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 Dark Green Religion
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CHAPTER I

Introducing Religion and Dark Green Religion

This chapter explores terms that are central to this study: *religion*, *spirituality*, *nature religion*, *green religion*, and *dark green religion*. Although this sort of linguistic labor may seem most pertinent to those with backgrounds in anthropology and religious studies, it should be even more valuable to those with little background in the academic study of religion. The rationale for this starting point is simple: terminology matters. It shapes methods and focuses attention in illuminating ways. Terminology also carries assumptions that may occlude phenomena that might well be relevant to any given inquiry. It is important in this investigation, therefore, to reflect critically on the terms employed.

What, for example, is the difference between religion and the absence of religion—or between religion and spirituality—or between what I am calling nature religion, green religion, and dark green religion? Where are the boundaries between them? Do such distinctions illuminate or confuse our understanding of the world we inhabit?

Religion and Family Resemblance Analysis

There has been much debate, of course, about the origin, definition, and utility of the word *religion*. One of the reasons for this lack of consensus is the difficulty of agreeing on what characterizes “religious” phenomena. Does religion have a *substantive* essence? Or does it *function* typically or universally in certain ways? Since people began thinking

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analytically about religion, many competing definitions have been offered. No consensus has emerged, however, including as to whether any specific traits or characteristics are essential to the phenomena. Such questions are certainly relevant to discussions surrounding what I am calling dark green religion. Are specific things essential to it, such as beliefs about supernatural or nonmaterial beings, as some scholars contend? Or is a nebulous sense that “nature is sacred” sufficient to justify using the term *religion*?

Unfortunately, selecting the earliest uses of the word does not set us on uncontested terminological ground.¹ In the last analysis, observers must choose the lenses, the definitions, that they think will best guide their inquiries and illuminate the phenomena they seek to understand.² As good a starting place as any is the scholarly work that has traced early forms of the idea of religion to the Latin root *leig*, meaning “to bind” or “tie fast,” or *religare*, which could be rendered “to reconnect”—from the Latin *re* (again) and *ligare* (to connect). Examining such roots in the context of contemporary understandings, we might conclude that religion has to do with that which connects and binds people to that which they most value, depend on, and consider sacred.

Yet there are dangers in specific definitions, especially for those who seek to understand the phenomena and compare different types of it in various times and places. As the anthropologist Benson Saler put it, “Explicit definitions are explicit heuristics: they guide or impel us in certain directions. By doing so they tend to divert our attention from information beyond the channels they cleave, and so choke off possibilities.”³ It is important, therefore, both to recognize the danger of explicit definitions (they might lead us to ignore important phenomena or dynamics) as well as their value (they might focus analytic attention and yield insights).

Taking into account the dangers and value of definitions, Saler and others advocate looking at “family resemblances” or taking a “polyfocal approach” to the study of religion, exploring, analyzing, and comparing the widest possible variety of beliefs, behaviors, and functions that are typically associated with the term. The heart of such an approach is to (1) note the many dimensions and characteristics of religious beliefs and practices; (2) reject a presumption that any single trait or characteristic is essential to religious phenomena and refuse to become preoccupied with where the boundaries of religion lie; and (3) focus instead on whether an analysis of religion-resembling beliefs and practices has explanatory power.⁴

Analyzing family resemblances is valuable despite the absence of any clear, essential, universal trait that everyone will agree constitutes religion's essence. Such an approach to conceptualizing religion leaves in play and open to contestation the definition of religion, and even challenges whether choosing a definition is important. Finally, it insists that the critical thing is to learn interesting things about human beings, their environments, and their earthly coinhabitants.⁵ With this strategy for analyzing religion (and religion-resembling) phenomena in place, a few other terms critical to this study require elaboration.

Spirituality

In contemporary parlance people increasingly speak of spirituality rather than religion when trying to express what moves them most deeply; and many consider the two to be distinctly different. Most of the characteristics scholars associate with religion, however, are found whether people consider themselves spiritual or religious. From a family resemblance perspective, therefore, there is little *analytical* reason to assume these are different kinds of social phenomena. It is important, however, to understand what most people understand the distinction to entail, especially because the term *spirituality* is more often than *religion* associated with nature and nature religions.

In common parlance, *religion* is often used to refer to organized and institutional religious belief and practice, while *spirituality* is held to involve one's deepest moral values and most profound religious experiences.⁶ But there are additional ideas that are more often associated with spirituality than religion. Spirituality is often thought to be about personal growth and gaining a proper understanding of one's place in the cosmos, and to be intertwined with environmentalist concern and action.⁷ This contrasts markedly with the world's predominant religions, which are generally concerned with transcending this world or obtaining divine rescue from it.

