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CHAPTER 36

Trends in Religion and Environmental Politics into the Twenty-First Century

Lucas F. Johnston and Bron Taylor

In the last decades of the twentieth century, the contestations between religious groups associated with nature-denying anthropocentric ethical orientations and those who held nature to be worthy of respect and care, and in some cases even reverence, were increasingly apparent and polarizing. However, the issues around which these battles had occurred began shifting during the 1990s as awareness and concern about human contributions to climate change intensified. As a consequence, declining bio-cultural diversity around the world and a host of other alarming environmental issues emerged as the most salient issues. Many environmentalists saw religious individuals and groups as potential allies in the fight to arrest global environmental decline. It is no surprise, therefore, that at the beginning of the twenty-first century, religious perceptions and beliefs have continued to play an important role in debates about the environment at the beginning of the twenty-first century in increasingly influential ways.

On the one hand, spiritualities that cohere with and draw on evolutionary and ecological worldviews stress ecological interdependence, and involve deep feelings of belonging and connection to nature, which Taylor has dubbed “dark green religion” (Taylor 2010), have begun to have substantial impact on culture, religion, politics, and debates about environmental policy in the United States. Moreover, such dark green spiritualities are being expressed and promoted within an incredibly diverse and increasingly global environmental milieu and in a myriad of ways – through the arts and sciences (both within and beyond academic institutions), festivals and performances, films, museums and exhibitions, at parks and world heritage sites, and sometimes on the streets and in the woods in acts of protest and defiance. There are also sectors of the populace in which nature is valued predominantly for its importance to human wellbeing, and there are people who do not focus on biodiversity conservation, but rather focus on social justice and contend that environmental burdens and benefits should be borne equitably by humans (we might call these “light green” activists).

On the other hand, standing in opposition to “green” religious orientations are Christian traditionalists who have longstanding antipathy toward what they consider to be spiritually dangerous pagan, pantheistic, or nature-reverencing spiritualities, and toward such trends within Christianity itself. Such contestation is nothing new, even as it assumes new forms. As Catherine Albanese argued in the early 1990s, there has long been religion-related contestation in the United States regarding how people should orient themselves to nature, and this has involved contradictory impulses to both mastery of nature and harmony with it (Albanese 1990). There can also be indifference to nature, of course, a perception that this world is of penultimate not ultimate value, which is usually rooted in a view that humans are spiritual beings whose ultimate fate and place is somehow above or beyond this world. Sometimes these contestations are *between* individuals and groups that implicitly or explicitly promote one or the other of these ends. Other times the conflict is *within* groups, leading to profound ambivalence as to their goals. All of these conflicts are understandable since our desire to flourish is multi-dimensional: it involves both a drive for material security and wellbeing, even wealth, as well as the pursuit of aesthetic and recreational pleasures, which for many includes a profound sense of connection with and obligation to protect relatively intact ecosystems.

Christianity and Environmental Issues in the United States

In the United States, justice has been an important way of framing environmental concerns. The National Council of Churches (NCC) and other specifically Christian groups have been on the forefront of environmental justice movements since the late 1960s (see Chapters 25 and 29 in this volume). Christians have often referred to their activism for the poor and oppressed as “eco-justice,” and these movements have continued in the twenty-first century. These movements have natural affinities with liberation theologies (in some cases influenced by movements in Central and South America), which interpret Jesus’s ministry as a metaphor and motivation for resistance to political and economic powers. More mystical interpretations of Christianity typically made environmental protection a higher priority (Fox 2006). Traditionalist evangelical environmental advocacy had, however, begun to emerge in the early 1970s, generally speaking, with an anthropocentric tone. As the high-profile evangelical pastor Joel Hunter put it, “The issue to evangelical Christians isn’t global warming; the issue is whether or not we will exercise a moral and biblical obedience to a direct command of God (Genesis 2: 15)” (Hunter 2006). The question raised through analysis of all of these specifically American Christian movements, however, is how influential have they been and might they become? The weight of evidence is that despite offering novel theological arguments for environmental protection, green Christians (both traditionalists and more liberal strains) have been much less politically influential than their traditionalist Christian counterparts whose focus has been resisting gay marriage, legalized abortion, and environmentalist priorities.

