensibility?

What is discussed in some depth is the difference between spirituality and religion. In popular vernacular, *spirituality* refers to a private, inner journey while *religion* is the public and organized expression. These definitions, however, do not explain why many spiritual people are not religious, and why many religious people are not spiritual. In an ideal world, religion helps people along their spiritual journey. Choosing between the two should be viewed as a false dichotomy but since we don't live in an ideal world, *Dark Green Religion* explores this contradiction.

A recent international survey of 30,000 youth by the SEARCH Institute helps clarify these differences. The survey revealed that, like adults, many youth struggle with the difference between religion and spirituality. Interviewing youth in eight countries from all of the major world faiths, they asked young people to define themselves; 34% defined themselves as both spiritual and religious, and 24% indicating that they are spiritual, but not religious. They are also mostly likely to see both religion and spirituality positively, although a third viewed religion as “usually bad.”

This survey revealed that their spirituality grows out of a sense of meaning, purpose, connectedness, or inner peace and it is related to their understanding of, or experience with, God (or a higher power). Interestingly, in light of dark green religion, the SEARCH survey reveals that young people pointed to being outside or in nature as being an experience that make it easier for them to be spiritual. This was the highest value, three times higher than getting instruction about their faith traditions. These young people surveyed are less likely to point to spiritual mentors, religious activities, school, or the Internet as making it easier to be spiritual. A clear take-away is if church leaders want to help their youth on their spiritual journeys, they should make sure spending time in nature as essential.

Lest we be too hard on the idea of “religion”, I would argue that religion is logically the outcome of a spirituality that becomes public. As people share with one another -- trying to lead others along their shared path, codifying their experience into doctrine or dogma, or developing spiritual leaders and institutions -- spirituality develops a public component. Over time, private spiritual journeys become enmeshed in personal and collective histories, language, rituals and they develop public and institutional expressions. Eventually they emerge as “religion”.



Analyzing the difference between spirituality and religion is not a major focus of *Dark Green Religion*, but it is one I come across repeatedly. The fact that many people who self-define themselves as spiritual but not religious have transcendent experiences within nature is to be expected. But I would contend that there are also many religious people who feel spiritual when out in nature but who have not connected or labeled that experience as a traditional expression of their faith.

### **The “Thin Place” of Nature**

The early Celtic Christians (circa 500 A.D.) referred to this experience as the “thin-place” – that place in nature where the wall that separates them from God becomes thinner and more transparent. The idea is that there are places in nature where one feels closer to God, where the divide is more easily breached.

This could be explained as simply as getting your hands dirty and absorbing soil bacteria. Scientists have discovered that a widespread soil bacterium, *mycobacterium vaccae*, may make us smarter, healthier and happier. Exposure to this natural soil bacterium, which people likely absorb, ingest or breathe in when they spend time in nature could increase learning behavior. Recent research studies revealed that when this bacterium was fed to mice, it stimulated neurons in the brain that resulted in increased levels of serotonin and decreased their levels of anxiety.

This research built upon earlier work that has shown exposure to *mycobacterium vaccae*, (i.e. getting it “under your skin”), also boosts the immune system and improves brain chemistry. Researchers have proposed that the sharp rise in asthma and allergy cases over the past century stems, unexpectedly and ironically, from living too cleanly. The idea is that routine exposure to harmless microorganisms in the environment trains our immune systems to ignore benign molecules. The bacteria, when injected into mice, activate a set of serotonin-releasing neurons in the brain—the same nerves targeted by Prozac, and other reports show that it can improve mood. Christopher Lowry, a neuroscientist at the University of Bristol in England, had a hunch about how this process might work. “What we think happens is that the bacteria activate immune cells, which release chemicals, called cytokines that then act on receptors on the sensory nerves to increase their activity,” he says.

### **Walking the sacred pathways through the forest**

Being spiritually inspired in nature is a more common Christian experience than people realize. Evangelical scholar, Gary Paulson, in his book *Sacred Pathways*, has defined nine ways (or spiritual wirings) people used in their spiritual journey.

