



INTERVIEW WITH BRON TAYLOR

In order to help readers understand Dark Green Religion and the interactions with it in this issue of the journal, following is an interview with Bron Taylor, author of [*Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future*](#) (University of California Press, 2010). Taylor earned a Ph.D. in Social Ethics from the University of Southern California and an M.A. from Fuller Theological Seminary. He is currently Professor of Religion and Environmental Ethics at the University of Florida. His research focuses on the emotional and spiritual dimensions of environmental movements, and he has led and participated in a variety of international initiatives promoting the conservation of biological and cultural diversity. His books include *Dark Green Religion* as well as [*Ecological Resistance Movements: The Global Emergence of Radical and Popular Environmentalism*](#) (SUNY Press, 1995). He edited the [*Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*](#) (Continuum International Publishers, 2005), founded the International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture, and serves as the editor its affiliated *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture*. For more information see www.brontaylor.com.

Sacred Tribes Journal: Bron, thank you for your willingness to discuss the thesis of your book involving a significant environment and religious movement. Your personal history is interesting in how you came to your present perspectives and activities. Can you share your background, including your time at Fuller, and how your views changed over time to bring you to your current perspectives?

Bron Taylor: I want to begin by thanking John Morehead for orchestrating this forum and for considering my book worth the attention. I also want to express my appreciation to Peter Illyn and Loren Wilkinson for their thoughtful responses. I wish I had the time to take up every point they raise and that we all had the opportunity to carry out this conversation in person. Nevertheless, I think this conversation is worth having in this way, and it reminds me of many good people and conversa-

tions I have had along the course of my own life, much of which involved my experiences within evangelical Christian enclaves.

These experiences began when, as a teenager from a dysfunctional family, I was fortunate to encounter Christian leaders in Campus Life / Youth For Christ, who took me under their wings and became like surrogate parents to me during some very difficult years. I was also involved with the Jesus movement in the early 1970s, and many evangelical churches through the rest of that decade, some of which were Pentecostal.

By 1975, after two years at a community college, I matriculated at California State University, Chico, where I double-majored in Religious Studies and Psychology, graduating in 1977. There, I became deeply interested in the Anabaptist tradition's depiction of Jesus as a prophet of nonviolence, and also in socially progressive streams of Christianity, from the Social Gospel to Liberation Theology. I wondered why I had never heard about these forms of Christianity from my evangelical mentors and friends. It became apparent that Christianity was much more diverse than I had known.

I was, however, an evangelical Christian and to consider ministry or teaching as a vocation, I decided to attend the evangelical Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California. There I was a social justice activist, urging the school to disinvest in South Africa in an effort to help overturn Apartheid, support Christian poor people's movements, and fight what I had come to view as an idolatrous trust in nuclear weapons. I had become one of what sociologist Richard Quebedeaux called *The Young Evangelicals*, namely, politically progressive evangelical activists who hoped to pressure their Christian brethren toward broadening their moral concerns to include social justice and peacemaking.¹

As I completed seminary I was invited to become the first, interim director of the Interfaith Center to Reverse the Arms Race, and about the same time, some seminarian friends and fellow wilderness lovers I knew, who worked for an evangelical outdoors organization called Sierra Treks,² introduced me to [Earthkeeping](#), a book co-edited and authored by Loren Wilkinson.³ This was a wonderful book to discover, for I was disturbed not only by the Church's apparent indifference to the suffering of

¹ Richard Quebedeaux, *The Young Evangelicals: Revolution in Orthodoxy* (New York: Harper Collins, 1974).

² Louis Lorentzen, "Sierra Treks," *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, Vol. 2, B. T. Taylor, ed. (London & New York: Continuum International, 2005), 1548-49.

³ Peter DeVos and Loren Wilkinson, eds., *Earthkeeping: Christian Stewardship of Natural Resources* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1980).



the poor and its failure to resist the production of weapons of mass death, but also by its appalling lack of concern for the natural environment. I knew, of course, that my own environmental concern did not come from the Church, but from the privilege I had of having been taken into the deserts and mountains of California by my father, a geologist and Sierra Club member, and at least a modest activist himself. He regularly wrote letters to congress people on environmental issues and he drove a small car, having already been convinced through his research that the US would itself soon reach what is now widely known as “peak oil.” Though he was not much of a presence in my life after I became a teenager and died while I was in college, I surmise in hindsight that, like a duck, the beauty and value of wild places was imprinted on me early through experiences he provided.