Although those who consider themselves spiritual but not religious generally consider spirituality to be superior to religion, *spirituality* is also a term increasingly used by traditionally religious people. They use it similarly to how the "spiritual but not religious" crowd speaks of the sacred importance of everyday life. Thus, spirituality can also be understood as a quest to deepen, renew, or tap into the most profound insights of traditional religions, as well as a word that consecrates

otherwise secular endeavors such as psychotherapy, political and environmental activism, and one's lifestyle and vocational choices. Such understanding of the term fosters a "rethinking of religious boundaries."⁸

Unless one considers belief in divine beings or forces to be essential to a definition of religion, most contemporary spirituality can easily be considered religious. Those who have studied contemporary spirituality find a common feature of it to be a sense that nature is sacred and that ethical responsibilities naturally follow such a realization. Who are the individuals and groups that have such perceptions? Anna King pointed in the right direction when she urged scholars to look for spirituality not only in small, marginalized religious sects but also in "movements such as Amnesty International [and] Greenpeace." Empirical studies have begun to demonstrate that many people in advanced industrial cultures resonate deeply with what could be called nature spirituality or nature religion. Some of these people view the world as full of spiritual intelligences with whom one can be in relationship (an animistic perception), while others among them perceive the earth to be alive or even divine (a more pantheistic belief).

In an analysis of a large social-science database generated in 2000, for example, James Proctor examined the relationship between religion and trust in various forms of authority. He found two sources of authority most prevalent: traditional religious authority (grounded in what he labeled theocracy) and religious ecology (which he called ecology, as shorthand). In both Europe and North America, large numbers of people express "deep trust in nature as inherently spiritual or sacred," Proctor discovered, and in many countries, such religiosity is even more prevalent than in the United States. He concluded, "Institutional religion is inextricably bound up with relations of trust in authority, and thus is functionally similar to [political] regimes rarely understood as religious. *We should therefore be cautious in bounding the domain of religion too narrowly.*"⁹

This assertion is pertinent to my current objective, which is to rattle assumptions as to what counts as religion in order to awaken new perceptions and insights. Are the people whose spirituality is intertwined with environmental concern, or who perceive and trust in nature and understand it to be sacred, engaged in nature religion?

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Nature Religion

Nature religion is most commonly used as an umbrella term to mean religious perceptions and practices that are characterized by a reverence for nature and that consider its destruction a desecrating act. Adherents often describe feelings of belonging and connection to the earth—of being bound to and dependent upon the earth's living systems.¹⁰

Over the last few centuries a number of phrases have been used to capture the family resemblance of nature religions, including *natural religion*, *nature worship*, *nature mysticism*, and *earth religion*. Meanwhile, words have been invented to reflect what is taken to be the universal essence of such religiosity, such as *Paganism*, *Animism*, and *Pantheism*. In both popular and scholarly venues the term *nature religion*, which began to be employed regularly at about the time of the first Earth Day celebration in 1970, is used increasingly to represent and debate such nature-as-sacred religions.

The idea of nature religion has a long history that parallels important watersheds in the study of religion. Indeed, the most common contemporary understanding of nature religion resembles the nature-venerating religiosity described in E. B. Tylor's *Primitive Culture* (1871), Max Müller's *Natural Religion* (1888), James G. Frazer's *The Worship of Nature* (1926), and Mircea Eliade's *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (1958).¹¹ Despite changes in scholarly fashions, there have been important continuities in both popular and scholarly contestations over nature religion. The most common debate has been between those who consider nature religions to be religiously or politically primitive, regressive, or dangerous, and those who laud such religions as spiritually perceptive and ecologically beneficent.

Negative views of nature religions likely originated with Abrahamic religious traditions, which have long had antipathy toward pagan and polytheistic religions. Throughout their histories, the Abrahamic religions often sought to force nature religions and the peoples who practiced them into decline or extinction through conversion, assimilation, and sometimes through threats and violence. Such persecution was often justified in religious terms, including through beliefs that assimilation was spiritually beneficial.

The tendency to view the practitioners of nature religions as primitive (though not always dangerous) intensified as Occidental culture placed increasing value on reason and as many thinkers became less religious. The German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel

(1770–1831), for example, advanced an idealistic philosophy that viewed nature religions as failing to perceive the divine spirit moving through the dialectical process of history.

