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The New Aquatic Nature Religion

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Siestas and Olas
SUSTAINABLE SURFING
Kaikoura Revisited

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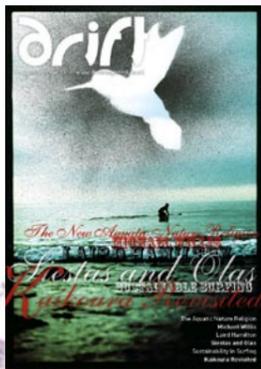


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The New Aquatic Nature Religion

By Bron Taylor

Soul surfers consider surfing to be a profoundly meaningful practice that brings physical, psychological, and spiritual benefits. They generally agree how surfing emerged, that it assumed a religious character, was suppressed for religious reasons, has been undergoing a revival, and enjoins reverence for and protection of nature.

This subset of the global surfing community should be understood as a new religious movement – a globalising, hybridised and increasingly influential example of what I call aquatic nature religion. For some, surfing is a religious form in which a specific sensual practice constitutes its sacred center, and the corresponding experiences are constructed in a way that leads to a belief in nature as powerful, transformative, healing, and sacred.

I facilitate an understanding of surfing as aquatic nature religion by analysing these experiences as well as the myths, rites, symbols, terminology, technology, material culture, and ethical mores found within surfing subcultures.

As anyone experienced with surfing cultures can attest, “Surfing isn’t easily categorized. It is based in sport, but can drift into art, vocation and avocation, even religion” ¹

As Brad Melekian asked in a musing reflecting on such a perception in *Surfer* magazine,

“Why can’t surfing be its own religion?” ²

“And the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the Waters” ~ Genesis 1:2

Photograph by Jamie Bott www.tubeframe.com

For some, surfing clearly is a religious experience, and it does not take long analysing material surf culture or its associated rhetoric to see its spirituality-infused nature. Amateur religion observer Melekian concluded accurately that surfing resembles religion in important ways, even while he promoted surfing as a legitimate spiritual path, and asserted that it makes one more compassionate toward both people and nature. It is easy to multiply examples. Jay Moriarity in the *Ultimate Guide to Surfing* wrote,

“Surfing fits into all categories. It’s an ART by the way you express yourself on a wave. It’s a SPORT because you compete with it, and it’s SPIRITUAL because it’s just you and Mother Nature.”³

As the sport has spread globally so has this form of aquatic nature religion. To name one example, I found a book, translated from German in an Istanbul bookshop in June 2006. It began with the claim that,

“Surfing has a spiritual aura that you only get once you’ve experienced it yourself. Surfing is a sport and a way of life you have to experience to really understand. It’s always a journey to the inner self. Of course the commercialisation of surfing has had a negative impact on the true spirit of the sport. But despite that, it has not, and never will lose its soul and spirit, because the magic that envelops you when surfing is far too powerful.”⁴

The ideas expressed in this statement, that there is a mysterious magic in surfing that can only be apprehended directly through the experience, that surfing fosters self-realization, that commercialization is a defiling act, that even such threats cannot obviate its spiritual power, have been expressed repeatedly, in various ways and venues, within surfing subcultures.

Soul Surfing

The *Ultimate Guide to Surfing* begins one section by asking “What is soul surfing?,” and it attempts to answer by describing the practice as “a powerful, elemental activity” that surfers indulge in “for the pure act of riding on a pulse of nature’s energy, and the contentment this instils (sic) in the heart.” In this account, surfing brings “magic that only comes from spending time on the moving canvas”⁵.

Explaining what this has to do with “soul,”

Gallagher added that the key is how the experience connects the surfer to nature, its energies, and its wild creatures⁶.

Paradise and the Myth of Origins

Among soul surfers there is no common story about the origins of the biosphere. There is, however, significant agreement regarding how surfing practice emerged, that it assumed a religious character, was suppressed for religious reasons, and has been undergoing a revival since the early twentieth century.