After seminary and my work with that interfaith center, I went to pursue a Ph.D. in social ethics at the School of Religion at the University of Southern California. I was interested in liberation theology movements but my coursework and major focus was on theological ethics widely. During my coursework Rosemary Reuther’s *New Woman, New Earth*, was nearly the only assigned reading that had anything to do with environmental ethics.⁴ But my environmental concerns were only growing, including because since high school I had been working with the California State Department of Parks and Recreation as an Ocean Lifeguard and occasional Park Ranger, and I had come to appreciate the destructive pressure under which the remaining fragments of natural habitats were under. Like Wilkinson and Illyn in the following articles, I could tell many stories about the indifference or hostility to environmental concerns that I encountered during those years in the churches I attended.

As a result, when I began to read arguments that Christianity and the other Abrahamic religions promoted environmentally indifferent or hostile attitudes and behaviors toward nature, my own long experience in evangelical subcultures, including as an InterVarsity Christian Fellowship leader while a chapter president at CSU Chico, provided ample evidence. Still, as I grew as a scholar, I knew it was important to not rush to judgments, but base conclusions on carefully constructed research and judicious consideration of all relevant evidence. As a part of this process, I began to explore the wider, global, environmental milieu, which has provided an important comparative reference point as I

⁴ Rosemary Reuther, *New Woman/New Earth: Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation* (New York: Seabury, 1975).

thought about my evangelical years and Christianity in general, especially, with regard to its beliefs and practices related to nature.

Over the years I have retained my interest in Christian ethics including its environmental values, even being the primary editor of the Christianity-focused entries in the [*Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*](#), a collection for which I was also the general editor. At the same time, I have become a scholar who examines the complex relationships between the environmental practices of people and their religious beliefs, whether they are involved in conventional religious traditions or beyond their boundaries. I have been trying to understand what obstacles and resources the affective and religious lives of human beings might provide for what I have come to believe is an urgently needed, global mobilization to protect and restore the earth's environmental systems.

I think I will stop here for the moment in relating my background and intellectual and religious pilgrimage, since my answers that follow, (as well as parts of the two articles in this issue that have responded to my book), provide a good introduction to some of the central arguments I have made, and in my final answer to the questions posed to me in this interview, I will return to a more personally to explain how my beliefs have changed along the way.

Sacred Tribes Journal: Can you define Dark Green Religion for readers? What elements comprise this environmental religious movement?

Bron Taylor: Dark green religion refers to diverse religious, and religion-resembling social phenomena, in which people have *perceptions* that nature is sacred and has intrinsic value, *beliefs* that everything is interconnected and mutually dependent, and *deep feelings* of belonging to nature.

Such nature spirituality is often rooted in an evolutionary understanding that all life shares a common ancestor, and it generally leads to kinship ethics, namely, felt ethical responsibilities toward and empathy for all living things who, like us, evolved through what Darwin aptly called the struggle for existence. Such perceptions generally lead people to see more continuities than differences between their own species and other ones, and this in turn tends to evoke humility about one's place in the grand scheme of things.

I label such religion "dark" not only to emphasize the depth of its valuing of 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. Since there is no religion without dangerous manifestations, I believe, it is important to be alert to the dangers of religion, of whatever sorts they might be. As a scholar of religion, I take that responsibility very seriously, and endeavored to do so



in [Dark Green Religion](#).

Sacred Tribes Journal: You identify and classify four different types of Dark Green Religion. What are they, and why is it important to recognize the different expressions of this religion?

Bron Taylor: I explore two main forms in the book, animistic and Gaian, both of which can in turn have two main types, those that are conventionally religious, involving perceptions or beliefs in nonmaterial divine beings of some sort, and forms that are entirely naturalistic, which involve no such beliefs.

The Gaian forms that are conventionally religious include Pantheistic spiritualities (including Panentheistic theologies), which embrace and consecrate organicist understandings of the universe's energetic systems and the earth's living systems that are embedded in them. (Organicism historically refers to notions that the universe and biosphere function in ways that resemble the interrelated functions in an organism's body.) Gaian spiritualities are conventional in that there is a belief in some sort of superordinate divine intelligence that accounts for the existence of these systems.