As moneyed interests worked to cast doubt on climate science in order to preserve their own command of capital and resources (Oreskes and Conway 2010), Christian

traditionalist evangelicals added their voices to those who were attempting to discredit the scientists who focus on evolutionary processes. In particular, many traditionalist evangelical individuals and organizations viewed scientists as amoral if not immoral atheistic materialists. The Discovery Institute (DI), for example, has fought the teaching of evolution in public-school science classrooms since the 1990s. In some cases, the DI has been successful in introducing textbooks that advocate Intelligent Design into curricula at the local level. In the public sphere, popular figures such as the televangelist Jerry Falwell and the self-styled historian David Barton blamed socialism or secularism (or both) for constitutional challenges to prayer in public schools and public displays of Christian symbols.

Countering such views, which he considered anti-science, Sir John Houghton, a scientist and evangelical, along with others, planned a series of meetings including scientists, evangelicals, and policy makers, from the "Climate Change Forum 2002" to the January 2007 resolution "An Urgent Call to Action," which declared that group members "happily discovered far more concordance than any of us had expected, quickly moving beyond dialogue to a shared sense of moral purpose" about the scientific consensus on anthropogenic climate change and the need to respond to it (Johnston 2013, 122).¹ For many who believed that climate disruption could not be addressed without religious leaders and groups, these were positive developments.

There were others, however, who stiffened their resistance, perceiving that these developments were inauthentic or erroneous interpretations of the Christian message. Such disputes were evident, for example, when in 2006 Richard Cizik, then Vice President for Governmental Affairs for the National Association of Evangelicals, quoted the biblical story of Daniel as a metaphor for the US government's capitulation to coal-, oil-, and gas-producing corporations, calling upon evangelicals to become transformational environmental leaders (Johnston 2013, 122). Many Christians, however, strongly reacted against such environmental activism. Consequently, Cizik soon became embattled for such views, which were clearly not in the evangelical mainstream, whether in the United States or abroad.

Another example is the National Association of Scholars (NAS), a group whose original mission was to challenge what they considered to be the "politically correct" emphasis on diversity in schools and workplaces. Since 2000, however, NAS has attacked environmentalism as a religious dogma that threatens traditional religious values, economic freedom, and prosperity. As Ashley Thorne put it, "Sustainability sounds like an appeal to moderation and good stewardship, while it really aims at radical reduction of human freedom," adding that it constitutes a "new morality that despises humankind and worships planet Gaia."² In another offering specifically attacking the University Presidents' Climate Commitment, Thorne declared that "[s]ustainability is indeed a pseudo-religion with its own code of morality that misappropriates the ideas of 'ethics,' 'justice,' and 'social mandate,' to shame people into compliance."³

The Cornwall Alliance is an evangelical organization with similar views. It created an Evangelical Declaration on Global Warming to oppose the Evangelical Environmental Network's call to action in response to climate change. It has disseminated materials that aim to debunk both climate science and cast suspicion on environmentalists, while promoting fossil-fuel development as a means of helping the poor.⁴ The group also created

a documentary, discussion guide, and book titled *Resisting the Green Dragon*. All of these materials contend that environmentalism is a new pagan religion intent on luring away Christian youth, which denies the sanctity of human life by promoting abortion and population control, harms the world's poor by hindering economic growth, and threatens liberty as it pursues an authoritarian world government.⁵ In sum, then, as one recent study of climate-change activism focusing on evangelical Christians in Georgia concluded, doctrines such as the sovereignty of God, the spiritual priority to witness for Christ, and suspicion of scientists, strongly work against climate change activism (Veldman 2014). Some adherents of other Abrahamic religions have been involved in grassroots conservation and lifestyle efficiency movements (Foltz and Denny 2003; Tiros-Samuels 2002; Foltz 2005; Gottlieb 2010).

Many Dharmic (e.g., Buddhism and Hinduism) religious traditions' adherents in the United States promote vegetarianism, emphasize the interdependency of humans with the entire ecosystem, and emphasize philosophies that are conducive to environmental concern and action. Other Dharmic notions are amenable to environmental emphases, such as the central importance of compassion for all sentient beings and the notion of *ahimsa*, the duty to cause no unnecessary harm to others (Chapple 2014; Jain 2014).⁶ Nevertheless, often any environmental benefits from Dharmic religious beliefs and practices are an indirect result of dietary and other lifestyle prescriptions rather than being a result of ecological concerns.

