
**Editor's Introduction: Toward a Robust Scientific
Investigation of the 'Religion' Variable
in the Quest for Sustainability**

Abstract

Despite significant progress in the development of the religion and nature field, there is still far too little data available to evaluate conclusively hypotheses regarding the 'greening of religion', regardless of whether the traditions in focus are large or small, longstanding or recently emerging. The field needs to move beyond anecdotal information and wishful thinking and develop a much more complex and robust, mixed methods social science to explore the religious dimensions of the quest for environmental sustainability and conservation. Only then will we be able to assess more accurately whether it is possible for such phenomena to contribute strongly to efforts to create a more equitable and environmentally sustainable world. Scholars interested in pursuing historically and empirically such questions are invited to contact *JSRNC* editors in order to establish a task force to pursue these questions.

*Toward a Robust Scientific Investigation of the 'Religion' Variable
in the Quest for Sustainability*

This issue of the *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* reflects the richness and diversity of the 'religion and nature' field, which seeks to illuminate, through a wide array of disciplinary lenses, the relationships between what we variously construe as 'religion' and 'nature'.

The Evolutionary Origins of Religion

Understanding the natural origins of religion, how religion emerged through the long process of biological evolution, has been one important thread through our common inquiry. In this issue James Harrod offers a related provocation, asking readers to consider what might constitute 'A Trans-Species Definition of Religion'. Of course, religion has, like culture,

long been considered only the province of our own species, *Homo sapiens sapiens*. But those informed by evolutionary understandings, who recognize thereby that while there are many differences among species there are also many continuities, will naturally wonder whether other-than-human organisms might have perceptions or affective experiences that are religious or, at least, religion-resembling. Harrod contends that by developing 'a non-anthropocentric and non-anthropomorphic prototype definition of human religious behavior' we might eventually develop protocols 'to predict and identify religious behavior in other species'. In light of the growing body of ethnological evidence that there are many continuities between the consciousness and affective states of humans and other organisms, and a corresponding erosion of the scholarly taboo against studying these continuities (which have typically been dismissed as anthropomorphism), it seems clear that Harrod is raising important issues for future research.

Contributing to the explosion of scholarly interest in the evolutionary roots of religion, and whether religion is adaptive or maladaptive, is Burgess Wilson's fascinating article exploring cognitive 'mirroring processes', which he sees as an important step toward his longer term effort to develop 'an empathic theory of religion'. Put briefly, he contends that there is a neurobiological root for the perception of supernatural agents, which also plays a role in empathetic affective states, which in turn tends in small-scale societies to promote environmentally sustainable practices. Like some other biologically based theories of religion, Burgess seeks to show that such evolved cognitive capacities not only explain religious beliefs and perceptions but that these can, at least in some cases, account for *why* some societies develop environmentally friendly lifeways and livelihoods. Complementing Burgess's article in this issue is Todd Tremlin's lucid review of Jay Feerman's edited book, *The Biology of Religious Behavior: The Evolutionary Origins of Faith and Religion*.

The Greening of Religion Hypothesis

This review and the above-mentioned articles provide an interesting backdrop for the rest of this issue, much of which addresses what could be called the greening of religion hypothesis, which has been a preoccupation of many involved in the religion and nature field. The hypothesis suggests that, as religious people (or some subset of them) become more aware of negative environmental impacts from human behaviors, they are transforming their traditions in more environmentally friendly directions.

As one who has long been concerned about environmental degradation and its negative impacts on human beings and other organisms, I have been intrigued with this optimistic hypothesis. As an empirically oriented scholar, however, I have not as yet found compelling the kind of evidence mustered in defense of the greening of religion hypothesis.