Naturalistic Gaian forms involve no such beliefs and thus some would say they are 'religion-resembling,' 'quasi- or secular- religions.' In the book I discuss James Lovelock's Gaia Theory as exemplary of this type.

The more conventionally religious animistic forms, which I call Spiritual Animism, involve perceptions that there are divine intelligences in nature. The most obvious examples are from certain aboriginal peoples but such perception is widespread, which I document in my book.

Naturalistic Animism, meanwhile, draws more on the personal experiences that some humans have with animals, as well as upon scientific explorations of animal consciousness, and behavior. Those who exemplify these naturalistic forms of Animism perceive that trans-species communication if not also communion is possible, or at minimum, believe that by understanding animal consciousness we can develop empathic relationships with them.

Sacred Tribes Journal: What part does radical environmentalism play in Dark Green Religion, and how might this exemplify some of the

negative aspects of dark in this movement?

Bron Taylor: Having studied radical environmental subcultures, first in North America, and then around the world, publishing *Ecological Resistance Movements: the Global Emergence of Radical and Popular Environmentalism* (1995), I began to note patterns in environment-related spiritualities among both radicals and mainstream environmentalists, and as I looked further, some striking similarities within the broader environmental milieu. Many radical environmentalists have decided that to defend natural habitats they consider sacred, that illegal activities are justifiable. They generally agree that civil disobedience is permissible, and then disagree as illegal tactics become more aggressive. These tactics have included arson and tree spiking (putting hard objects in trees to make it more expensive to harvest them), among other things. Radical environmentalists have been called “ecoterrorists” and denounced as religious extremists. Since 1990, I have written about the religious dimensions (or at least religion-resembling aspects) of such movements, and since they are viewed as spiritually, politically, and even physically dangerous by many of their adversaries, I thought it was important to seriously consider such charges. I sought to do so in the book. Where do I come out? I really think this is too important and delicate an issue to respond to here, but I do address it in the nuance it deserves in *Dark Green Religion*, as well as in scholarly journals, including *Terrorism and Political Violence*.⁵

Sacred Tribes Journal: Your book sets forth the charge that the Abrahamic religions, particularly Christianity, bear great responsibility for our current environmental challenges. This is a charge that Christians need to hear and wrestle with. How would you support this charge, and what aspects of Christianity do you think lend themselves to inappropriate interactions with nature?

Bron Taylor: Given my own Christian background and fondness for so many Christian individuals, I wish could have avoided coming to this conclusion.

There have been many scholars before me who have advanced this case (Wilkinson’s article summarizes some of the major arguments typically made.) Some of these sources are referenced in the book, and there

⁵ These articles are downloadable at my website, www.brontaylor.com, which also provides materials that introduce and compliment *Dark Green Religion*, including video, music, and a section on the motion picture *Avatar*, which I think is a recent example of cinematic dark green nature religion. See John Morehead’s review of this film in this issue of *Sacred Tribes Journal* which echoes this sentiment.



are also very balanced discussions in the [Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature](#) (2005), which I edited. And there have also been many books penned by Christians who have variously acknowledged environmental sins, or argued that properly understood, Christianity is inherently environmental, or who have contended that the tradition has an ambiguous environmental legacy and needs to emphasize its more environmentally beneficent expressions.⁶

For my part, I never *assumed* the charges were compelling but have considered them carefully in the light of historical and social scientific evidence. This journal interview is not a venue where I can go into detail but I can mention a few reasons why the Abrahamic religions seem to have a hard time prioritizing earth care. Perhaps most importantly (and here I am especially speaking of the orthodox forms of Christianity and Islam), they locate the sacred in a paradise beyond the Earth and believe that the most important religious duty is to help people to properly orient themselves toward God, in order to reap their un-earthly heavenly reward. Moreover, when their devotees have been more powerful than their neighbors, the Abrahamic traditions have suppressed, often brutally, peoples they considered pagan, who felt reverence for non-human organisms or the earth itself. This tragic history has very deep roots in cultures rooted in Abrahamic religions, and while the antipathy toward practitioners of nature religions has abated, it appears to remain the strongest where Abrahamic religions are strongest and most fervently believed.