In what may prove to be a significant development with regard to religion and environmental politics in the early twenty-first century, on June 24, 2015, Pope Francis issued a papal encyclical on the environment.⁷ In it, he endorsed the scientific consensus that human activities were disrupting the climate, arguing that this has devastating consequences for humanity and especially the poor and urging a strong, global response. He also stressed the importance of preserving biological diversity, even contending that all species have value apart from their usefulness to human beings. Moreover, he denounced capitalism to the extent that it promotes overconsumption and greed and is indifferent to the wellbeing of the poor and the natural environment. Although he had earlier argued that good Catholics need not breed "like rabbits,"⁸ giving rise to hope among environmentalists that he might soften the church's strong opposition to artificial birth control and abortion, he reiterated this teaching in his encyclical, stressing the special place of human beings since only they were created in the divine image. Because of these stances, Francis immediately faced a wide range of criticisms. Environmentalists, while generally welcoming of the pope's obviously sincere environmentalism, questioned how serious he could be without addressing the church's pro-natalist positions, which have contributed significantly to overpopulation and the degradation of environmental systems. Francis has also faced resistance from some high-ranking church officials, as well as from American evangelicals including Calvin Beisner, who demanded that the pope "back off" from his endorsement of the scientific consensus regarding anthropogenic climate change and corresponding calls to address it.⁹ Several Catholic politicians were running for the presidency when the encyclical was announced, including Rick Santorum, Jeb Bush, Bobby Jindal, and Marco Rubio, and they all in various ways disagreed with the pope that humans were precipitating climate change and argued that capitalism provided the way out of poverty, disputing the pope's assertion that it was

exacerbating it. While the influence of Pope Francis on these matters is unclear, it is certain that there will continue to be contention over whether, to what extent, and in what ways. Christians should take on environmental causes.

The Influence of, and Reactions to, Popular Expressions of Green Religion and Ethics

It may be, in contrast, that those who are engaged in nature-based spiritualities are producing or contributing to the most politically efficacious environmental social movements, including those in western countercultures (Taylor 1991, 1995a, 1995b, 2001a, 2001b, 2002). Oftentimes, the values of these countercultural groups – particularly their religious values – are exhibited in artistic renderings, whether narrative, music, theater, or other modes of expression.

In the twentieth century, especially from the late 1960s forward, both countercultural and personal growth movements deployed artistic modes as avenues for expressing values in the public eye (Glock, Bellah, and Alfred 1976), oftentimes displaying significant dark green themes. Politically efficacious groups flaunted social norms (for instance the Merry Pranksters who clashed with Ronald Reagan when he was governor of California), deploying public “image events” (as many radical environmentalists did) to draw political action toward environmental or social issues (DeLuca 1999). Many of these countercultural communities exhibited significant religious dimensions, often characterized by holistic interdependent worldviews, emphasis on community and, in some cases, communal living, as well as a sense of fellow-feeling and ethical concern for cultural and non-human others.

In the twenty-first century, these subcultures have continued to evidence an ethic of interdependence as a central value, often including pantheistic and animistic sentiments, regardless of whether or not individual participants perceive themselves to be members of more traditional religious groups (St. John 2004, 2008, 2010; Gilmore 2010; Johnston 2015).¹⁰ Some of those with such perceptions also understand the biosphere as a sacred, Gaia-like superorganism, and stress evolutionary continuity and even kinship among all organisms, sometimes even in an animistic way in which communication or, for some, even communion with non-human organisms is thought possible. Generally speaking, such spiritualities share a deep humility about humanity’s place in the universe and a corresponding belief that all organisms have value, regardless of whether they are useful to human beings, and consequently they should be accorded respect, or even reverence.