There are a number of reasons for my skepticism. Much of the research defending this hypothesis, first of all, has been based not on randomized datasets but on cases where religious individuals or small groups are demonstrably environmentally concerned and active. In short, much of the case for the greening of religion hypothesis is based on pre-screened, positive examples, or is otherwise merely anecdotal (known as confirmation bias to social scientists). Unfortunately, such information does not indicate what proportion of a given religious group has environmentally friendly ideals or behavioral practices, nor does it provide a comparative reference point with non-religious groups or other religious groups, nor does it track attitude and behavioral changes over time. Moreover, such information does not demonstrate that *religion* is responsible for the environmentally friendly ideals and practices even where these are demonstrable. Scholars should not, therefore, take at face value the claims by religionists (or scholarly observers) that the environmental concerns and practices of a given group are *caused* by their religious tradition's ethical ideals. There may, in fact, be a defensive and apologetic motivation for such claims, and scholars who study a given tradition are often also participants in them and sympathetic toward them, and subject to the same apologetic impulses. Furthermore, a question that would naturally arise from a perspective indebted to Emile Durkheim is too often not even considered by those advancing the greening of religion hypothesis, namely, that environmental concern expressed by religious actors is a *reflection* of the culture in which the religious actors are situated, not the *result* of the religion's ethical ideals. Similarly, much of the scholarship celebrating the supposed greening of religion fails to consider other possibly influential, if not decisive variables, that may account for such greening where it can be documented. Clearly, to evaluate the greening of religion hypothesis a more sophisticated social scientific approach is needed.

In the *JSRNC*, we have sought to advance the consideration of the greening of religion hypothesis by publishing studies and reviews that contribute to such analysis, and by analyzing evidence developed and published elsewhere. In the current issue, for example, Sarah Robinson's review of İbrahim Özdemir's *The Ethical Dimension of Human Attitude towards Nature: A Muslim Perspective* certainly demonstrates that some Muslims are looking to their tradition for environmental values; but for

me the review (and other evidence) also raises a question as to whether Muslim environmentalism is the province of a very small group of Muslim intellectuals who have deeply engaged Western environmental thought, as has the philosopher (and *JSRNC* editorial board member) Özdemir.

Also in the current issue of the *JSRNC* is Sophie Gilliat-Ray and Mark Bryant's study titled 'Are British Muslims "Green"?' which found that some British Muslims 'are engaged in a range of projects involving the promotion of environmental conservation and sustainable horticulture'. The authors also demonstrated that these projects had been facilitated by new Muslim environmental organizations as well as by environmentally friendly interpretations of sacred texts. As the authors judiciously recognized, what can be concluded from this study remains modest. In my view, however, the study is most valuable when viewed not as strong evidence for the greening of Islam in the United Kingdom but rather as demonstrating the need for further research. It is worth noting, for example, that the environmental concern expressed by their interlocutors had little to do with the conservation of the biological diversity, a goal which many environmentalists consider to be central to the conservation agenda.¹ The study could even be cited as evidence by those who claim that Abrahamic traditions are immutably anthropocentric. Moreover, those involved in the scrutinized projects clearly represent a small proportion of British Muslims. Given these considerations, this study of Muslim sustainability efforts in Britain could reasonably be considered evidence of how difficult it is to develop environmental projects among Muslims in Britain, rather than as evidence for a significant, emerging, Islamic environmentalism there.

Another window into the ferment over the greening of religion hypothesis focuses on Christianity. In her review of *Nature and Scripture in the Abrahamic Religions*, for example, Jame Shaefer spotlights the complicated ways in which scientific understandings of nature entwine with efforts to understand scripture by Christian thinkers. This book ends its analysis in the sixteenth century, however, and thus does little to illuminate the possibility of a green Christianity today, apart from showing how Christians have long sought to fuse their religious tradition with the unfolding, new scientific understandings. The review by Alastair McIntosh of the theologian Sallie McFague's latest book, and the review essay by Michael Northcott, examine recent works by theologians who are directly involved in efforts to turn their tradition green.