I am gratified at the strong environmental concerns that can be found among some Jews, Christians, and Muslims. My respondents are two of the most prominent examples from evangelical Christianity. Moreover, social scientific data that is available suggests that their numbers are modestly growing. Some cite such evidence, or passages in their sacred texts that express delight in the beauties and bounty of what they consider to be God's created order, to argue that their traditions are naturally environmentally friendly. As a social scientist, however, to conclude this about Christians or any other religious group, I would expect to find that they would be *more* involved in environmental protection efforts than people who are otherwise similar demographically. But the available evidence about Christians suggests that this is not the case, except perhaps among the very most liberal Christians. But it is liberal Christians whom conservative Christians criticize for having abandoned

⁶ Paul H. Santmire, *The Travail of Nature: the Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1985).

what they consider to be the most important foundations of their faith. So, the best available evidence indicates that more theological conservative people are, the less environmentally concerned they are as well. This seems to support the critics who contend that specific worldview elements in the Abrahamic religions tend to hinder environmental concern and action. Unfortunately, the struggle my respondents in this forum about dark green religion have commonly had, and report honestly, within their own communities, supports the critics more than their own assertions that the fundamental core of the Christian faith leads naturally to environmental concern and action.

Today I am the editor of the [*Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture*](#). In it my collaborators and I publish every pertinent, quality, study we receive that explores environmental action in the world's religions and beyond them. While we do report on encouraging environmental mobilization among Christians and others from the world's predominant religions, there is, to my knowledge, no compelling evidence that conventionally religious people, *in a proportion beyond their numbers in the general population*, are taking a leadership role and dramatic action to protect and restore the earth's environmental systems.

I hope I will some day be able to publish solid evidence that will reverse this assessment, but given history and current data, I doubt such evidence will be forthcoming. I do, however, want to stress that I know many ardent Christians, including Wilkinson and Illyn, have devoted their lives to turning their traditions in a greener direction. As importantly, there is a great opportunity for them to cooperate with those who are not Christians in environmental affairs and with regard to the often closely related social justice causes. In *Dark Green Religion* I even discuss my hopes in this regard and the possible emergence of a global civil earth religion, where people who are both conventionally religious and who are not all not come to revere the earth in their own ways and work in concert to protect it. Perhaps the very conversation we are having now provides an example of the possibility for building real understanding and common cause, even if Christians and those who are not Christians cannot agree on metaphysical things.

Sacred Tribes Journal: One of the more interesting claims of the book is the idea that Dark Green Religions are situated scientifically and environmentally to surpass declining supernatural religions in the future. The thesis doesn't seem to be specifically developed in the book. Can you comment and elaborate on this and why you see this as the case?

Bron Taylor: I do contend that nature-based, or nature-focused spiritualities are becoming an increasingly important global social force, and that, if we think medium to long term, such spiritualities might even become *decisive* in the religious and planetary future, eventually supplanting the world's current predominant religions, all of which include be-



liefs in invisible divine forces or divinities (whether these are singular or plural). The short answer to your question would be that the entire book provides evidence of this admittedly speculative thesis.

I know this is quite a claim, however, especially during a time where some contend that religious fundamentalism and conventional religious forms are strengthening, and that secularization is largely and only a European phenomenon. So to answer your quite reasonable question I will say more about my path to what some may consider a contrarian perspective.

For over two decades I have been studying environmental mobilization around the world, focusing especially on the perceptual, affective, ethical, and religious variables contributing to it. My first case studies involved ethnographic research on radical environmentalism in North America, increasingly supplemented by historical work to enable me to better understand its tributaries. From there, I branched out and looked at environmental movements around the world, discovering some interesting continuities among diverse examples of them in Europe and America. I then branched out further still, exploring a very wide variety of cultural phenomena in an even broader environmental milieu (some examples were mentioned in a previous answer), where diverse individuals and groups encounter and mutually influence one another as they struggle to understand and respond an increasingly alarming and obvious global environmental crisis. Among the far-flung individuals and groups I continued to see, despite important differences, continuities that enabled me to group them under the label dark green religion.