Examples in Film

Popular culture shapes the ways in which many people perceive and act on environmental threats such as climate change (Schneider-Mayerson 2013). A prominent example of a popular expression of green religion and ethics is the highest grossing film of all time (as of this writing), James Cameron’s *Avatar* (2009), which was set on a moon far from Earth. The film depicted an Indigenous group – the Na’vi whose religion

had animistic and Gaia-like dimensions – battling militaristic colonists from the Earth intent on taking their natural resources, even if it meant destroying the Na’vi and their most sacred places. Arguably, the film promoted dark green spirituality and radical environmental politics, which is not only evidenced in the film itself, but in the harsh criticism it received from religious and political conservatives.

The reactions to the film contained many surprises and cut across many cultural divides, finding support and criticism from the political right as well as the political left, as well as differing views as to whether the film promoted positive views and solidarity with women and Indigenous peoples. Despite contention over the film it is clear that a surprising range of people expressed affinity with the dark green spirituality and conservationist attitudes promoted in the film. Some conservatives, for example, including US military personnel, defended the film and agreed that nature and people who are close to nature should be protected (Taylor 2013). Moreover, wide cross-cultural appreciation of the film’s dark green theme suggests that new forms of religion-related environmental politics and alliances may be emerging. Despite debates about whether the film provided “authentic” depictions of Indigenous traditions, the debates evidence the way perceptions about Indigenous religious traditions are expressed, promoted, and contested in contemporary environmental politics, both in and beyond the United States.¹¹

Avatar is far from the only film entangling religion and environmental politics. Two other examples whose reception reflects the related, ongoing contestation are *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) and *Noah*, one of the most popular films of 2014. *The Day After Tomorrow* depicts the world as it passes a climate tipping-point and begins to enter a new ice age nearly overnight. Populations across the world are decimated, and survivors flock south, toward warmer climes. Although not overtly religious, such apocalyptic films fueled a religious brand of Apocalypticism in the United States grounded in the quasi-religious belief that “peak-oil” would precipitate the end of the world as we know it. *Noah*’s director, Darren Aronofsky, used his version of the story to present a biocentric view that all life is valuable (in this case, because God created it), as well as a view that ecological degradation flows from greed and violent competition, while glossing over the contradiction that the god who considered his created order good decided to kill almost all of its life forms.¹²

Despite their differences and ironies that critics observe in them, these films highlight the dangers of technology and critique the worldviews that emerged with and reinforce the world’s predominant, consumption-based, imperial civilizations. To varying degrees they also criticize religious perceptions and practices that advance and reinforce such destruction histories and dynamics.

That their beliefs and values were being challenged was not lost on traditionalist Christians, who issued their own forceful rejoinders. The NAS argued that *Noah* was a heretical fantasy piece, not an accurate rendition of the biblical tale. They especially objected to the film’s negative view of humanity and its implication that God favored animals over humans.¹³ The organization Answers in Genesis criticized *The Day After Tomorrow* as promoting a “hyper-environmentalist agenda” which also “takes pot-shots at Christianity and is sprinkled with evolutionary ideas.” The commentary added that “The movie’s title ... implies that there is a crisis coming and we need to be ready. While the movie may be incorrect about another ice age, there really is a crisis

coming – Judgment Day.”¹⁴ One of the educational modules from the Cornwall Alliance’s “Resisting the Green Dragon” series, for further example, was titled “From Captain Planet to Avatar: the Seduction of Our Youth.” It claimed that such fantasy worlds promote dangerous pagan values. Additionally, the group Answers in Genesis published several online articles decrying the pantheism and “hyper-environmentalism” of *Avatar*.¹⁵

An Example in Documentary Television

While the environmentalist milieu has long embraced ethical obligations to non-human nature, it has also always been grounded in a constantly evolving scientific understanding of life and the cosmos, and, in many cases, scientists have emphasized the spiritual dimensions of their projects. An example in the early twenty-first century is the documentary series *Cosmos*, a re-creation of Carl Sagan’s original 1980s series, which aired on both the Fox Television network and the National Geographic cable channel in 2014. The 2014 version was co-written by Ann Druyan (Sagan’s wife from 1981 until his death in 1996), who also wrote the first series, and it was hosted by the physicist Neil deGrasse Tyson. The series took viewers through cosmic and biological evolution, clearly striving to impart a sense of awe and wonder among viewers at the beauties and mysteries of the universe, as well as in scientific enquiry itself. It also, more directly than the earlier series, challenged the assault on science from adherents of traditionalist religious orientations that had intensified in the intervening decades. Meanwhile, it advanced the scientific consensus that human beings are causing climate disruption and should act accordingly, and expressed themes common in dark green spirituality: “Evolution really happened. Accepting our kinship with all life is not only solid science. In my view, it’s also a soaring spiritual experience” (episode 1, minute 38). “Our ancestors worshipped the sun. They were far from foolish. It makes good sense to revere the sun and stars, because we are their children” (episode 8, minute 56). In the final episode, Tyson noted how Sagan had once directed the Voyager satellite to look back at Earth from the edge of our solar system, which revealed a tiny, pale blue dot. This he then used to challenge human arrogance and to underscore the fragility and preciousness of life on Earth:

Our posturings, our imagined self-importance, the delusion that they we have some privileged position in the universe are challenged by this point of pale light. Our planet is a lonely speck in the great, enveloping, cosmic dark. In our obscurity, in all this vastness, there is no hint that help will come from elsewhere to save us from ourselves. The Earth is the only world known so far to harbor life. There is nowhere else ... to which our species could migrate ... Like it or not, for the moment, the Earth is where we make our stand ... The only home we’ve ever known. (episode 13, minute 54)

[W]hen I take all of this [knowledge about the cosmos] into my heart and mind I’m uplifted by it ... and the other living things on this planet carry a legacy of cosmic evolution spanning billions of years. If we take that knowledge and come to know and love nature as it really is then we will surely be remembered by our descendants as good, strong links in the chain of life, and our children will continue this sacred searching, seeing for us as we have seen for those who came before us, discovering wonders yet undreamt of in the cosmos. (episode 13, minute 59)

The impact of DeGrasse Tyson’s series was significant, representing the largest distribution of a television documentary in history, appearing on 220 channels in 181 countries in 45 languages.¹⁶

Predictably given the series’ mix of science and evocative spirituality, Christian traditionalist organizations denounced it. The organization Answers in Genesis, for example, characterized the scientific consensus depicted in *Cosmos* as “unscientific,” suggesting that widespread acceptance of Darwinian evolution and human contributions to climate change is based on “blind faith” in certain interpretations of science and involves active suppression of alternative explanations.¹⁷ Answers in Genesis referred to scientists’ confidence in the scientific method as a type of hubris, while the idea that the Earth is roughly 6000 years old (the “young Earth” model) was advanced as a credible, scientific alternative. Answers in Genesis even provided reviews and discussion guides challenging each *Cosmos* episode.

The above are just a few of many examples that make clear that traditionalist Christians feel their views are under siege and that their political power may even be waning. They attribute this to contemporary science and popular culture, which are now infused with new forms of spiritual orientations that they believe are derived from pantheistic or animist spirituality. In their view, these threats to Christian traditionalist theologies in the United States were long ago identified as idolatrous competitors to fidelity to God – namely, those who, in one way or another, venerate or worship nature.

Despite these challenges, it seems that green spiritual orientations – both within and without mainstream religions – are beginning to be heard in political arenas where there could be an impact on public policies that address environmental concerns, although not yet with the impact that religious environmentalists hope.

International Environmental Activities and Political Engagement in the United States

By the turn of the century climate change had become the central organizing issue within the environmentalist and sustainability milieus. Although the first United Nations Earth Summit (the popular name for the organization’s major meetings) in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 (officially the “United Nations Conference on Environment and Development”) paid little attention to climate change, the problem was much more in focus during the subsequent two gatherings: in Johannesburg in 2002 (officially “The World Summit on Sustainable Development” or WSSD) and Rio de Janeiro in 2012 (officially “Rio+20”). Nearly all major religious bodies in the United States and abroad issued statements of environmental concern in the run up to or during these meetings, sometimes specifically urging action to address human contributions to climate disruption.¹⁸ The Parliament of the World’s Religions, which was founded in Chicago in 1893 to promote interreligious dialogue, but went into a nearly complete hiatus until the 1990s, began in the new century to make environmental sustainability an important priority. At its conferences it also provided a special platform for Indigenous peoples due to the widespread (if also sometimes exaggerated) perception that these traditions have been more environmentally aware and have much to teach the rest of the world (Hames 2007).