The first is that of 'naturalist' - loving God in the midst of nature – which Bron Taylor would be classified as dark, green religion. But spirituality comes in many forms. The other eight sacred pathways Paulson defines are as follows:

- Sensates – loving God with the senses,
- Traditionalists – loving God through ritual and symbol,
- Ascetics – loving God in solitude and simplicity.
- Activists – loving God through confrontation.
- Enthusiasts – loving God with mystery and celebration,
- Contemplatives – loving God through adoration,
- Intellectuals – loving God with the mind.

Simply put, my fellow tree-hugging, flower-smelling, dog-scratching, woods-walking Christians are not being seduced by the “green dragon” but are partaking in a long-standing, traditional expression of Christianity, especially as it relates to a sense of inspiration and kinship with nature.

Kinship with nature – animism or faithful Christian stewardship?

*"God gave us the earth. We have dominion over the plants, the animals, the trees. God said, 'Earth is yours. Take it. Rape it. It's yours.'" Ann Coulter on Hannity & Colmes.*

Although this statement was probably an intentional attempt to shock, it does reflect an anti-environmental ethos found in the Christian community. It is usually less blatant; expressed instead as “Jesus really only cares about the human soul, so nature doesn’t matter.” Or, “God is going to destroy the earth anyhow. Since God clearly doesn’t care, why should we?”

Much of our current theological worldview emerged about five hundred years ago as the Western world went through numerous profound changes. Within two hundred years occurred the rise of the scientific era, the Reformation (with the breaking of the monopoly of the Roman church), the emergence of nations, the rise of the first corporations, the discovery of the New World, and the advent of the consumerism.

Adding to the speed of change, the rise of the printing press allowed pamphlets and books to spread these new ideas far and wide and effectively. The anonymity of the authors also hindered the Church’s ability to censor new ideas and those labeled heretics and dissidents in one country could claim asylum in another; i.e. Luther in Germany, Voltaire in England, Calvin in Geneva. Ironically, the explorer’s discovery of trade routes into the tropics introduced unknown foodstuffs that then fostered the rise of new social institutions where these novel ideas were fueled and financed – coffee and cocoa houses, tea rooms, smoking rooms – all sweetened with sugar cane or spiced with pepper. Concepts once unthinkable became *idea de jour*.



The rise of the scientific method was also driven by the invention of new tools of observation – in particular, the telescope, the microscope, the spectrometer and the vacuum pump. These, in turn, facilitated the rise of the new sciences; physics, calculus, geology, biology.

For example, the telescope revealed that Mercury and Venus were orbiting the sun, leading Copernicus to develop his theory that the universe did not revolve around the earth, but that the earth revolved around the sun. This theory had a profound social impact on the idea that humanity was the center of the universe and was thus fiercely challenged by the Church. The authority of the Bible, the Church and the newly rediscovered Greek philosophers became open to question, although one paid a heavy price for doing so. Galileo was exonerated by the Catholic Church only a few years ago.

What arose from these new tools of observation was the steady challenge to the Church's authority to define and explain reality of life. Natural philosophers emerged as the first scientists – Francis Bacon, John Locke, Renee Descartes. They began to offer alternative frameworks that contradicted the dominant teaching of the Scholastic Universities and the Church. It suddenly mattered less what Aristotle taught. Observation trumped authority. Knowledge and truth became renegotiable.

Math was still the queen of sciences. Unless a theory could be tested, replicated and explained using mathematical theories, it was still suspect. Onto the scene arrived Isaac Newton who was able through physics and calculus to prove and predict the movement of the planets as elliptical orbits around the sun.

### **Earth as Choir or as Clock?**

This proving theory occurred about the same time that windmills were evolving into the earliest factories and the birth of the industrial age. Crankshafts, pulleys, and gears became metaphors for the design of nature. Mechanistic explanations for life began to replace organic models. Descartes championed life in mechanistic terms, even stating that animals were purely complex organic machines.

Large factories and steam engines were not the only thing emerging during this time. The first clocks, watches and chronometers were being designed with intricate gears, springs and bearings. In the 1700's, theologian William Paley wrote a treatise describing God as a watchmaker with the watch becoming the metaphor for the ordered design of nature.

During Paley's era, the evangelical church first emerged, preaching a pietistic, personal knowledge of and relationship with God and in-

dividual salvation through faith. My working premise is that these ideas merged; resulting in evangelicals adopting the idea of the “earth as a well-oiled machine.”