So, on the one hand, my argument is based on historical trends and contemporary phenomena that I explore in the book, thinking about what has given rise to them, and considering whether their causes are likely to exercise more or less influence in coming decades or centuries. My conviction is that these spiritualities will grow because they are sensory and thus sensible (pun intended). By this I mean they are based on the senses and thus experiences people can have today, rather than on beliefs and perceptions rooted in events and experiences that occurred long ago. They appear, therefore, to be sensible to science-embracing modern people who understand that today we know many things about the universe and the biosphere that were unknown when most of the world's conventional religions were born.

I find it exceptionally difficult to believe that in two millennia from now, the overwhelming majority of the world's people, at least the rea-

sonably well-educated ones, will not have adopted an evolutionary and ecological worldview. Of course, there are many sincere and well-intentioned efforts to reconcile science and conventional religion. But it is also true that many who adopt an evolutionary and ecological worldview leave conventional faiths, even though they often acknowledge that these faiths have much to commend them, and even though they may have loved ones still devoted to them. I think these are dynamics are becoming strong trends that will intensify. I think many orthodox religious believers see these trends unfolding as well, which is why they are legitimately fearful of losing their young to what they consider to be 'secular' and spiritually dangerous worldviews.⁷

One thing my book shows is that many of these individuals are not really becoming 'secular' but rather, are gravitating toward naturalistic nature spiritualities. This is because, I contend, that the human quest for meaning will not abate even when conventional religions retreat. Instead, new forms are emerging that will reverence the sources of our existence, our planetary home, and the diverse forms of life with whom we share it. My book demonstrates that this process is well underway and, since the reasons for these developments are not going away, neither will this long-term trend.

To wrap up this answer, I believe that the first time, really, there is a cosmogony convincing enough, and communicative technologies ubiquitous enough, to spread an evolutionary and ecological worldview throughout the world's intelligentsia (e.g., educators and other thought leaders, media and economic elites, and political decision makers). While it can be and sometimes is being grafted onto existing religious worldviews (as evidenced by my two respondents in this journal), it is increasingly serving as a self-sufficient meaning system that also provides ethical guidance. This is the long-term trend I have identified.

Personally, I do not think this is something to be feared. If, as a wise man once said, the truth will set one free, then we should pursue it, and its logics, wherever they lead us, even if away from the world's currently predominant, longstanding religions.

Sacred Tribes Journal: You have been speaking quite a bit on this topic and I understand the reception has been great for eco-spirituality. Why do you think this speaks significantly to people?

⁷ For example, over one third young people are unaffiliated with religious institutions, according to sociologists Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell in *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (NY: Simon and Schuster, 2010). The Barna Group of Christian pollsters has documented similar trends in and beyond the churches, which as partisans of what they call biblical worldviews, they find troubling. See especially the articles listed at their website under [Faith/Spirituality](#).



[sacredtribes]

Sacred Tribes Journal

Volume 6 Number 1 (2011): 5-21

ISSN: 1941-8167

Bron Taylor: I think the book's reception has been significant for two main reasons: Firstly, because many modern people find intellectually compelling what in the previous answer I described as the sensory and sensible spiritualities that I have labeled 'dark green religion'; and secondly, because many people feel happy and relieved, and less alone, to know there are so many people, from so many walks of life around the world, who have come to feel the way they do. (Even reading the [re-views of the book](#) at my website or at Amazon.com provides evidence of such resonances.)

Sacred Tribes Journal: You've had a chance to read the essays by Wilkinson and Illyn in this special edition of the journal. What are some thoughts and impressions that you might have as a result of this?

Bron Taylor: I appreciate the thoughtful comments made by Illyn and Wilkinson. I wish we had the opportunity for a real, extended conversation, in person about the many interesting points they made and the assumptions upon which these points rely. At this time I can only provide a few brief responses.

First and most importantly, I appreciate their honesty, as they have both candidly indicated how difficult it is within their own evangelical contexts to convince their brethren that as they put it, "creation care," is a central religious duty for Christians. In a very real way they thereby provide evidence contrary to their most ardent hopes for the greening of Christianity, and ironically, provide evidence supporting the views of those who contend that there are ideas in the main streams of Christianity that work strongly against a dark green Christian environmental ethics. (The same tendency is true of most versions of the world's religions, it is worth noting, in part because their most important religious duties tend to be oriented toward otherworldly beings and realities, which understandably makes this world penultimate.)