More important for the historical study of religion in general and scholarly reflection on nature religion in particular was the influence of Charles Darwin's (1809–1882) theory of evolution.¹² Generations of scholars came to view nature religions as grounded in primitive misperceptions that natural forces are animated or alive. John Lubbock cited as an example Darwin's observation that dogs mistake inanimate objects for living beings, and Lubbock surmised that religion had its origin in a similar misapprehension by primitive humans.¹³ E. B. Tylor, whom many consider to be the father of anthropology, would coin the term *Animism* for the attribution of consciousness to inanimate objects and natural forces, asserting that this misapprehension was grounded in the dream states and sneezing of "primitive" or "savage" peoples, and arguing that this kind of perception is the root of human religious consciousness.¹⁴ Not long afterward, Max Müller, considered by some to be the father of the academic study of religion, traced the origin of Indo-European religion to religious metaphors and symbolism grounded in the natural environment, especially the sky and sun.¹⁵

Both classical Paganism and polytheistic religions involved supplication to or veneration of celestial bodies and other natural entities and forces. According to Sir James Frazer, belief and ritual related to the sun, the earth, and the dead were especially common in the worldwide emergence and ancient history of religion.¹⁶ The idea of religion as involving nature-related beliefs and practices became widely influential, as did Frazer's "worship of nature" rubric to describe such religions:

[By] the worship of nature, I mean . . . the worship of natural phenomena conceived as animated, conscious, and endowed with both the power and the will to benefit or injure mankind. Conceived as such they are naturally objects of human awe and fear . . . To the mind of primitive man these natural phenomena assume the character of formidable and dangerous spirits whose anger it is his wish to avoid, and whose favour it is his interest to conciliate. To attain these desirable ends he . . . prays and sacrifices to them; in short, he worships them. Thus what we may call the worship of nature is based on the personification of natural phenomena.

This early nature religiosity, Frazer thought, was replaced first by polytheism and then by monotheism as part of a "slow and gradual" pro-

cess that was leading inexorably among civilized peoples to the “despiritualization of the universe.” Most scholarly observers during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries agreed that monotheistic religions, or no religion, would eventually supplant nature religions. They assumed that although nature religions might be regressive, they were not dangerous, at least not to cultural and material progress.

More recently, however, a chorus of voices have suggested that some nature religions are indeed dangerous. In *Nature Religion in America* (1990), for example, Catherine Albanese broadly defined nature religion to include cases in which nature is an important symbolic resource but is not itself considered sacred. She argued that many forms of nature religion mask an impulse to dominate both people and nature, citing as evidence how the “religions of nature,” which had prominent adherents among the most influential of figures during the formation of the United States, justified the subjugation of both the natural world and the continent’s aboriginal peoples. Albanese’s assertions caused consternation among many who had a positive attitude toward nature religions. She also blurred the boundaries as to what counts as religion by considering examples that did not always, at first glance, appear religious, such as the macrobiotic dietary movement.¹⁷

At about the same time, a number of studies found worldview affinities and historical connections between some nature religions (especially northern European Paganism and various pagan revival movements) and racist subcultures and political movements, including extremist environmentalism. Among the most influential studies were those by Anna Bramwell. She argued that the environmental movement, which can be traced roughly to the middle of the nineteenth century, represents an entirely new “nature worshipping” ideology that, while it can be fused to many ideologies, has often had strong affinity with racist ideologies and political movements (such as Nazism) and programs (such as eugenics) that reject Enlightenment rationality in favor of a romantic, agrarian ideal.¹⁸

Of course, historical understandings of nature religion are contested. Many other scholars consider such religions to be spiritually perceptive, humane, and ecologically beneficent. Historical studies of such spiritual beliefs and practices demonstrate not only fear of and hostility toward them but also their persistence and diversity. In a seminal study of such religiosity in the Occident, the geographer Clarence Glacken argued that an organicist worldview, which believes the world to be alive, interdependent, and sacred, was one of the two most prevalent, long-standing

general ways people have oriented themselves to nature and religion and have understood how religion and culture are related. Urging his readers not to “forget the echoes of the primordial Mediterranean world: its age-old veneration of Mother Earth” or its “astrological paganism,” Glacken’s work helped pave the way for the scholarly pursuit of nature religion. Other studies, such as by Donald Worster, underscored that, whereas belief in specific earthly and celestial nature gods may have declined or disappeared, the perception that nature’s places and forces are alive and sacred—the underlying perception that gave rise to classical Paganism and other nature religions—has not withered away. Even in the modern West, such perception has been resilient, even episodically threatening the hegemony of the monotheistic consensus and, later on, challenging secular, science-based worldviews.¹⁹

Early Exemplars: Spinoza and Rousseau

Two thinkers writing at the dawn of the Age of Reason, the Jewish philosopher Baruch (or Benedictus) Spinoza (1632–1677) and the French social theorist Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778), are worth spotlighting as examples of the resilience of nature religion. They were also inspirational figures to dark green religion.