1. My impression in this regard was confirmed by the authors during the editorial review process.

In his review essay, Northcott found in the works he reviewed strong evidence for the greening of Christianity hypothesis, citing the work of Christian intellectuals to integrate evolutionary and other scientific perspectives with environmental concerns, and a 'cascade' of environmental efforts among Christian laypeople, cited by the authors of the books he reviewed. Drawing on this evidence and, little doubt, his own experience as a theologian laboring to develop and demonstrate Christianity's green themes, Northcott directly challenged my skepticism about the greening of Abrahamic religions, which I expressed in *Dark Green Religion: Nature Religion and the Planetary Future* (2010a).² Here I can only offer a brief response.

My strong impression, gathered from my own diverse experiences with Christians, including within the global environmental milieu, and cross-checked by attending to available qualitative and quantitative data, is that Northcott and other apologists for the Abrahamic traditions are unduly sanguine about the environmental potential and direction of their traditions.

The Barna Group of Evangelical Christian pollsters, for example, have produced two excellent studies comparing environmental views among different groups of Christians in the United States with those of the wider public. In their most recent one (conducted in 2008), focusing on environmental values, they concluded that 'Christians—like most other Americans—are open to environmental concerns, but these issues tend to be relatively minor top-of-mind concerns'. The researchers also noted that 89% of Christians, and 85% of churchgoers, have never 'heard the phrase "creation care"', which is increasingly used by environmentally concerned Christians as shorthand for what they perceive as a religious duty to be good stewards of creation. The authors explained that this 'may be because few congregations teach the topic', also finding that most churchgoers (64%) reported that they had never heard any sermons 'about how Christians should respond to environmental issues' (Barna Group 2008).

This 2008 study coheres with my own long observation within Christian groups in North America that the more theologically conservative Christians are, the less likely they are to consider environmental conservation an important religious obligation, and that more liberal Christians do not seem to be any more environmentally engaged than other political liberals who are not Christian. For one anecdotal example, in June 2011, I spoke with a Methodist minister in Tennessee who had been influenced

2. For the review by Eugene Anderson, see *JSRNC* 5.2: 244-45; other reviews and further information are available at <http://brontaylor.com>.

by the environmental theologian Sallie McFague, under whom he studied at Vanderbilt University's Divinity School. McFague's writings are considered dangerously unorthodox, bordering on pantheism, by some conservative Christians, but this middle-aged minister had found McFague's ecological theology compelling, and he expressed frustration that in his nearly 20 years in the pastorate, he has seen little evidence of grassroots congregational interest in environmental conservation, and virtually no teaching of such responsibilities from the pulpit. In short, based on what I know from my own observations and that of other qualitative researchers studying the environmental values of Christians, I am skeptical that the environmental initiatives underway within Christianity are growing significantly, and think the available quantitative data reinforce my perception in this regard.³

Indeed, as I argued in *Dark Green Religion*, the more theologically conservative participants in these traditions are, the more likely they are to view the new, green expressions of them as spiritually dangerous, or at most, of minor importance compared to more pressing spiritual and ethical obligations.⁴

3. For an interesting and informative exchange that illuminates this point, see my interview with the editor of the *Sacred Tribes Journal* (2011a), and the related exchange with several of the most prominent environmentally concerned evangelical Christians in the United States. As I argued there, their consistent reports about how difficult it is to be green within their theologically orthodox Christian groups coheres with my longstanding first-hand impressions of the general indifference to environmental conservation among most such Christians. But it is rare for the environmentally concerned apologists for these traditions to seriously address the ideas central to them that appear to hinder their becoming more environmentally engaged. For a notable exception, see Nash, 'The Bible vs. Biodiversity: The Case against Moral Argument from Scripture', *JSRNC* 3.2 (2009), and the responses in the same issue, especially for the current purpose, Michael Northcott's 'Loving Scripture and Nature' (2009), and Bernard Zaleha's 'James Nash as Christian Deep Ecologist: Forging a New Eco-theology for the Third Millennium' (2009).