Second, and this said, religions are malleable and some of them are developing or deepening their felt responsibilities toward nature. As I made clear in my book, some Christians and others from the so-called world religions are finding resources in their sacred texts to develop reverence for life ethics, and some of these are also grafting evolutionary and ecological worldviews onto their longstanding religious metaphysics and developing dark green dimensions to their ethics. I think, moreover, that the balance of evidence is that, of the world's predominant religions,

Christianity (or more precisely, some forms of it) have made more strides in this direction than either Vedic or the other Abrahamic religions. Ilyn and Wilkinson both exemplify these developments within Christianity and provide evidence of these salutary developments. Yet, as encouraging as these examples of the strengthening environmentalism within these traditions are, most of the evidence remains anecdotal and scatter-shot. Only time will tell if Christianity, and the others among the world predominant religions, will take a decisive green turn.

When I do think about this optimistically, as mentioned previously, I envision the emergence of a global, civil Earth religion, wherein people around the world retain their own particular religious convictions, while coming together with the shared reverence for life and a newfound dark green ethics. I have speculated about this possibility in my book, and more recently, in [“Civil Earth Religion versus Religious Nationalism”](#), an essay published online by the Social Science Research Council. I hope that my book will make at a modest contribution to such a vision, and that increasing numbers of Christians will share and contribute to it. Even if there are some things we cannot agree on there is much we can; it is good to focus on those things and how we can work together. One important example of such a shared vision is [the Earth Charter](#). This diplomatically crafted interfaith document expresses a reverence for life ethics in a way that at least some leaders of the world’s predominant religious faiths have endorsed. The objective of its framers is to gain United Nations endorsement and then use this as moral and spiritual leverage to nudge the nation states toward more environmentally beneficent behavior. As I document in my book, however, many conservative Christians view the initiative as spiritually and politically dangerous Paganism or Pantheism, and opposition from conservative religionists of various faiths might well guarantee that it will never gain the widespread endorsement it envisions.

Third, there is a real possibility, often feared by conservative Christians, that as members of their flock incorporate an evolutionary and ecological worldview, many of them will find less or implausible the metaphysical beliefs, including of a supreme deity governing the universe, that have been a centerpiece to their religious beliefs and practices. There is significant anecdotal evidence (and as cited above as well as in my book, some social scientific evidence) that this could well be a trend. Certainly, most Christians know young people who, when exposed to scientific cosmogonies, drift away from Christian faith. Yet we really do not have sufficient social scientific evidence documenting how significant this trend is, or where such people go spiritually as a result, if anywhere. My own book is more historical and ethnographic than empirical (e.g., while it cites survey research that is available it is not itself based upon such research). Consequently, while during my research I have met many former Christians (and others from the world’s conventional ‘world religions’), who have slipped away from their previous religious traditions as they developed dark green spiritual perceptions and ethics, I



so not know what proportion of those who leave traditional faiths do so in this way. This ignorance is but one reason why the field of religion and nature is so fascinating: so many questions remain unanswered.

Fourth, and here I will return to a more personal reflection and thus to the first question addressed to me in this forum. During and after seminary I studied in depth the various theodicies that purport to explain the ways of God, and trenchant, corresponding questions, such as why a supposedly all powerful and good god (of any kind) allows injustice, suffering, and death. I cannot recite the typical explanations here but simply note that, eventually and reluctantly, I concluded that none of these excuses for God were compelling. Indeed, those offering these theodicies, in my view, go through excruciating, illogical mental gymnastics in these efforts. I found these explanations even more wanting when, through deepening study of religion cross culturally, it became clear that one of the most common roots of religion in general is a felt sense, as people faced inexplicable and sometimes dangerous forces in nature, that there are invisible beings animating the world (or otherwise behind the observable scenes) which must be propitiated, or sacrificed to, if we are to avoid danger and receive blessings. I ultimately decided that the existence of a divine being or beings who demand blood sacrifice was not only implausible but horrific. Make no mistake about it, such sacrifice is as much at the heart of the Abrahamic religions as it was for the Aztecs, whose human sacrifices transfix and horrify many moderns today. And so, far from obedience, I concluded, any being demanding such sacrifice should be resisted, not worshiped and supplicated. Why should we not expect our God or gods to be at least as nice as we are when we are in a good mood?