Eventually the earth became referred to as a well-oiled machine. This metaphor of God as watchmaker, earth as well-oiled machine was furthered by deism – the belief that God created the universe, set it in motion and stepped back from day to day interactions. This is contrasted with theism, a theological belief that God is intimately involved in the day-to-day process of life.

This pietism and emphasis on personal faith, further reduced creation to a mechanistic, utilitarian function while at the same time increasing a sense of religious narcissism. Much of this happened during the ramifications of the Age of Discovery and the rise of colonialism. New lands, filled with infidels and heathens, became the focus as these theologies, ideologies and theories were now used to explain and justify massive social shifts.

This has had a profound implication on the way we think today, especially in light of dark, green religion. Instead of seeing the creation as a garden or a choir singing praise to the Creator (a la St Francis), the creation was reduced to its utilitarian value.

Eighty years after Paley’s treatise, Dispensational theology emerged. With this new teaching came the rapture of the saints followed by the destruction of the earth resulting in further disregard for nature. Why care about a world soon destined for destruction? Clearly, no wise Christian should.

### **Earth as Community or Commodity?**

So we traded nature as part of *community* with viewing it simply as a *commodity*. These new theologies became intertwined with political, economic and legal ideologies that became the basis of property law. Starting with the Magna Carta, which reduced the authority of the King to take away private property, English common law morphed into *terra nullius* (lands claimed by indigenous peoples were “empty” and therefore could be legally claimed by settlers who would bring order, productivity and civilization with them.

*Terra nullius* was particularly prevalent in Australia. In the United States, Manifest Destiny was the ideology that allowed land to be co-opted for “development”. Even a century later, this idea was still a powerful force within the American church.

B.H. Carroll, founder of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary wrote in 1948, “In God’s law, neither man nor nation can hold title to land nor sea and let them remain undeveloped...the ignorant savage cannot hold large territories of fertile land merely for a hunting ground. When a developer comes, he (the ignorant savage) must retire...mere priority of occupancy on a given territory cannot be a barrier to the progress of civilization.”



Even without the emergence of the dispensationalist theology of the “end times” (construed as involving an earth destined for destruction), seeing the earth as a well-oiled machine had profound implications on the Church’s view of the human/nature relationship. Machines don’t have intrinsic value, or inherent rights. Machines are maintained or repaired, but are not nourished and nurtured. No one can be immoral to a machine, not one goes to jail for cruelty to a machine. Machines don’t die. Machines don’t sing praise, or love in return. But the biggest implication is that no one develops loving kinship with a machine.

Kinship holds a belief that one is related by family ties – shared blood. In the case of an organic view of nature, kinship with nature assumes that humans and nature are created by the same source – the Creator God, and are made of the same substance – the red earth. The Hebrew word *adam* (man) is a root of the word *adamah* (red earth). These words would have been better translated as “earth” and “earthling”.

Genesis teaches that God created humanity out of the earth and breathed life into them. Many Christians readily quote the verse stating humans were made in the image of God (interpreted ontologically rather than representationally or relationally), but we ignore the verses that say we were made from the very same substance of the earth.

Modern believers have forgotten that a mechanistic view of nature was not always held by the church. Contrast the grossly utilitarian worldview of Ann Coulter with that of St. Basil, the Bishop of Caesarea around 375 AD, who wrote “Oh, God, enlarge within us the sense of fellowship with all living things, our brothers the animals to whom you gave the earth in common with us. We remember with shame that in the past we have exercised the high dominion of man with ruthless cruelty so that the voice of the earth, which should have gone up to you in song, has been a groan of travail.”

Or the writings of St. Isaac the Syrian, a mystic writing in the seventh century who wrote, “What is a charitable heart? He asks? It is a heart that is burning with love for the whole creation, for men, for the birds, for the beasts... for all creatures. He who has such a heart cannot see or call to mind the creature without his eyes being filled with tears by reason of the immense compassion which seizes his heart; a heart which is softening could no longer bear to see or learn from others of any suffering, even the smallest pain being inflicted upon a creature. That is why such a man never ceases to pray for the animals... moved by the infinite pity which reigns in the hearts of those who are becoming united with God.”