Glenn Hening, who in 1984 founded the environmentalist Surfrider Foundation and assembled the team of surfer visionaries who would develop the organization, began during the late 1980s to explore the possibility that ancient Peruvians were the first surfers based upon their material culture (especially art and architecture), about which he began to learn during a surfing trip⁷. Ben Finney, a southern California ocean lifeguard and surfer turned anthropologist, later found some evidence for ancient Peruvian wave riding while researching his Master’s Thesis, which was eventually reworked into a co-authored book⁸. He speculated that Peruvians may have ridden waves using small reed-woven boats as early as 3000 BCE.

These oceanic cultures were at home in and at play with the forces and spirits of nature, according to this narrative. For a millennium these South Pacific cultures were engaged in prone wave riding on small boards. The practice was highly ritualized, the story continues, and this extended to standup board surfing,



perhaps especially as it emerged in Hawaii.

The demise of the surf-focused culture in Hawaii was accelerated by the arrival of European missionaries, beginning in 1820, many of whom sought to destroy what they considered to be the pagan dimensions of Hawaiian culture, including surfing, with its accompanying nakedness and casual sexuality. This dark period of cultural genocide and deterioration almost ended the sport, according to the surfing historians, and by the late nineteenth century surfing was rarely practiced ⁹.

Suddenly, however, after Jack London and other adventurers began to write about the practice in the late nineteenth century, and commercial interests saw its potential as a tourist attraction, a renaissance began, first in Hawaii in the early twentieth century, and soon in California, which adopted much of the Polynesian/Hawaiian ethos. This revitalization was driven in part by George Freeth, the Irish-Hawaiian surfer lionized by Jack London in a 1907 magazine article on surfing in Hawaii. Freeth later moved to California, becoming a surfing icon as well as the state's first professional lifeguard ¹⁰. By most accounts, however, the most decisive figure in the revitalisation and transmission of the sport was the charismatic, full-blooded Hawaiian swimmer and surfer, Duke Kahanamoku.

Duke Kahanamoku testified to his own sense of the importance of Aloha with words appearing on the back of his personal business card:

"In Hawaii we greet friends, loved ones or strangers with 'Aloha,' which means with love. Aloha is the key word to the universal spirit of real hospitality, which makes Hawaii renowned as the world's center of understanding and fellowship. Try meeting or leaving people with Aloha. You'll be surprised by their reaction. I believe it, and it is my creed. Aloha to you."

Much of the extension of a Hawaiian-flavored surfing spirituality to California has been credited by surfing historians to Tom Blake (1902-1994). Returning to Wisconsin, he wrote the animistically-titled "Voice of the Wave," which was published in *Surfing* in 1969 ¹¹.

"Why say nature or God? Just this: over the years, the close association with waves of all kinds,

coupled with a religious background, has convinced this old surf rider that nature is synonymous with God."

At times, Blake put this idea simply, "Nature = God."

This twenty-first century understanding of the sport is difficult to imagine, however, in the absence of the gestalt changes in religion that began largely in the 1960s, which decisively transformed the West's religious land and seascape.

Surfing and the Counterculture

The influence of the psychedelic age was then and can still be discerned in surfing cultures. Any number of graphics from surf magazines, surf-film posters, surf-music album covers, and designs on surfboards and other elements of surfing's material culture can be provided to illustrate the sport's psychedelic dimension, especially those dating to the late 1960s and the 1970s.

Perhaps the two most perennial themes in surf movies, whatever differences may inhere to them, are surfing as an ecstatic and mystical experience, and the quest for the perfect waves and surfing spots as the pursuit of paradise. During the 1960s and 1970s, surf movies had not yet gone Hollywood, and were usually shown at Civic Auditoriums and fraternal clubs, and other small venues, where great and even riotous enthusiasm was often expressed, reminding or vicariously conveying some of the experience for which many surfers had taken up as their personal quest. Having attended some of these surf movies in such venues, it is easy for me to retroactively apply scholarly lenses indebted to Victor Turner, and see these events as powerful ritual forms that reinforce or produce the perception that the sport induces liminal experiences. These events also promote and reinforce participants' "collective identity," which is often expressed with the self-referential term "tribe." Turner can help us to understand why some prominent soul surfers today suggest surf film viewing is best when it is a collective experience, held in small, intimate, non-commercial venues.

Musing on how widely the experience could vary, depending in part on the quality of the movie presented, Warshaw concluded, "Mob violence or unique bonding experience—it's a fine line" ¹². Perhaps here is another way in which surfing resembles other religions.