Furthermore, the idea that an "Earth Charter" be established and ratified by the UN gained traction. It was the aspiration of the charter's advocates that it would serve as the UN's ethical and spiritual conscience on environmental and social issues. After a long and sometimes difficult consultative process among a variety of actors around the world, facilitated by religion scholars and involving many prominent members of civil society, including many religious non-governmental organizations, contributors finalized a version of the Earth Charter and presented it to the UN during the WSSD in 2002 (Rockefeller 2005, 2008). Maurice Strong, who reportedly first hatched the Earth Charter idea while serving as the Secretary-General of the 1992 UN Earth Summit in Rio, spoke and endorsed the effort. Other high-ranking UN dignitaries also articulated their support for promoting a global environmental ethics and a politics congruent with it.

To the disappointment of the charter's advocates, however, apart from a few supportive words from some dignitaries, the charter was neither brought to the floor of the UN for serious consideration at the 2002 WSSD in Johannesburg nor at Rio+20 in Rio de Janeiro in 2012 (Taylor 2010, 178, 190–95, 205). The failure of the Earth Charter effort at these meetings suggests that despite ardent activism on the part of some actors affiliated with the world's predominant religions, and growing attention by ecumenical religious bodies to environmental issues, there was not enough support from their members to pressure the nations to dramatic action or otherwise prompt significant policy changes either in the United States or abroad.

Nevertheless, in September 2014, on the eve of another climate-focused UN meeting at the United Nations headquarters in New York City, a massive march was held (with smaller demonstrations in solidarity around the world) demanding action in response to the perceived climate crisis. Representatives of many religious traditions participated, which hints that stronger action from religious individuals and groups may be emerging. Over 100 demonstrators, including some who had affinity with dark green spiritualities, were arrested the following day in a protest. Protesters especially targeted Wall Street financiers, whom the protesters and others perceive to be powerful barriers to action to address climate disruption.¹⁹

Other important international efforts, which have influenced and have been influenced by US environmental political discourse, have focused on Indigenous peoples. The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP 2007) called for the protection of Indigenous lands and natural resources, as well as intellectual, cultural, and religious property, places, and practices.²⁰ The document provided political leverage for Indigenous activists resisting a host of unsustainable and destructive commercial enterprises. Problems persist, however, as when resource utilization has pitted factions within specific communities against each other, or when opening up Indigenous lands to development or extraction has disrupted traditional subsistence patterns and eroded folk knowledge and management practices (Baviskar 2005; Wright 2009). Moreover, in most cases, sustainable development plans are administered by organizations outside the communities they target, and often fail to promote self-reliance and community development (Conklin and Graham 1995, 704; see also Wright 2009, 204).

In 2012, the UN Human Rights Council created a three-year mandate with UN resolution 19/10, which focused on the relationship between human rights and the enjoyment of a safe and clean environment.²¹ In keeping with developments under

the UN umbrella since the initial Earth Summit, the effort included a focus on the preservation of traditional lifeways and resistance to exploitative development on Indigenous lands, as well as attentiveness to gender issues. Importantly, this illustrates that at least at the international political level, there is an explicit recognition that Indigenous rights, universal human rights, and rights to a healthy environment are closely intertwined.

As the above examples illustrate, the UN has at times been involved in initiatives and discussions in which a secularized, non-partisan, green religiosity, sometimes framed as a concern for justice and found in its declarations and its development mandates, is expressed and contested. But while this provides evidence that dark green themes have their proponents and some influence, they have certainly not succeeded in their efforts to get the nations to dramatically respond to the world's diverse and intensifying environmental problems.

Future Scenarios: Toward a Global Ecological Civil Religion?

A major reason religions do not naturally and commonly promote environmental protection and corresponding public policies is that they did not come into existence to address such issues. Generally speaking, rather, they emerged to help people cope with life's difficulties, including suffering and death. Yet sometimes religion has developed in ways that enjoin respect and reverence for ecosystems and non-human organisms (Lansing 1991; Posey 1999; Rappaport 1999; Wilson 2002). Some scholars even contend that humans have a natural if sometimes weak affinity for healthy biological systems because such traits are ecologically and socially adaptive (Wilson 1984; Kellert and Wilson 1993; Kellert 2007). There is, moreover, evidence that at least some religionists as well as scholars of religion are working ardently to turn longstanding religions into potent political forces (Tucker and Grim 2001; Taylor 2005; Gottlieb 2006; S. Taylor 2007; Sponsel 2012).