Now, some liberal Christians aver that it is possible to be a Christian without believing literally in the necessity of Jesus' blood sacrifice to satisfy the righteous God who cannot stand sin and insists that somebody must pay for it. But such Christianity is no longer orthodox and certainly not Evangelical, as I understand them, anyway. Some other liberal Christians will rejoinder that we should look not at the sacrifice of Christ but at the ethics of Jesus, who rejected the Hebrew Bible's 'eye for an eye' ethics, and transformed sacrifice into the virtue of longsuffering love. I take this argument seriously, which has been a strong current in liberal Christianity for more than a century, even before Walter Rauschenbush gave it expression in the social gospel. Jesus *was* a great moral teacher and he remains, therefore, my favorite religious prophet. But because I now find implausible the Abrahamic metaphysics (as well the various, other, supernaturalistic religions), I eventually decided that I could no longer honestly accept the label "Christian."

In this, I identify with Darwin, who also had lost a once profound Theistic faith but loved deeply his devout Christian wife. His biographers have documented how he empathetically sought to navigate the difficult personal terrain in a way that was sympathetic to her beliefs (including her worries about the fate of Darwin's own soul), while maintaining his own intellectual integrity. I identify with him because many of my friends and family members are Christian. I now express my strong agnosticism in their midst – by this I mean, 'I doubt there are invisible divine forces or beings and even if they are, I think they are beyond our confident knowing.' But I have tried to do this in a way that is respectful of the powerful need many of us have to believe in some, ultimate, divine cause of the universe and our place in it. I understand, moreover, that many have had powerful personal experiences which, they believe, provides compelling grounds for their beliefs. With regard to these, I have come to think that there are more compelling explanations for such experiences – for example in the evolutionary and cognitive sciences – than the understandings attributed to them by religious individuals. Like the religion and nature field more generally, these are still nascent and fascinating fields of scientific inquiry that as yet leave many questions unanswered. But in my view, they are already articulating a powerful explanatory framework for religious perception and belief.⁸

Fifth, although both of my respondents are obviously warm and caring individuals, some of what they wrote I find chilling. Ilyn, for example, was very careful, as the orthodox tradition demands, to distinguish his environmental concern from idolatrous, Pantheistic or Pagan beliefs. This implies that he accepts his tradition's longstanding view that such beliefs are dangerous. Meanwhile, Wilkinson gently and warmly urged me back to the Christian fold in the final paragraph of his reflections. Other evangelical friends and family have entreated me similarly over the past couple of decades. I do appreciate the heartfelt and even compassionate place from which such overtures typically come. The logical

⁸ For an excellent start on this literature, see Stewart Guthrie, *Faces in the Clouds: a New Theory of Religion* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) Pascal Boyer, *Religion Explained: the Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought* (New York: Basic, 2001) and Scott Atran, *In Gods We Trust: the Evolutionary Landscape of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002). David Sloan Wilson provides an excellent and positive assessment of religion as a usually positive evolutionary adaptation in *Darwin's Cathedral: Evolution, Religion, and the Nature of Society* (Chicago & London: Chicago University Press, 2002). For a lucid overview and introduction to naturalistic explanations that is unsympathetic to religion, see Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (New York City: Viking, 2006), and most recently, David Lewis-Williams, *Conceiving God: The Cognitive Origin and Evolution of Religion* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2010). Conventionally religious individuals who are serious about fusing their religions with evolutionary theory should also see if they are able to reconcile their religious beliefs with evolutionary explanations for them.



flip side of these expressions should also be little examined, however. These passages demonstrate that my respondents consider dangerous the beliefs of those who think the world is full of spiritual intelligences or consider Gaia to be some kind of divine being. Also dangerous, by logical implication, are naturalists like me, who express a kinship ethics with all organisms because we share a common ancestor, and who also consider the universe and biosphere to be great and wondrous mystery, worthy of our spiritual affections and reverent care, even if we doubt that the human mind will ever understand its origins. If one believes that Animists and those with Gaian spiritualities (whether conventionally religious or naturalistic) are spiritually dangerous, then to protect yourselves and your loved ones, would you not be tempted, if not compelled, to suppress us?