These battles of kinship with creation still rage today. Southern Baptist leader, Richard Land, says “human beings come first in God's

created order. .... If that means that other parts of nature take a back seat, well, then they take a back seat.” Chuck Colson quoted John Locke, “Was man made for nature, or was nature made for man?” James Dobson wrote, “I will not support any environmental law that puts the rights of plants and animals over the rights of humans.” In these quotes, what is assumed is that humanity is somehow separate from the rest of nature.

Contrast their worldview with the views of John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, who wrote, "I believe in my heart that faith in Jesus Christ can and will lead us beyond an exclusive concern for the well-being of other human beings to the broader concern for the well-being of the birds in our backyards, the fish in our rivers, and every living creature on the face of the earth."

### **The power of perspective**

Interestingly, two clusters of people seem to hold a deeper, relational view of nature more frequently than the general public - tribal people and astronauts. Perhaps it is a matter of perspective - one micro and the other macro - of the human place on the earth.

Jacques Cousteau, the late, famed oceanographer wrote about this sense of connectedness, a sense of fragility and a sense of wonder shared by most astronauts. In the forward for the 1980's book, *The Home Planet*, Cousteau writes, “From their exceptional journeys, they all came back with the revelation of beauty. Beauty of the black sky, beauty and variety of our planet, beauty of the Earth seen from the moon, girdled by a scintillating belt of equatorial thunderstorms. They all emphasize that our planet is one, the borderlines are artificial, that humankind is one single community onboard spaceship Earth. They all insist of this fragile gem is at our mercy and that we must all endeavor to protect it.”

Soviet cosmonaut, Oleg Makarov, USSR even quantified when and how this epiphany happens: “Within seconds of attaining Earth orbit, every cosmonaut ... uttered the same sort of confused expression of delight in wonder. No one has been able to restrain his heartfelt wonder at the sight of the enthralling panorama of the Earth. The emotional outburst last 42 seconds on average. It is not just that the planet is piercingly beautiful when viewed at a distance; something about the unexpectedness of the sight, its incompatibility with anything we have ever experienced on Earth, or known, or practiced, elicits a deep emotional response...the spectacle of our small planet haloed in blue. ”

The editor of *The Home Planet*, Kevin W. Kelley remarked, “Many astronauts and cosmonauts, upon returning from their missions, report changes that are powerful and life transforming, attributed to the simple experience of looking back at our own planet from the remoteness of space. The Apollo astronauts say that from the moon the Earth looks like a small, delicate, blue and white marble. Stick out your thumb and you can blot out everything that has any meaning to you on that fragile globe, small enough to crumble between your fingers. Space offers us a chance to see our world with new eyes, a perspective that may have great signi-



ficance for the planet for all of the future.”

Aleksei Leonov of the USSR commented on the fragility of our planet, “The Earth was small, light blue, and so touchingly alone, our home that must be defended like a holy relic.” Following his space flight, United States astronaut, James Irwin became what can best be called an evangelist, speaking at conferences and churches about the strong sense of God’s presence he felt while looking back towards home. He wrote, “The Earth reminds us of a Christmas tree ornament hanging in the blackness of space. As we got farther and farther away, it diminished in size. Finally, it shrink to the size of a marble, the most beautiful marble you can imagine. That beautiful, warm, living object looks so fragile, so delicate, that if you touched it with a finger it would crumble and fall apart. Seeing this has to change a man, has to make a man appreciate the creation of God and the love of God.”

The fragility of the earth was accentuated when they realized how small the biosphere that supports life is when seen against the infinite blackness of space. Ulf Merbold of Germany wrote, “For the first time in my life. I saw the horizon as a curved line. It was accentuated by a thin seam of dark blue light – our atmosphere. Obviously this was not the ocean of air I have been told it was so many times in my life. I was terrified by its fragile appearance.”

Taylor Wang wrote a most loving description, “A Chinese tale tells of some men sent to harm a young girl who, upon seeing her beauty, became her protectors rather than her violators. That is how I felt seeing the Earth for the first time. I could not help but love and cherish her.”

These space travelers commonly experienced not only an epiphany of kinship towards the biosphere, but also with the rest of humanity. Donald Williams, USA wrote, “For those who have seen the Earth from space...the experience most certainly changes your perspective. The things that we share and our world are far more valuable than those which divide us.” Vladimir Shatalov writes, “The “boundless” blue sky, the ocean which gives us breath and protects us from the endless black and death, is but an infinitesimally thin film. How dangerous is it to threaten even the smallest part of this gossamer covering, this conserver of life.”

