



*SOME RESPONSES TO THE BRON TAYLOR INTERVIEW*

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I appreciate very much Bron Taylor's 's genuinely irenic spirit – I believe him when he says he wishes he didn't have to be as critical of Christianity as he is. I appreciate this spirit all the more because since writing the response to his book I have been involved (via the [Biologos](#) website, founded by Francis Collins, head of the human genome project, and dedicated to the "integration of science and Christian faith") with a very angry, very wounded atheist community whose default attitude seems to be that Christians are, almost by definition, both brain-dead and morally culpable. I don't detect this sort of stereotyping in Bron Taylor (though I confess I rather expected it, and perhaps projected some of that antagonism onto his book, at least when I first read it). Taylor is committed, as I am (and as some of the militant atheists he criticizing seem not to be) to working out the implications of the belief that we live in *one* world, not two: the world of "fact" described by science – and the world of "feeling" – emotion, wonder and awe – in which all people (including scientists) live.

I am as disturbed as Taylor is by the sociological evidence that Christian faith doesn't seem to make much difference in people's attitudes toward the earth. But Taylor and I respond differently to that sad fact: he assumes it to be that Christianity is not true; I think rather that it is evidence of a very widespread human inability to live out what they believe to be true.

It is instructive to compare the dismal Christian environmental record with human response to the equally inconvenient truths of science. Most obviously: large swathes of Americans (including, sadly, the majority of American evangelical Christians) prefer to deny the unavoidable science of human-caused climate change. But ignoring it (and occasional misuses of that science) won't make the facts go away, any more

than ignoring the resurrection of Jesus will make it and its implications disappear. More subtly: Science is a hugely influential force today, and (through its applications in technology) arguably at the roots of much of the environmental damage we both lament. But one does not decide to be anti-science because of the negative uses to which science has been put; we have to learn how to use the dangerous truth that the world can be understood and manipulated by human beings, but the record of our having learned that is pretty mixed—as is the record of Christians having learned to live out the dangerous truths about Jesus. Witch-burnings, distrusts of pagans and “In this sign conquer. . .” are all sad records of our failure. (This analogy between attitudes towards science and towards Christianity is complicated by the fact that, science, good and bad, has its roots in Christian culture, good and bad – however much that historical connection is obscured today.)

I wish Taylor and I had occasion to pursue in some detail the case I tried to make about the inconsistency between rational, moral argument and the inadequate philosophical and spiritual resources of impersonal monism and an accidental universe which seems to underlie “Dark Green Religion.” Purpose and personality seem built into the cosmos, and (it seems to me) the only philosophy or theology compatible with that fact is some sort of theism, perhaps even a trinitarian theism.

Finally: I sympathize very much with Taylor’s distress at the pain and suffering in the universe, and the apparent tension between that evil and the idea of a good Creator. But if that distress is used as an argument to reject theism (and Christianity), two responses must be made. The first has been made often: The “problem of evil” is a “problem” only for those who are already committed to some idea of a good God. It does not arise at all (as Spinoza made clear) in a monist or pantheist universe (though even the good monist or Stoic has usually had to work hard to bring his feelings into conformity with the state of the universe). If the universe and its purpose (or lack of it) are one, then our feelings of distress about it are an illusion, as the Buddha saw clearly.

The second response is more foundational, and more radically Christian. It is also an answer to Taylor’s quite understandable rejection of those Christian theologies which stress the belief that the central meaning of the crucifixion of Jesus is that an angry God needed a victim on which to take out his wrath, thus “satisfying” a need for divine justice. Such a view fails to take seriously a belief which is at the heart of Christian faith: that in the suffering of Jesus we see most clearly the character of the Creator. Creation is a gift, but a costly gift—as Holmes Rolston, the founder of the *Journal of Environmental Ethics* put it, “The aura of the cross is cast backwards across the whole global story, and it forever outlines the future.” Far from elevating for worship a blood-thirsty deity



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who requires sacrifice, this deeper Christian underlines the reality that it is the eternal sacrifice of a loving God which makes creation possible.

That picture of a suffering Creator, it seems to me, is a far more compelling model for human behaviour towards the suffering earth than any of the positions Taylor outlines in *Dark Green Religion*. So I ask him again not to base his understanding of Christianity on the various sad caricatures which he describes, and not on Christians' woefully inadequate attempts to live out their faith. Rather, I suggest that the morally passionate stance towards the earth which he describes, and which he represents has only one true center, the crucified God.