
Focus Introduction: Aquatic Nature Religion

Bron Taylor

Outdoor adventure and other recreational practices can express, evoke, and reinforce religious perceptions and orientations to natural and social worlds. Some participants in them understand nature itself to be sacred in some way and believe that facilitating human connections to nature is the most important aspect of their chosen practice. Such activities can be construed by scholars as “nature religion,” and profitably analyzed by comparing characteristics commonly associated with religion to the beliefs and practices of participants engaged in these activities. Here I introduce as “Aquatic Nature Religion” three case studies that explore the religious, or religion-resembling aspects, of surfing, fly fishing, and whitewater kayaking. These studies provocatively challenge conventional understandings of religion and pose anew the boundary question: Where does religion end and phenomena that are not religious begin?

THE FOLLOWING THREE ESSAYS are studies of what we can call “Aquatic Nature Religion.”

That water is an important physical and conceptual resource in religious life should be unsurprising, for only air is more critical to the sustaining of life. Water may be perceived as sacred or defiled, either intrinsically or at the hands of either mortal or mortal beings, as when a Priest, through the power of God, consecrates water for purifying rituals. Whether water is scarce or plentiful, pristine or polluted, the places where it is accessed are often considered sacred. Pilgrimages to

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Journal of the American Academy of Religion, December 2007, Vol. 75, No. 4, pp. 863–874
doi:10.1093/jaarel/lfm065

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Advance Access publication on October 16, 2007

such places, and practices undertaken there, are often religiously meaningful and sometimes obligatory.

Some scholars have analyzed the diverse and intimate relations between water and religion. As summarized by Rudhardt (2005), water is often central to religious cosmogony, can be understood as a manifestation of the divine or governed by divine being or beings, it may be associated with sexuality or otherwise perceived to be involved with the generation of life, or with healing, purification, or sacralization. Water may also be considered a source of wisdom or mysterious, cathartic power, or conversely, a force in opposition to divine purposes and in need of subjugation (Rudhardt 2005; Tvedt and Oestigaard 2006).¹ It is a fluid and powerful substance, speaking metaphorically, that can and has been used in different ways in different places by people trying to make meaning from their experiences.

The new religious practices and experiences that I am labeling Aquatic Nature Religion certainly have continuities with some of the traditional ways in which water has been intertwined with religious belief and practice. These continuities include the ways, within American cultural history, that some people considered nature to be sacred and worthy of reverent care.² Yet, there also appear to be some religiously innovative dimensions to the practices of surfing, fly fishing, and kayaking, when people construe these practices as spiritual or religious.

Whether these presentations are compelling may ultimately depend on one's understanding of the term "religion". But as is well known, determining what counts as religion has become exceedingly messy. Some argue that scholars should abjure the term because the way it has been construed has injured colonized and marginalized peoples.³ Others have sought to overcome the confusion by providing an

¹ Further suggesting an intimate relationship between religion and water is that, in the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, 45% of the 1000 entries make reference to water (Taylor 2005d).

² For overviews exploring individuals and groups that have perceived nature as sacred and can therefore be called nature religions in the sense I am using the term here see Taylor and Van Horn (2006) and Taylor and Witt (2006). The following are among the most important studies exploring the ways in which some Americans have considered nature spiritually significant and often sacred in some way: Miller (1956), Nash (1967), Carroll (1969), Fox (1981), Sears (1989), Albanese (1990, 2002), Oelschlaeger (1991), York (1995), Buell (1996), Harvey (1997), Harrod (2000), Price (2000), Ivakhiv (2001), Martin (2001), Gatta (2004), Pike (2004), and Gould (2005).

³ Citing Asad (1993), Fitzgerald (1999), and McCutcheon (1997) as examples, Chidester summarized this perspective in this way: "the terms of *religion* and *religious* are so damaged by their colonial, imperial, and globalizing legacy that they should be abandoned in cultural analysis" (2005: 27). See also Dubuisson (2003) and Masuzawa (2005). Chidester demurred from the argument that the term religion should be abandoned, however, even though he had himself

unambiguous definition, such as the authors of the definition of religion entry in the *Dictionary of Religion* who echo echoed E.B. Tylor (1871) and insisted that “an adequate definition” must understand religion as “a system of beliefs and practices that are relative to superhuman beings” (Smith and Green 1995: 893). Yet others deny that superhuman or divine beings are needed to understand beliefs and practices as religious. Indeed, as theories of religion have proliferated so have the definitions of it.

Scholars exploring what they call “implicit religion” (Bailey 1997), on the one hand, and others who analyze what they call “lived religion,” on the other hand, e.g., question traditional premises regarding what counts *as* religion, and what counts *in* religion. As Robert Orsi put it in an important introduction to a collection of essays collected under the neologism “lived religion”:

to study lived religion entails a fundamental rethinking of what religion is and what it means to be “religious.” Religion is not only *sui generis*, distinct from other dimensions of experience called “profane.” Religion comes into being in an ongoing, dynamic relationship with the realities of everyday life (Orsi 1997: 7).