Lastly, Sigmund Jahn wrote, “Before I flew I was already aware of how small and vulnerable our planet is; but only when I saw it from space, in all it is an affable beauty and fragility did I realize that human-kind's most urgent task is to cherish and preserve it for future generations.”

### **Loving the land like a tribe**

The second cluster of people that seem to share a profound sense of kinship with nature are indigenous peoples. By definition, they are people of a place; i.e. typically the very place their creation stories describe – the caves, cracks or lakes of their ancestral lands. Their sense of kinship, however, is rooted in more than story. For traditional hunter/gatherer societies, their very survival depended(s) upon the sustained bounty of the land they inhabit. Jared Diamond in the book, *Collapse*, looks at several indigenous societies that lost the ecological balance with their native environments and suffered the consequences, eventually leading to their demise. The Anasazi, the Mayans, and the Polynesians of Easter Island are examples of this.

For indigenous peoples there is a tendency, even to this day, to call members of their clan by terms we use to define immediate relatives - uncle, father, aunt, and mother. This sense of kinship is seen, in particular, in communities that still function in subsistence economies; ones that still share what they hunt, fish or gather – fish, deer, caribou, roots and berries - as a part of their daily lives. Private property and personal possessions are irrelevant in the collective whole.

I was traveling with Yat Paol, a tribal leader from Papua New Guinea. We were at my home in Washington State for a couple of days and watched one of my favorite films, *Dersu Uzala*. Directed by Akira Kurosawa it won the 1975 Academy Award for Best Foreign Film. Set in 1902, a Czarist Russian army expedition is assigned to explore Siberia under the command of Captain Vladimir Arseniev. He befriends an indigenous hunter, a Goldi (Nanai) named Dersu Uzala and invites him to guide the surveyors through the boreal forest.

In one scene the expedition took shelter from a torrential rainstorm in a trapper shack roofed with large strips of bark. After the rain subsided, the Czarist surveyors were preparing to leave. Dersu took some of his limited food supplies and put it in a corner of the hut. When asked why, he said it was for his "brothers."

My friend Yat, nodding his head knowingly, said quietly, "Yes, for his brothers ... the animals." At the exact same time in the film, Dersu answered Captain Arseniev's further queries by saying, "It is for my brother the badger and the fox."

### **Bellybutton Christianity**

For many indigenous Christians, the sense of kinship with the rest of creation is unquestioned. I heard this same idea expressed but in a different way when a Gwich'in tribal elder from the forests of Northern Canada refer to herself as a "bellybutton Christian" with her umbilical cord connected the "earth, my mother."

A few years later, I held a Christian environmental seminar in Papua New Guinea for 2,000 Christian tribal members. Afterwards, sitting on a dock in a lagoon, with the ocean still and glasslike a colleague from Papua New Guinea and a lifelong Catholic, was watching some



village boys fishing from their dugouts. We were discussing the reasons how the missionaries never taught a connection to nature as a part of faith, even the Catholic Franciscans, who should have known better.

He looked to me and said, "I am a belly-button Christian" and elaborated that "my umbilical cord is still connected the earth, my mother. She gives us our food, our clothing, our shelter, our medicine and when we die, she even takes us back into her arms and comforts us." He went on to say that when his fellow tribal members move off their traditional land, they are said to have "lost their belly-buttons."

Although global populations of native people are rapidly declining as distinct culture groups, I have been privileged to work with many indigenous communities around environmental campaigns to protect the biological integrity of their tribal lands by protecting populations of caribou, buffalo, salmon, and wolves. I have worked with elders of the Yakama Nation who gather huckleberries and offer salmon as a "first fruits" ritual practice, thanking the Creator for the gift the fruit of creation that sustains their cultures and their lives.