But clearly, in addition to reinforcing the "stoked" feeling that surfing brings, surf films reprised the dream of Edenic return common in surfing cultures. The most famous surf film ever, Bruce Brown's *Endless Summer* (1963), while mostly fun and playful, depicted a global search for pristine places and "the perfect wave" and, according to Warshaw, it "now and then slipped over into profound, even spiritual areas" ¹³.

Almost any issue of the hundreds of surfing magazines one might peruse will have photographs or other graphics that reprise the Edenic theme, showing pristine beaches, waves, and communities of surfers and other sea lovers. The accompanying articles normally feature pilgrimages to such places and often the pursuit of harmonious relationships with the people and habitats there.

Perhaps the two surfing magazines that best represent this kind of vision are the beautifully produced *Surfer's Journal* (from 1992) which eschews most advertising (which would represent a kind of commercial defilement of the pristine experience the journal is designed to evoke), and *Surfer's Path* (from 1997), which through its very title, as well as diverse discourse, articles, and photographs, expresses the spiritual pilgrimage theme common in surfing cultures. The latter journal especially insists that the "surfer's path" must also involve the quest for environmental sustainability, announcing in 2004 that it would henceforth publish using "100% post-consumer recycled paper using non-GMO soy-based inks," and in 2005 established "Green Wave Awards" to recognize initiatives that protect ocean ecosystems

and promote environmental responsibility in the surf-industry.

With these words the online explanation describing *Surfer's Path* concluded by invoking this path as a spiritual pilgrimage:

"Who knows what it means to be a surfer? Perhaps it's something in our exposure and connection to the passions of nature that makes our lives wildly different from those of the uninitiated. One thing we know for sure: we want those perfect waves . . . and those perfect moments we find along the way. Like the pilgrim or the holy man, we follow our own roads to our own perfection. Call it what you will, we call it *The Surfer's Path*."

The themes in surfing journals exemplified in these quotes have much in common with the longstanding depiction of the sublime in nature in American and European landscape art (traceable to early in the nineteenth century). Such art depicts natural habitats as sublime places, and pilgrimages to them as a way to discover one's authentic self ¹⁴. In January 1978, the psychedelic pioneer Timothy Leary was lauded in *Surfer* magazine in a way that illustrates how, for some, surfing is understood as a path to self-realization. Leary reportedly said: "It's perfectly logical to me that surfing is the spiritual aesthetic style of the liberated self."

Like many in America and beyond during the 1960s and 1970s, some surfers drew directly on religions originating in Asia, which grew popular among those seeking alternatives to what they considered to be a materialistic and violent mass culture. Most



Inner Light by Frank Errickson

famous among such surfers was Gerry Lopez, considered by many to have had the most elegant surfing style of all time, and one of the first who learned to "rip" the Banzai Pipeline in Hawai'i. His image sitting in Lotus position appeared and reappeared in surfing publications, beginning in 1968, as he became known for a "Zen-like" equanimity in monster surf. Surfing great Tom Curren called his style "pure Zen" ¹⁵.

Reflecting on this era and his surfer friends of the time, Lopez later recalled, "We became hippies and got into yoga and that whole self realization thing and started to realize that those moments when you were completely focused on riding a wave are actually kind of spiritual . . . religious moments."

Lopez led explorations of discovery to paradises he likened to "heaven," in Indonesia and beyond. Indeed, surf travel to pristine untrammelled surfing Shangri-La's is a form of pilgrimage and has long been a centerpiece of surf culture.

The spirituality (or religion) of soul surfers involves a sense of connection and belonging to nature in general and the sea in particular and produces concomitant reverence toward nature and a corresponding environmentalist ethics. Its practitioners also report that it brings a wide range of benefits; physical, psychological, and spiritual.

As with most contemporary religion in social contexts that are not insular, the spirituality of soul surfers is hybridized. Some blend their surfing spirituality with religions (or aspects of them) derived from Abrahamic (Western) or Asian roots. Others feel more affinity with (their not always accurate) understandings of indigenous traditions or various forms of Paganism. Still other surfers, and perhaps increasing numbers of them, are skeptical or agnostic about most if not all particular religious beliefs, and find sufficient resources in surfing, and within surfing communities, to construct meaningful spiritual lives.