Spinoza articulated a sophisticated organicism, or monistic pantheism, that influenced generations of future nature religionists.²⁰ Those embracing or influenced by such philosophy include some of the greatest theologians and philosophers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: Friedrich Schleiermacher and Albert North Whitehead (and his progeny of “process” philosophers and theologians who have expressed either pantheistic or panentheistic worldviews), as well as leading proponents of “deep ecology” such as Arne Naess and George Sessions.²¹ The affinity of the deep ecologists for Spinoza makes sense, for if every being and object is a manifestation of God or God’s activity, then everything has value, which presents a fundamental challenge to the prevailing anthropocentrism.²² (Although deep ecology is not equivalent to dark green religion, they have many affinities.)

Rousseau’s religious thought and political philosophy became even more influential than Spinoza’s pantheistic philosophy in promoting nature religion. Most important for the present purpose is that Rousseau rejected Europe’s Abrahamic orthodoxies in favor of a deistic “natural religion” in which God’s existence could be perceived in the order of

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nature. For Rousseau, natural religion and an epistemological turn to nature could lead the way to a life free from the alienation and materialism of Western civilization.²³

Rousseau's memoir *Reveries of a Solitary Walker* (1782), written in the last years of his life, provides insight into his deepest feelings. In it he described a series of long walks, noting that although he had loved being in nature as a free and natural young man, during that stage of his life he had "hardly ever contemplated [nature] otherwise than as a total and undivided spectacle."²⁴ Walking and writing as an old man, in contrast he was focusing like a naturalist on "the details of the great pageant of nature." A number of remarkable passages conveyed his mystical sense of oneness with nature and the cosmos in a way that presaged future forms of nature religion:

The more sensitive the soul of the observer, the greater the ecstasy aroused in him by this harmony. At such times his senses are possessed by a deep and delightful reverie, and in a state of blissful self-abandonment he loses himself in the immensity of this beautiful order, with which he feels himself at one. All individual objects escape him; he sees and feels nothing but the unity of all things. His ideas have to be restricted and his imagination limited by some particular circumstances for him to observe the separate parts of this universe which he was striving to embrace in its entirety.

Passages like this and in his well-read novel *Julie, or the New Heloise* (1761) were especially responsible for kindling the nature-revering romantic movements in Europe and North America.²⁵ Rousseau also articulated many of the key ideas typically found in dark green religion, including a critique of materialism as a distraction from what makes people truly content or happy, namely, intimate contact with and open-hearted contemplation of nature, which was itself an epistemological principle;²⁶ a belief that indigenous peoples lived closer to nature and were thus socially and ecologically superior to "civilized" peoples and from whom civilized people had much to learn;²⁷ a conviction that people in the state of nature and uncorrupted by society have a natural predisposition toward sympathy and compassion for all creatures and a corresponding conviction that a good society would cultivate and not destroy such affections; and finally, belief in an expansive self in which one's own identity includes the rest of nature and a felt unity with and empathy for it.²⁸ This latter sentiment anticipated and spurred similar ones among romantic movement figures and, much later, among proponents of deep ecology.

In related ways, Spinoza and Rousseau contradicted claims that nature-based religions, as opposed to “revealed” religions, were primitive and dangerous. They asserted that nature religion offers instead an attractive antidote to the West’s spiritual malaise, social violence, economic inequality, and callousness to nonhuman nature: a harmonious future characterized by fulfilling relationships among the earth’s diverse forms of life.

Green and Dark Green Religion

It is important to distinguish between green religion (which posits that environmentally friendly behavior is a religious obligation) and dark green religion (in which nature is sacred, has intrinsic value, and is therefore due reverent care). These two forms are often in tension and sometimes in direct conflict. Exploring their similarities and differences further sets the stage before turning in the following chapters to the diverse examples of four types of dark green religion.

Rousseau is an especially important early exemplar of dark green religion. But his writings did more than encourage the emergence and proliferation of diverse forms of dark green religion (although not called by that term). His explicit and implicit criticisms of revealed religions, including his belief that they distort human societies into forms that detract from the freedom and well-being of all natural beings, eroded support for such religions and have continued to gain traction ever since. In some cases, Rousseau’s critiques caused soul searching and reform movements within the criticized religions. Since the 1960s this reformist trend has become so pronounced that some scholars and laypeople have come to speak about “the greening of religion” or “religious environmentalism,” by which they mean religions that are becoming more environmentally friendly.²⁹ In this work I speak of green religion or the greening of religion when discussing religious environmentalism or its development.