Twice I have gone on extended speaking tours with Reverend Trimble Gilbert, the 75-year-old traditional chief of the Gwich'in people and a fourth generation Episcopal priest of Arctic Village, Alaska. Every morning in his village, Reverend Gilbert walks to the same outcropping of rock his ancestors walked to and catches a white fish for breakfast. He sews caribou-skinned gloves and hand-made snowshoes – albeit now while watching Christian television on his satellite television (at least during the hours when the village generator is running). Rev. Gilbert, along with teaching from the Bible, also re-tells stories of how when the tribal grandmothers lay dying in their village, they would often dream dreams about the caribou and begin to pray in their native tongue. What most impressed Rev. Gilbert was how, when the elders are near death, many times roving bands of caribou would come near their houses or of wolves howling on the outskirts of the village.

### **Chorus of the singing dogs**

Another example of kinship with nature is **Kumalau Tawali**. He was a Papua New Guinea poet, a newspaper columnist, cultural historian and also a Baptist minister. (Note: **Kumalau** went to seminary at Regent Seminary in Vancouver, Canada where Loren Wilkinson, another author in this issue of *Sacred Tribes Journal*, taught him. Small world.)

Having grown up night-fishing on the coral atolls of Manus Islands, **Kumalau** was also an expert star-navigator. He told stories of how the birds would lead him to where the fish were. When suffered an incapacitating stroke, part of his recovery was to sit for hours along the beach

in the direction of home. He was also noted throughout the South Pacific for his deep love of Christianity and his outspoken environmental concerns.

In his neighborhood, however, he was known for his gentleness with the dogs of his neighborhood. These are called the New Guinea Singing Dogs who live on the slim overlap of domestic and wild. When Kumalau suffered a second fatal stroke, his neighbors claim that as he was dying, a group of neighborhood dogs came to the edge of his lawn and started singing in a chorus. The neighbors saw it as a supernatural form of grieving and interconnectedness that added poignancy to their grief.

Another indigenous friend from Papua New Guinea, a strong Christian, seminary trained, told me how one night he was sleeping in a traditional guest hut on KarKar Island at his wife's parent's village. He awoke in the middle of the night with this compelling urge to walk the path down to the ocean shore. As he stood under the moonlight staring into the calm sea, a white dugong (related to a sea manatee) slowly rose out of the water. They held eye contact for a few seconds before the dugong slowly slide back under the sea. My friend, awed into silence, walked back to the hut, perplexed by what he had seen. A few days later, he received word that his brother had died that night back at his home village. He believes his brother sent the dugong to say good-bye. Who am I to argue?

Over years, I have taken five trips to Papua New Guinea (PNG) teaching at seminaries, Bible schools and teachers colleges. In 1975 PNG became a nation, part of British Commonwealth with strong ties to Australia and New Zealand. It has a young, chaotic, but freely-elected parliamentary government. As a Christian environmentalist, I find PNG a unique place. It is a raw land, with the third largest intact tropical rainforests filled with birds of paradise and coral reefs filled with WWII wreckage. 85% of the people still live in their traditional tribal villages getting their protein from substance hunting and gardening. PNG considered itself a Christian nation as over 93% of the population declared so in the last census.

It is also teeming with hard-rock miners and oil drillers trying to buy land that the people will not sell. The PNG government and international financial markets are trying to force the individual landowner register their land and get legal title. This would allow them to sell or lease the land to multi-national corporations.

Papua New Guinea was forced into the modern world during WWII when the Japanese, Australians, and Americans had fierce battles in their land. In 1975, the founding nationalists wrote into their constitution that 97% of the land was to be deeded back to the original ancestral landowners – with the collective tribe as the traditional landowners. In addition, they developed a traditional land court were land disputes are settled through the telling of tribal stories concerning features of the land



or their connection to it, not through survey markers and GPS readings.

### **Looters and finger-wagging**

I was staying at the Lutheran Guest House in the Port Moresby, the nation's capital, when I awoke to the smell of a grass fire and the sounds of shouting. Suddenly gunshots rang out as an angry mob crested a hill and began torching the dry hill grass. As the mass came upon the local small general store, I heard glass breaking and the crowd began looting. Then I heard chanting coming down the main road— the chants grew louder as a crowd cresting a hill. It was a protest march of hundreds of students, mothers and tribal elders waving banana leaves and palm fronds in the air as they chanted.

The day before the PNG parliament had voted to force tribes to privatize their land. Students from the university -- claiming that the earth was their mother and therefore was not for sale -- marched to the Parliament house. It ended tragically when the police opened fire and killed three students.