As the practice of surfing continues to spread, globally, there is every reason to expect that its construction as a contemporary religious alternative will continue as well. I would not take such surfing spirituality so far as some of those discussed in this article, or as did the finale to Five Summer Stories, with its implication that one can find divine love in energetic wave tunnels. That also seems far beyond human ken, or at least, beyond my own capacity for confident knowledge. Nevertheless, I have come to understand the impulse to construct as sacred the participatory experience that can be had within cosmically generated aquatic waves.

It is an impulse that will continue to drive my own return to the sea.



This excerpt is drawn from an "Aquatic Nature Religion" and "Surfing into Spirituality," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* v. 75, #4 in December 2007, and "Sea Spirituality, Surfing, and Aquatic Nature Religion." In *Deep Blue: Critical Reflections on Nature, Religion and Water*, edited by Sylvie Shaw and Andrew Francis. London: Equinox, 2008. Other work by Taylor is featured at www.religionandnature.com/bron

Inner Light and Pukana
La courtesy of Frank Errickson
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1. Quoted in Matt Warshaw's book on surfing literature (Warshaw 2004: ix-x).
2. See Brad Melekian, "Is God a Goofyfoot: If So, Surfing May Be the Next World Religion" *Surfer* 46, 3 (March 2005), online at <http://www.surfermag.com/magazine/archivedissues/godgoofy/index.html>, accessed November 2005.
3. Moriarity and Gallagher 2001: 10
4. Steffan Mackert 2005: 3
5. Moriarity and Gallagher 2001: 73, 75
6. Moriarity and Gallagher 2001, 77
7. Hening and Taylor 2005: 1610-11
8. Houston and Finney 1996
9. Kampion 2003: 30-36; Houston and Finney 1966; Young 1983; Colburn and others 2002, esp. 82-100
10. Warshaw 2004: ix
11. Warshaw 2003: 67
12. Warshaw 2005: 7
13. Warshaw 2005: 10
14. Sears 1989
15. Warshaw 2003: 345



Afterthought

For some time I've been musing over the idea of a piece on the religion of surfing. As an accessible agnostic, I have never really put forward a theory about religion, nor really listened to anyone else's claims. For most of my life it seemed that religious ideals are nothing more than conjecture, but then I started surfing. I have come to understand that my religion is nature, just as Blake discovered. Nature is without contradiction, and offers a simple relationship with the world.

So, in Issue Three, The New Aquatic Water Religion was included. Bron Taylor's piece captured my imagination, and also summarised my own thoughts towards religion and secular beliefs.

It only seemed right then, to include a piece about the preservation of nature. So we have focused heavily on sustainable surfing. With "sustainable" becoming something of a catch-all phrase these days, what is the surf industry doing to protect and further our industry? Well, at first glance, not much. We still rely on a hugely toxic industry, and the media and tour scene jet-sets its way around the globe, paying homage to the carbon gods in the sky.

But there are a few, our green heroes, who shine like brilliant beacons on the horizon of a new world of material technology and processes. A few who have shunned the dollars in favour of a long term answer. This issue acknowledges their efforts.

The layout is once again something we have tried to present to you as photo led, but still make readable. We are some way from a language we are happy with, but Jon sharpens his Macintosh pencil and changes things as we go. Of course the design will change again, if we manage to launch our printed issue.

Our long term goal now is to move into a wood free magazine (of course it already is) with some new projects. We have various negotiations going on around the globe, and are confident about bringing you something new very soon. We've not only looked at the materials, but the process too. We're confident we can move away from trees and get away from water too. Offset litho printing uses this natural resource in huge quantities and of course deposits dirty water back in the rivers and oceans we want to be part of. We will still continue to bring you a digital magazine, but we think that we can make a bigger difference to the world if we change how printed material is made and distributed.

So keep sending us your stories, it's your magazine, it's your voice and community which makes Drift work. Keep blogging and pod casting, it's changing everything we do, on a daily basis.

I hope you enjoy this issue, as ever it's been a pleasure to work on.

Keep Driftin'

Howard

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noun

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