4. See, for example, *Dark Green Religion* (2010a: 203-205), and more recently, the attacks on environmentalism by the conservative Christians associated with the Cornwall Alliance for the Stewardship of Creation (<http://www.cornwallalliance.org/>); see especially its 'Resisting the Green Dragon' website (<http://www.resistingthegreendragon.com/>), which offers a DVD series, discussion guide, and book, as 'A Biblical Response' to radical environmentalism, which it labeled 'one of the Greatest Deceptions of our Day'. My own work has now been cited by E. Calvin Beisner, the founder of the Cornwall Alliance, as evidence that there is a religious dimension to contemporary environmentalism, which he considers dangerous, especially to children; see online: <http://www.cornwallalliance.org/blog/item/protecting-kids-from-the-green-dragon/>.

The New Green Religion Hypothesis

One important finding in *Dark Green Religion* was that there is more evidence of a biodiversity-reverencing environmentalism in religious and religion-resembling social phenomenon outside of the world's predominant 'world religions' than there is evidence of such religious environmentalism within them. Feelings of belonging and connection to nature, along with felt kinship with non-human organisms, are nothing new for the human species. Yet I have come to believe that especially since an ecological/evolutionary worldview gained widespread acceptance among scientifically literate peoples, diverse forms of dark green religion have been gaining strength and influence around the world. With new social forms and technologies facilitating communication, these understandings have spread to such an extent that we can consider whether it is possible to perceive the emergence of a little-recognized, new, world (nature) religion, with reverent care for nature as its central ethical obligation. Understandably, Northcott did not take up this argument, which would have taken him far afield from his Christianity-focused review essay. I do think, however, that dark green nature religion is important to consider when trying to assess whether religion might be contributing effectively to efforts to conserve environmental systems and the planet's genetic and species variety.

In *Dark Green Religion* I noted that there are examples across religious traditions, and from diverse regions, of individuals and groups understanding the biosphere as sacred and all organisms as worthy of reverent care, and I suggested that, however unlikely it may seem from the present vantage point, it is conceivable that eventually, dramatic international and inter-faith cooperation toward environmental conservation will emerge. This possibility, it seems to me, has affinity with Freya Mathews's perspective, which appears in this issue of the *JSRNC*. Mathews argues that the twin root of ethics and religion might be found in a diversity of longstanding cultural stories about the human place on earth, as well as in newly invented arts and rituals, which evoke and promote what she called a 'biospheric myth'. This is a myth, she contends, that all can share, regardless of their diverse metaphysical beliefs and commitments.

In *Dark Green Religion* I argued similarly to Mathews, suggesting the possible emergence of a civil or 'terrapolitan' earth religion, in which one's primary felt loyalty was to the earth and biosphere, rather than to any subset of it.⁵ Recent evidence that such a development might not be

5. For my discussion of 'Terrapolitan Earth Religion', a term I borrowed from the political theorist Daniel Deudney, see *Dark Green Religion* (2010a: 180-99), or my essay,

just an ecotopian fantasy can be found in the constitutional legal frameworks for the protection of Mother Earth that have been adopted by Ecuador and Bolivia.⁶ There are also some tantalizing quantitative studies that suggest that nature-venerating spirituality may be gaining cultural traction. Reviewing such studies sociologist Bernard Zaleha concluded that recent studies 'suggest that those who venerate nature and have beliefs and perceptions close to the pantheistic end of the sacrality scale can be expected to have a higher rate of pro-environment behaviors' than those expressing the religious perceptions and beliefs typical of the most prevalent religions around the world. Moreover, Zaleha tentatively concluded, 'this correlation appears to be a cross-cultural, cross-national phenomenon' (2011: n.p.).⁷

As Zaleha judiciously acknowledged, the studies that are available do not reveal how prevalent the diverse religious and quasi-religious nature-venerating beliefs are:

Researchers have not in any substantial way actively sought to determine whether or not nature venerating religions are growing, or whether the traditional religions are mutating to give rise to new earth venerating forms of these old religions. Given that social science researchers of environmental behavior have demonstrated that nature veneration does increase pro-environment behaviors, and given that increasing the rate of such behavior is urgently needed, further research on how nature venerating ideas and religions spread is an area worthy of further sociological and social psychological research (2011: n.p.).