The riots and the marches was the people's outrage at the student's deaths. Later that morning the police came to escort Yat and myself to the meet with the US Ambassador at the Embassy. Sitting in her office, we discussed the escalating situation. She said with an exasperated tone, "I don't get these people. Don't they want development?" Yat was able to hold his tongue until we were safely back out on the street, when he retorted, "I don't get these people. Don't they understand that for us "land is life."

PNG is one of the only democratic nations in the world where tribal people still govern the land of their ancestors. Heavily Christian and English speaking it should be a place for a Christian environmental ethos to grow deep roots. But the Christian churches there hardly ever speak out on environmental issues -- even as the people fight to stop the Chinese nickel mine waste from being illegally dumped into their coral beds, or Australian gold miner flooding the rivers with toxic waste, or the rain forest get illegally logged by Malaysian timber companies or the industrial tuna fishing processing plants owned by the Philippines.

What some claimed was economic development was clearly doing longterm ecological harm. In a subsistence economy, nothing is more valuable than the fruitfulness of the traditional land, so I asked myself, why the silence? The answer came soon enough.

The next morning, as I was at airport, I made eye contact with the only other Caucasian in the room, an American missionary from Mt Hagen. When I told him I was a Christian environmentalist, he raised his eyebrows and pointed his finger in my face. "You better never call the

earth your mother!” he scolded. Taken a back, I retorted that in the Epistle of Romans, the Apostle Paul wrote that the “creation was groaning as if in childbirth” and “if childbirth is not a metaphor for motherhood, I don’t know what else is.”

### **Is the Earth a Goddess, Machine or Community?**

These three incidents all happened within a week. They revealed very different views of kinship with nature; bellybutton Christianity, rioting tribal landowners, and finger wagging western missionaries. When Yat called the Earth “his mother”, he was not referring to it as divine, as a Goddess or as Gaia, but simply as the life-giver and provider, just as his mother was. This is a completely biblical idea. The creation account in Genesis reveals that first God created the earth, and then God used the earth to bring forth the rest of life. The interpretation is straightforward and not open to much debate. For Christians, calling the earth “mother” is simply acknowledging the life-giving role of the earth and its systems.

Genesis 1: 11-12, 24-25 *emphasis added* Then God said, “Let the *land produce* vegetation: seed-bearing plants and trees on the land that bear fruit with seed in it, according to their various kinds.” And it was so. <sup>12</sup> The *land produced* vegetation: plants bearing seed according to their kinds and trees bearing fruit with seed in it according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good. <sup>24</sup> And God said, “Let the *land produce* living creatures according to their kinds: livestock, creatures that move along the ground, and wild animals, each according to its kind.” And it was so. <sup>25</sup> *God made* the wild animals according to their kinds, the livestock according to their kinds, and all the creatures that move along the ground according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good.

Our modern, knee-jerk response to the idea of earth as mother represents not the paganism of our faith, but the mechanization of our view of nature. Just as I love my birth mother, care for her, protect her – so I care for the earth.

Alternatively, we would find it shameful to be so powerless as to be unable to stop someone from enslaving, raping, killing our mother. This is why such reprehensible behavior is often used in malevolent guerrilla warfare as the ultimate sign of power. It is evil and corruption at its finest.

### **A sacred love of nature as an expression of faith**

Earth as mother is not the only word embedded with complex meanings and ambiguous definitions. In his book, *Dark Green Religion*, Dr. Taylor does an admirable job in recognizing that many of the terms used to define God, spirituality, love for the land etc., have many different definitions among different groups.



Within historic Christianity, the word *sacred* means things that are “*holy*”, i.e. things set aside by God or set aside for God. It does not mean that something is divine, but that it is special or holy. For example, the early Christian church struggled with the role of icons in the sanctuary - which some in the Western church accused the Eastern Church of worshipping. Finally a church council ruled that icons were simply sacred and worthy of veneration, but that they were not divine and were not to be worshipped. Venerated versus worshipped may seem like a slight distinction today, but it is significant especially in the idea of a dark, green religion. When a something sacred is disrespected, it is called sacrilege. When something divine is disrespected, it is blasphemy. Worshipping the sacred is idolatry, but honoring the sacred is appropriate.