This is not an idle question given the repressive history of the Abrahamic traditions against those they have considered idolatrous pagans. As a scholar of religion this is not a history I should forget. Although I am sure that this history is the farthest thing from the mind of Illyn and Wilkinson when they were writing the passages to which I am referring, there is an echo of it in their concern both for the purity of their traditions and their call back to the fold. On the other side of the coin from a sincere fear for the immortal soul of non-believers is a fear of their dangerous and polluting beliefs. I expect my point and concern here will seem exaggerated or misplaced, after all and for example, Illyn's final sentences expressed appreciation for environmentalist pagans of all sorts and regions. I am quite sure he would be mortified to hear that some of what he said might trigger such a concern. But I would urge him and Wilkinson also, and other Christians, to follow the logic of their fear of idolaters, pagans, and pantheists, and to consider the violence it has precipitated, and still does to a lesser extent today, and whether this fear is a part of their faith that would best be left behind.

I hope that my responses to John Morehead's questions about my book, as well as to the responses to Illyn and Wilkinson, will help them and other Christians understand why I, and no small number of other scientifically literate individuals, have reluctantly left behind the Christian faith. Although I have been riding the slippery slope to a strong agnosticism, I have retained my fondness for those who once nurtured me in the faith and for Jesus and his teachings. I am also convinced that many Christians will continue to creatively fuse their faith with modern scientific understandings. I certainly respect those who can reconcile the two and recognize that this will naturally redound in environmental action. I wish all who are conventionally religious, and believe in invisible divine beings or forces, all the best as they endeavor to hybridize their

faith and science. At the same time, I appeal to them to recognize that some of us, including many who were once devout, have been unable to remain in the fold but nevertheless, have retained a deep reverence for nature and the sources of existence, even though we cannot bring ourselves to believe they have a divine cause.

While I do not claim great brilliance I can express affinity with Albert Einstein, who wrote movingly about the mystical experiences of awe and wonder that can come through direct experience in nature. After a great storm he weathered at sea in 1931, he wrote, “Never before had I lived through a storm like the one this night . . . The sea has a look of indescribable grandeur, especially when the sun falls on it. One feels as though one is dissolved and merged into Nature. Even more than usual, one feels the insignificance of the individual, and it makes me happy.”⁹ Einstein’s experience and revelry, and the ethical convictions that he also expressed, including kinship with non-human organisms, are very common in dark green religion. Einstein exemplified the *naturalistic* pole of dark green spirituality, I should be clear, writing in 1954 to counter those who, noting his occasional references to God, assumed or wondered whether he was a theist. Einstein made clear, however, that such references were metaphorical and that he did not believe in a personal God or even in the theological quest. Lest he be misunderstood, he wrote, “If something is in me which can be called religious then it is the unbounded admiration for the structure of the world so far as our science can reveal it.”¹⁰

This is the sort of religious naturalism with which I have grown to have affinity. It is also the kind of spirituality that I think will likely play an increasingly important and possibly decisive role in the religious and planetary future. My hope is that religious naturalists (including those who would not use the term), and those with more traditional religious beliefs, will engage in more forthright and honest discussions where we agree and disagree, along the lines of those undertaken in this issue of the *Sacred Tribes Journal*. I think that if we do this well we will increasingly find common environmentalist cause through a shared reverence for life, and a common understanding of our tiny biosphere as a miraculous and sacred place.

Sacred Tribes Journal: Thank you for making time in a very busy schedule to participate in this interview. These are difficult things that various parties need to hear, and we need to dialogue on. It is our hope that this journal can open the door and set the table (to mix metaphors) for future dialogues, either in person at conferences, or in print in various

⁹ *Albert Einstein: The Human Side*, Helen Dukas and Banesh Hoffman, eds. (Princeton University Press, 1979), 23.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 43.



Isacredtribes *Sacred Tribes Journal*

Volume 6 Number 1 (2011): 5-21

ISSN: 1941-8167

venues, as well as possible collaborative opportunities.