'Civil Earth Religion versus Religious Nationalism', appearing in the Social Science Research Council's *Immanent Frame* (2010b).

6. For a brief discussion of Bolivia's new laws, see Taylor 2011b; and for a copy of the Ecuadorian Earth Constitution, see http://www.brontaylor.com/environmental_books/dgr/green_religion_ch_9.html. For 'Imagining Ecotopia', a special issue edited by Evan Berry and James Proctor, see *JSRNC* 5.2 (2011).

7. Zaleha kindly allowed me to share this unpublished manuscript with the scholars at a National Endowment for the Humanities seminar focusing on Aldo Leopold and environmental sustainability in Flagstaff Arizona in mid-June to mid-July 2011. Zaleha is in the Sociology Department at the University of California, Santa Cruz and can be contacted by email at berniezaleha@pobox.com. Zaleha drew especially on important studies by Mirella Stroink and Teresa DiCiccio (forthcoming 2011) and Thomas Dietz, Amy Fitzgerald, and Rachael Shwom (2005). See also the important article by James Proctor, 'Religion as Trust in Authority: Theocracy and Ecology in the United States' (2006), which shows that increasing proportions of the populations of Europe and the United States trust in nature (environmental systems), not in the deities worshiped by those involved in the world's longstanding religions. This study especially provides empirical evidence in support of the argument in *Dark Green Religion* (2010a: 4, 205) that there is fertile cultural ground outside of the world's predominant religions for dark green spiritualities and ethics.

Evaluating the Hypotheses

With these just-cited words, Zaleha identified a central problem with the field of religion and nature studies. The fact is that we are profoundly ignorant regarding the extent to which the world's predominant religions are becoming more environmentally friendly (beyond a vanguard that is demonstrably so). We know little about whether such religions play an important role in influencing environmental behaviors, whether positively or negatively, and there is some evidence that the religion variable is not very important.⁸ If religion is important we do not know with any certainty *which* religions and traditions are the most environmentally friendly or amenable to being nudged in this direction. And we cannot say definitively whether the nature-venerating forms, which my own research and the studies here cited suggest redound in efforts to protect and restore environmental systems, are marginal or growing in adherents and influence.

To summarize, despite significant progress in the development of the religion and nature field, there is still far too little data available to evaluate conclusively hypotheses regarding the greening of religion, regardless of whether the traditions in focus are large or small, long-standing or recently emerging. The field needs to move beyond anecdotal information and wishful thinking and develop a much more complex and robust mixed methods social science to explore the religious dimensions of the quest for environmental sustainability and conservation. Only then will we be able to assess more accurately whether it is possible for such phenomena to contribute strongly to efforts to create a more equitable and environmentally sustainable world.

I am, therefore, urging social scientists and other scholars interested in pursuing empirically such questions to contact me with regard to a special issue of the *JSRNC*, and/or other publications, exploring in more detail than ever before the 'greening of religion hypothesis', the 'new green religion' hypothesis, and other hypotheses that deserve critical scrutiny. I am hoping to draw together a social science task force to

8. Ethnographic research has illuminated the role of religion in both adaptive and maladaptive behaviors in some (generally small-scale and indigenous) societies. There has also been some empirical research seeking to illuminate environmental attitudes and behaviors in the United States. But my impression is that these empirical studies show little more than that conservative Christians are somewhat less environmentally concerned and/or active than liberal ones, that liberal ones are not significantly more environmentally concerned than non-religious liberals, and that the most environmentally concerned/active may be those who are not religious in a conventional sense.

explore these issues. Perhaps the field has matured enough that such data can soon be generated and analyzed. While many scholars have developed their own impressions, hunches, and hypotheses, it is high time to test empirically such perceptions.

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