Through such study, Orsi and his fellow travelers have sought to break down “the dualism of matter and religion, sacred and profane” while pursuing “a more dynamic integration of religion and experience” (1997: 8). Such study urges attentiveness to the practices of every day life, and the meanings people attach to them, which are often revealed and expressed verbally with religion-related terminology.

Orsi is not alone. Scholars such as Catherine Albanese and Joseph Price have argued this case in relation to experiences of nature. In *Nature Religion in America*, Albanese provided a valuable example of such an approach, defining “nature religion” as a variety of beliefs and practices in which nature is considered a pivotally important symbolic resource. Albanese’s case studies showed that the sacred/profane distinction was problematic, or at least, sometimes entirely irrelevant, when it came to the “natural dimension” of religion (Albanese 1990: 13). She concluded, “Religions are action systems as much—if not more than—they are thought systems” and, for there to be nature religion, “the symbol of nature must, so to speak, get out on the street [and] touch flesh, blood, and action” (Albanese 1990: 200–201). Price published an article on what he called “naturalistic recreations” in 1996, arguing that

demonstrated how religion-related terminology has functioned oppressively (Chidester 1996). For judicious analysis of such arguments see Saler (1993: 27–69) and Stuckrad (2003).

nature-related spirituality includes many outdoor activities, including fishing and adventurous water sports. Such practices, Price argued, can provide “a sense of wonder, awe, wholeness, harmony, ecstasy, transcendence, and solitude” (1996: 415). Moreover, he observed, the language the participants use to describe their experiences “frequently becomes poetic and invokes religious metaphors” (1996: 417).⁴

Meanwhile, a growing number of scholars have wrestled with the preference that increasing numbers have for the term “spirituality,” rather than “religion,” when they try to express that which is most inspiring, meaningful, and fulfilling to them (Van Ness 1992, 1996, Roof 1993; King 1996; Helminiak 1996; Zinnbauer et al., 1997, Fuller 2001; Kellert and Farnham 2002; Heelas and Woodhead 2005; Schmidt 2005). These observers note that, generally speaking, those who prefer the term spirituality contrast it favorably to religion, and view the former as something that is more oriented to the individual’s personal experience, growth, and connections to higher powers or forces, than are more organized and institutionally grounded religions. Those preferring the term “spirituality” are also more likely than those engaged in “religion” to understand the sacred as immanent, rather than beyond this world somehow as in traditional theism, and consider the protection of nature to be an important ethical duty.

My own work has explored venues where spirituality, nature, outdoor experience, and everyday, lived practice intersect. I have focused on pagans, scientists, environmentalists, as well as on social scientists and religion scholars, and participants in international institutions and non-governmental groups who are engaged in dialog and action related to the quest for environmental sustainability (Taylor 1995, 2001a, 2001b, 2004, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c; Taylor and Zimmerman 2005; Taylor and Van Horn 2006; Taylor and Witt 2006).⁵ I have found important affinities among these diverse actors and have argued that, despite many differences, it makes sense to consider them all as involved in “nature religion.”⁶

⁴ For nature spirituality and other forms of nature-related recreation, see Cattell (2005), Johnson (2005), and Stuckrad (2005).

⁵ In an analogous way, anthropologist Jonathan Benthall suggests that anthropology and archeology have “religioid” dimensions that can be analyzed religiously (2006). Benthall has also found helpful Saler’s *Conceptualizing Religion* (1993), which is discussed in the text later, and concurs that much of environmentalism can be examined profitably as a religious phenomenon (personal communication, October 2006).

⁶ Without disagreeing with Albanese’s definition and use of the term “nature religion,” which has its own heuristic value, I have found it useful to focus my work on a narrower band of religiosity than she generally has (1990, 2002). Her definitions and analyses do not require that subjects perceive the sacred in nature or use religious terminology explicitly focused upon it. But in

Such religion strongly tends to involve two, closely related dimensions.

- (1) A perception that nature is sacred (in some way) and worthy of reverent care. Such perception is usually expressed using religious terminology and metaphors, and often is reflected in practical, ethical behavior. Conversely, damaging nature is considered to be an unethical and desecrating act.
- (2) Feelings of belonging and connection to the earth—of being bound to and dependent upon the earth's living systems. Such feelings and perceptions are closely connected to beliefs in which the purpose of life is understood to foster positive transformation, well-being, and healing, for the individual persona as well as for society and the natural world.