With this definition in mind, the idea of nature as sacred takes on a more nuanced definition. Calling nature sacred is not the same as calling a divine. Nature is not divine and is not to be worshipped, but there are parts of nature that can and should be viewed as sacred and worthy of reverential care.

Take for example, the birthing grounds of the Arctic caribou. To the Gwich'in Athabascan people, the birthing grounds are sacred, set aside by the Creator for the caribou – so sacred, in fact, that traditionally it was taboo to trespass there. They call it “*iizhik gwats'an gwandaii goodlit*” (The sacred place where life begins). The Gwich'in became Anglican Christians in the 1850's, but even prior to their conversion, they did not worship the birthing grounds, but believed they were a sacred gift entrusted to them by the Creator.

All throughout the far north, small bands of pregnant caribou cows overwinter by foraging in the boreal forests. Something of a marvel occurs, however, when within the same week, scattered across thousands of miles, the mothers all simultaneously stop eating and lift their heads towards as though hearing a summons. First in small bands, and then in increasing larger groups, hundreds of thousands of caribou begin to walk, drawn like iron shavings towards a magnet, towards the Iizhik Gwats'an Gwandaii Goodlit. It is a difficult and perilous journey. Pushing through waist deep snow, they often drown in raging, ice filled or are ambushed by hungry wolves or bears. Nothing stops them. Eventually the small bands of caribou converge and the small groups of ten become larger groups of hundreds, then thousands and tens of thousands. Eventually, about 250,000 caribou cross over the crest of the Brooks Range and drop down into the birthing grounds.

If that is not miracle enough, simultaneously most of the mothers give birth. Suddenly there are fifty-thousand young caribou, hours from being born, struggling to their feet and beginning to dart around the tun-

dra. During this time in the spring wind also shifts, and blows the mosquitoes with it.

Again the Gwich'in are not pantheists, but are committed Christians. However, they are also embedded in place and codependent upon the miracle of the caribou and their migration. They are simply following the biblical command to tend and keep the earth.

Another idea is the soul, the spark of life, or the breath of God. In reading *Dark Green Religion*, I was surprised to learn that animism is a relatively newly created word, defined by one of the earliest anthropologists, E.B. Tyler, in the late 1880's. Animism has been used to describe and contrast worldviews that believed that there were souls in nature. This could range from believing that the ancestors abode in the trees and rivers of a tribal land or it could mean something as benign as seeing soulful love in the eyes of your dog.

Many Christians with a disconnected and mechanistic view of nature have been dismissive about cultures that believe that there are "souls" in the nature. There has been a long debate within the church as to the difference between soul and spirit and these terms are used interchangeably. Definitions become confusing since when people say animals have no souls, they usually mean they do not have eternal spirits. Soul is at times referred to as the mind, will and emotions, differentiating animals from plants.

St Anthony the Great (251-356 AD) wrote "Plants have a natural life, but they do not have a soul. Man is called an intelligent animal because he that has intellect is capable of acquiring knowledge. The other animals and the birds can make sounds because they possess breath and soul. All things that are subject to growth and decline are alive; but the fact that they live and grow does not necessarily mean that they all have souls. There are four categories of living beings. The first are immortal and have souls such as angels. The second have intellect, soul and breathe such as man. The third have breath and soul, such as animals. The fourth have only life, such as plants. The life of plants is without soul, breath, intellect or immortality. These four attributes on the other hand, presuppose the possession of life." *Philokalia, Vol1, Section on St Anthony, Faber and Faber, London 1979, p 354*

*Dark Green Religion* is a study of the modern manifestation of an ancient human experience – the sacred sense of kinship with nature. Ironically, in the modern world, this worldview has become such an anomaly that it must become the focus of academic study. Further irony is that evangelicals, those who claim to intimately know the Creator and who claim the supremacy of a pro-life morality, are the most hostile to a dark green Christianity. My thanks to all of the pagans, earth-lovers, surfers, and radical non-Christians who have proclaimed this truth while the church has been silent. Since few of us will ever have the opportunity to look back at our home planet from the perspective of space, we must find our epiphanies here on the earth, in the city and in the stained glass ca-



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thedrals. My hope is that the faith of Christians can soon grow big enough embrace a dark, green religion, acknowledging the miracle of life on earth before we squander this sacred trust. Dr. Taylor's book will help prevent the bitter regret of clarified hindsight.

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