Much of this innovation was precipitated by criticisms that echoed those made by Rousseau, the most famous of which was articulated by the historian Lynn White Jr. in 1967. White contended that Christianity bore a heavy burden for the environmental crisis, arguing the following:

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- I. Christianity but not Asian religions promoted a dualistic attitude between people and nature that fostered exploitation: “Christianity, in absolute contrast to ancient paganism and Asia’s religions . . . not

only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends."

2. Paganism and Animism (typically associated with indigenous peoples) were more environmentally friendly than Christianity, a religion that made people callous toward nonhuman creatures: "By destroying pagan animism, Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects."
3. Christianity was "the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen" and as a result helped precipitate the environmental crisis.³⁰

White thought that Western people, even those who were no longer religious, were deeply conditioned by Christianity's anthropocentrism and irreverence toward nature. Although he averred that animistic indigenous cultures and religions originating in Asia were more naturally inclined toward environmentally beneficent attitudes and behaviors, he doubted such religions would appeal to many Westerners, so he proposed that they seek inspiration from the ecologically holy (if somewhat heretical) St. Francis of Assisi. White believed that St. Francis's spiritual biocentrism provided an antidote to the West's pernicious anthropocentrism.³¹ Drawing on St. Francis, White argued that humility is a virtue "not merely for the individual but for man as a species." Moreover, "More science and more technology are not going to get us out of the present ecologic crisis until we find a new religion, or rethink our old one."³² For White, religion was the decisive variable that had fueled but could now reverse environmental decline, especially if it rejected an instrumental and anthropocentric worldview in favor of religious biocentrism.

Although White was not alone in articulating such views, he did so in a prominent venue (the widely read journal *Science*) and at an auspicious cultural moment—the apex of the 1960s cultural upheavals. This period was characterized by growing receptivity to the religious beliefs and practices of indigenous and Asian peoples at the same time that many were rejecting mainstream Western religions. Fused with intensifying environmental alarm, this religion-related ferment provided fertile cultural ground for a robust debate about the relationships between people, religion, and nature.

Christians and some others in the Abrahamic traditions who encountered such views tended to respond in one of four ways: either apologetically, arguing that properly understood their traditions were environmentally sensitive; or confessionally, acknowledging guilt (at

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least in part) and undertaking internal religious reform to make their religions environmentally responsible. These two responses were a part of the greening of Christianity that has been underway since the late 1960s.³³ The third response was indifference, viewing the criticisms and environmental concern as of minor or no importance to their religious faith; and a fourth type was hostility, seeing such a concern as antithetical to Christianity. These latter two responses ironically provided evidence for White's thesis.

These four types of response came from both laypeople and scholars. Scholarly experts began probing sacred texts for their environmental values, and some laypeople began to organize to encourage the greening of their traditions. Before long, the soul searching that White's thesis precipitated within Occidental religions spread to religions originating in Asia. This occurred, in part, because of scholarly reactions to White's thesis, including an important paper published by the geographer Yi-Fu Tuan shortly after White's. Tuan challenged the idea of a naturally environmentalist Asia by arguing that in China there was massive deforestation long before it could have been corrupted by an antienvironmental Christian civilization.³⁴ After Tuan, more scholars began to ask why environmental decline had been so pronounced in Asia if, as many believed, the religions there were environmentally friendly. Just as White's thesis had precipitated apologetic, confessional, indifferent, and hostile reactions within the world's Abrahamic traditions, the diverse reactions to White's thesis triggered similar responses among religionists and scholars engaged with Asian religions.

In the case of both Western and Asian religions, religious studies scholars played a significant role in the efforts to understand the environmental strengths and weaknesses of their traditions. Scholars of religion have often played twin roles as observers and participants in the religions they study, so it is unsurprising that in the face of newly perceived environmental challenges they would rethink the ethical responsibilities of the traditions they know best. Quite a number of them, indeed, became directly involved in efforts to push the traditions they were analyzing toward ethics that make environmental sustainability a central objective.

The greening of the world religions is not, however, the focus of the present volume, except to the extent that such green religion is also *dark*: on the one hand, perceiving nature as sacred and due reverent care; and on the other, arousing the concern that inheres in all holistic ethics—that the well-being if not rights of individuals could be endangered by efforts to ensure the flourishing of some supposedly sacred whole.

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