Mindful of these phenomena, and the above-mentioned scholarly debates, a few years ago I began to think about the religiosity of surfing subcultures, with which I had long been involved. I found in them, and among some of their participants, many of the same characteristics present in the groups I had concluded could be profitably analyzed as nature religions. Meanwhile, I encountered other scholars interested in the religious dimensions of their own, water-related, outdoor activities. Each of the following contributions has affinity with or engages the above-mentioned, intellectual currents. Like the earlier works, the present ones complicate our understanding of religion. They illuminate beliefs and practices that might not be considered religious by those presuming more conventional understandings of the term, such as those who insist that belief in non-material beings are necessary for the religion trope to be apt. Beyond this, the present studies enhance our understanding of communities, and their associated beliefs and practices, which cannot be adequately understood without attending to their religious (or at least, their religion-resembling) dimensions.

Price concluded in his own, provocative analysis, “naturalistic recreations offer symbols and orientations by which secular Americans have begun to organize their conceptions of the physical world and to render them meaningful” (Price 1996: 417). Although he found it heuristically useful to use religious studies lenses to analyze such phenomena, he nevertheless seemed to demur from calling them religious. This also

the subcultures I have examined, such terminology is ubiquitous. For extended analysis of the term “nature religion” and the putative differences between nature-related “religion” and “spirituality,” see especially Taylor (2001a, 2001b, 2005b).

seems to be the case with the scholars advancing the notion of “implicit religion.” The analyses of aquatic nature religions provided here, however, not only underscore, with all of the above-referenced scholars, the value of analyzing the practices of groups involved in outdoor recreation with religious studies lenses, but also challenge the notion that such practitioners should be considered “secular,” and any conclusion that religion provides a useful analytical framework, but not an apt definition, when applied to such communities and their practices.

Of course, some will elect to reserve the term religion for cases in which non-material beings are perceived and engaged. Given my own fieldwork, however, I have found it useful to adopt the term religion whenever practitioners use religious terminology to describe their own perceptions and practices. Moreover, I am content to label as “nature religion” those cases where people consider nature to be sacred in some way (Taylor 2001a). This is in part because I concur with J. Z. Smith when he asserted, “‘Religion’ is not a native term; it is a term created by scholars for their intellectual purposes and therefore it is theirs to define” (Smith 1998: 281–282).⁷ This is also why I will not presume to speak for my collaborators’ understandings of or approach to religion (in general) or aquatic nature religion (in particular). They may find it useful to construe differently these tropes.

My own approach has affinity with Benson Saler’s in *Conceptualizing Religion*. Saler argued that—when it comes to analyzing phenomena in the borderland between what some will consider “religion” while others will not—how we understand the term and delineate the beliefs and practices to which it refers is not the most critical thing.⁸ Instead, “The power of religion as an analytical category ... depends on its instrumental value in facilitating the formulation of interesting statements about human beings” (Saler 1993: 68). I likewise take a pragmatic approach to the term and am primarily concerned about its explanatory utility. Moreover, I agree that it is valuable to observe and analyze the

⁷ By saying religion is not a “native term” Smith means it is not one that most people use self-referentially, but rather, it is constructed by outside observers “who are solely responsible for the content of the term” (Smith 1998: 269). At the end of this useful review of the changing understandings of the term religion, although Smith encourages scholars to construct the word in ways useful to them, his own operational definition remains solidly in the main streams of twentieth century thinking about religion, wherein it is conceived of as having to do with the beliefs and practices related to postulated supernatural beings (Smith 1998: 280–81; cf. Smith and Green 1995).

⁸ In the introduction to the *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature, and Culture*, I discuss in more detail my approach to defining religion (Taylor 2007).

characteristics typically associated with what both scholars and ordinary people typically associate with the word. After all,

if our ultimate purpose as scholars is to say interesting things about human beings rather than about religions and religion, appreciation of the pervasiveness of religious elements in human life is far more important than any contrivance for bounding religion (Saler 1993: 226).

This seems like a fitting launching point for a discussion of Aquatic Nature Religion. The following articles do indeed challenge dominant, contemporary constructions of religion. Whether they blur or expand our understanding of the boundaries of religion is less important than whether they help explain the “organic-cultural flows” wherein water-related practices and perceptions are experienced and construed by their participants as spiritual and religious.⁹

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⁹ Thomas Tweed’s theory of religion is replete with aquatic metaphors. This includes his definition of the term, from which I borrowed the phrase “organic-cultural flows”: “*Religions are confluences of organic-cultural flows that intensify joy and confront suffering by drawing on human and suprahuman forces to make homes and cross boundaries*” (2006: 54, his italics). Like Saler and others, Tweed believes that we must remain open to new understandings of the term religion: “No constitutive disciplinary term is elastic enough to perform all the work scholars demand of it. But that means we should continually refine and revise our understanding of the term for purposes and contexts, not abandon it” (Tweed 2006: 39–40). These aquatic nature religion essays do what Tweed suggests.

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