Such efforts are typically rooted in the conviction that "Human ecology is deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny – that is, by religion" (White 1967, 1205; cf. Grim and Tucker 2014, xvi). If this is true then nothing short of a religious revolution will precipitate the social and political changes needed to create environmentally sustainable and equitable societies. These are common assumptions among those who hope that religious environmentalism will foster environmentally sustainable societies.

From a social-scientific perspective, much of the activism related to religion and ecology can be considered in two ways, as a religious *revitalization movement* and as a *new (ecumenical) religious movement*. It is a revitalization movement in that it seeks to return religious people to valuable if forgotten roots, in this case, roots that supposedly enjoin reverent care for nature and all living things. It is a new religious movement, and an ecumenical one at that, because it seeks to uncover and blend environment-related insights that have been longstanding and latent in the world's religious heritage with scientific understandings. It also promotes such ideas in political culture to influence public policy, as exemplified by the Earth Charter initiative, in which green religion entwines with science and environmental causes.

As we have shown, there are examples of green religious production and activity within the world's largest religious traditions. It is also true that many religious bodies have issued statements of environmental concern. The question remains, however, as to how significant and influential such activities have been and yet might be. The short answer is that there has not been a significant and dramatic upwelling of an influential religious environmentalism. If there were, we would expect to see a host of public policy initiatives toward efficient and renewable energy, transportation, and food systems, combined with widespread efforts to reduce population growth and per capita consumption of energy and natural resources, since human numbers and consumption rates are two critically important drivers of environmental degradation.

The possible future for religious environmentalism is no more encouraging since, at least thinking near-term, the best predictor of future behavior is past behavior. Indeed, reviews of empirical research exploring whether religion promotes environmental conservation and creative adaptation to environmental challenges suggest that such religiously inspired conservation efforts are typically the exception, not the rule (Hames 2007; Taylor, van Wieren, and Zaleha 2014). Moreover, a 2014 study of religion-related environmental beliefs in the United States did not indicate evidence of an upwelling of religion-rooted environmental concern and action with regard to climate change (Jones, Cox, and Navarro-Rivera 2014; cf. Taylor 2015). Nevertheless, increasing acceptance of the scientific consensus that human behaviors are disrupting the climate system might yet precipitate concern and action by religious actors, and further research will be needed to determine the extent of any such mobilization (Taylor 2011).

Some scholars have noted, however, that rather than expecting those involved in the world religions to lead the way, emergent dark green nature spiritualities, in which promoting environmental protection and sustainability are central ethical obligations, are already deeply engaged in political action to transform political/economic systems (Benthall 2008; Taylor 2010). Some have even discussed the possibility of the emergence of a global civil Earth religion in which people of diverse religious traditions unite around a few common principles, such as biological kinship and the interdependence of all life, rather than a civil religion bound by national boundaries and loyalties. Perhaps adherents of a civil Earth religion would argue that people with diverse religious and philosophical beliefs around the world should come to agree that they have a religious (or spiritual) responsibility to protect and restore the Earth's living systems and all the species that constitute them, and that nations have responsibilities including the caretaking of all nations' peoples. In such a religion, which the political theorist Dan Deudney termed "terrapolitan earth religion" (Deudney 1998, cf. 1995, 1996), whatever religious, regional, or national loyalties people might feel, they would share a deep loyalty to the Earth that would trump provincial loyalties when life itself is at stake (Taylor 2010). For Deudney, just such a religion is needed as the emotional and spiritual basis for a federal-republican Earth constitution, and the related treaties and enforcement mechanisms, and is essential for environmental health and resilience.

With such a religion, people from the world's longstanding religious traditions would increasingly graft onto their beliefs and practices ecological understandings. Meanwhile, people outside of established religious traditions would increasingly consider evolutionary and scientific narratives to be their sacred stories and the conservation of biodiversity

their deepest ethical obligation. And whether traditionally religious or religious in novel scientific ways, those involved in working toward sustainability often influence one another and learn to appreciate the different ways people (and differently religious people) come to share a commitment to their earthly, environmental responsibilities.

In the early years of the twenty-first century it is possible to see, at least in a fledgling way, just such a convergence. Only time will tell how extensive and influential such convergence will become. As uncertain as we may be as to the importance of the religion variable in public policy developments which take account of bio-cultural evolution on planet Earth, it seems reasonable to suppose that if anything close to the present diversity of life is to be retained, there must be dramatic change in the ways human beings understand their place in the universe and on planet Earth. This in turn would appear to depend on significant changes to the forms and functions of what human beings construe as religion.

Notes

- 1 The resolution can be viewed at <http://www-tc.pbs.org/now/shows/343/letter.pdf>. Accessed August 2014.
- 2 See http://www.nas.org/articles/Sustainability_Educations_New_Morality. For the University Presidents' Climate Commitment, see <http://www.presidentsclimatecommitment.org/>. Accessed August 2014.
- 3 See <http://www.nas.org/articles/SustainaReligion>. Accessed August 2014.
- 4 For instance, their declaration suggests that cheap and abundant energy is required for people to rise from abject poverty, and that alternative fuels cannot supply the increasing demand.
- 5 See <http://www.resistingthegreendragon.com/>, and <http://www.cornwallalliance.org/2013/07/12/does-caring-for-the-least-of-these-demand-fighting-global-warming/>. Accessed August 2014. According to the Cornwall Alliance, adopting measures to reduce atmospheric carbon loads would increase the proportion of income spent on energy by the world's poor, thus ultimately harming them the most. Importantly, this logic ignores the massive subsidies which make fossil fuels cheap, the finite nature of such resources, as well as the true cost (including ecological and social impacts) of extracting and transporting such resources in many unstable places across the globe.
- 6 See <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2014/09/140929-greendex-survey-environmental-attitudes-ngfood/>. Accessed October 2014.
- 7 Full text available at http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html. Accessed June 2015.
- 8 See <http://time.com/3674155/pope-francis-contraception-catholic-rabbits-comment/>. See also <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/dec/27/pope-francis-edict-climate-change-us-rightwing>. Accessed January 2015.
- 9 See <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/dec/27/pope-francis-edict-climate-change-us-rightwing>. Accessed January 2015.
- 10 Johnston's ongoing fieldwork traces the contemporary religious dimensions of these performance-oriented subcultures and, to date, buttresses the arguments made here.
- 11 As many religion scholars have pointed out, the jargon of authenticity is always deployed for political ends (see McCutcheon 2005).

- 12 The narrative of the film coheres with the popular history provided by Daniel Quinn in his novels *Ishmael* (1992) and *The Story of B* (1996). For scholarly resources that advance a similar narrative, see Newsom (2000).
- 13 See http://www.nas.org/articles/top_five_environmental_themes_in_darren_aronofskys_noah. Accessed August 2014.
- 14 Both quotes drawn from <https://answersingenesis.org/reviews/movies/the-day-after-tomorrow/>. Accessed January 2015.
- 15 See for example <https://answersingenesis.org/reviews/movies/avatara-spiritual-experience/>. Accessed August 2014. *Captain Planet* was a cartoon in which a superhero educated children about ecological degradation, and fought against it.
- 16 See <http://www.motherjones.com/environment/2014/03/neil-degrasse-tyson-inquiring-minds-cosmos>. Accessed August 2014.
- 17 The review of the first episode can be found here: <https://answersingenesis.org/reviews/tv/cosmos-review-standing-up-in-the-milky-way/>. Accessed August 2014.
- 18 See for instance the Alliance of Religions and Nature (ARC) webpage with statements from the 12 largest religious groups, http://www.arcworld.org/arc_and_the_faiths.asp. Accessed October 2014, or those listed at the Forum on Religion and Ecology's webpage, <http://fore.research.yale.edu/climate-change/statements-from-world-religions/>. Accessed October 2014.
- 19 Author Taylor knows three of the arrestees who are longstanding participants in "dark green" radical environmental movements.
- 20 See www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfi/documents/DRIPS_en.pdf. Accessed August 2014.
- 21 See <http://srenvironment.org/>, and <http://icenvironment.org/un-mandate/>. Accessed August 2014.

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