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CHAPTER 29

Religion and the Rise of Environmental Politics in the Twentieth Century

Bron Taylor and Lucas F. Johnston

Religions have long been implicated in the search for both harmony with and mastery over nature. This quest is often entwined in complicated ways with the competition for resources and the exercise of power over others. In the twentieth century, recognition of this gave rise to an increasingly prominent global environmental milieu – the “contexts in which environmentally concerned officials, scientists, activists, and other citizens connect with and reciprocally influence one another” (Taylor 2010, 13–14). As milieu participants interact, they increasingly influence one another, leading to significant agreement around a set of core beliefs that have come to characterize the environmental movement (Taylor 2002; cf. Campbell 1972).¹ Evidencing a desire for harmony intertwined in innovative religious forms, blending science, spirituality, and ethics, they oppose dominant ecological, social, and economic goals that are grounded in dualistic religions and philosophies.

However, the optimistic assumptions of many milieu participants regarding human potential and correspondingly idealistic prescriptions as to how to inspire environmental action were often simplistic and impractical, untethered to the sorts of economic incentives to which human beings commonly respond. Consequently, in the twentieth century many environmental political actors underestimated the scope of their task and were often outmaneuvered by their opponents, who spoke more easily in ways that reflected common desires and fears.

Opponents of environmental movements, meanwhile, promoted countervailing visions of science, religious practice, and moral obligations. In so doing, they tethered classical and neoliberal economic theory and enthusiasm for capitalism to democracy, making environmentalist challenges to the former appear to be a direct assault on the latter. The slogan that environmentalists were green on the outside but red (socialist) on the inside, and thus unpatriotic and dangerous, proved to be a powerful deterrent to environmental action.

Background: Religion, Nature, and Politics from First Contacts through the Nineteenth Century

Religion has been crucial in navigating human relationships with habitats long before Europeans arrived on North American shores, and decisions regarding procurement and distribution of sustenance and other crucial resources have always been political. Scholars have long debated the extent to which the native peoples of the Americas shaped their habitats prior to European invasions. Some claimed that Native Americans lived in harmony with their habitats, or conversely, degraded them significantly. It has become clear, however, that while there were great variations among pre-Columbian populations, they modified American ecosystems much more dramatically than was earlier (and perhaps commonly) believed. Moreover, they sometimes did so in ways that enhanced the resilience of their societies and local ecosystem diversity, and sometimes not. Since the quest for eco-friendly societies has been so important in environmental politics in America, and this is so often conditioned by assumptions about pre-Columbian societies, it is wise to have this complicated reality in mind when turning to the post-Columbian history.

Although these pre-Columbian societies were sometimes romanticized by early European colonists, many colonial intellectuals expressed and promoted a naturalistic religion – where nature itself is imbued with sacredness and worthy of reverence and care – that was fused with nationalism and cast Native peoples who supposedly lacked such presuppositions as savages (Albanese 1990, 50). Thus, in an ironic and contradictory mix, some among the explorers, traders, and fortune-seekers who followed Columbus held romantic views about the land and its original inhabitants. Yet their cultural and economic beliefs and practices, as well as their religions (which they considered superior) and their weapons (undoubtedly superior) systematically, sometimes intentionally and sometimes unintentionally, destroyed Native cultures and lifeways.

Nature appreciation “began in the cities” and was prompted by an ethic of scarcity (conferring value to diminishing resources), which began permeating European consciousness in the late 1700s (Nash [1967] 2001, 41).² French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau is typically considered the most important early proponent of Romanticism, but many more would follow, including the poets William Blake and William Wordsworth. Romantics argued that humans had innate affinities for wild places, which are essential for physical and spiritual wellbeing. In addition, the peoples who supposedly lived in harmony with these wild spaces were imagined as morally superior, exemplars of a more authentic way of life, which was under assault in the face of an expansionist techno-industrial civilization.

Intellectuals in the Northeastern United States contributed in their own ways to such ideas, drawing from and on the canvas of American wilderness. Ralph Waldo Emerson, for example, the spiritual leader of American Transcendentalism, expressed a deep appreciation for nature, viewing it as essential to the perception of spiritual truths. His protégé Henry David Thoreau, and John Muir, who would be influenced by both Emerson and Thoreau, developed nature-based spiritualities that resembled Emerson’s. But Thoreau and Muir had a more scientific and this-worldly nature religion, in which the sacred is here and now, than did Emerson who, in a more Platonic than Aristotelian

tradition, saw nature more as a sacred portal to deeper universal truths than as sacred in and of itself (Fox 1988; Taylor 2010, 227–48). Consequently Thoreau and Muir would influence subsequent environmentalism much more than Emerson. Thoreau advanced a life characterized by intimate contact with nature and simple living. However, Muir, who also stressed direct and sensuous experience with nature and her denizens, moved in a passionately activist direction, playing a leading role in the establishment in 1890 of Yosemite National Park (which had earlier become California State Park after Abraham Lincoln protected some parts of it in 1864).

Muir was also a trenchant critic of what he understood to be the dominant streams of Christianity, to which he traced much ecological destruction. This is clearly seen in what Muir wrote in his journal in 1867, during a time when he was ill in Cedar Keys, Florida. Pointedly referring to prevalent Christian beliefs Muir wrote, "The world, we are told, was made especially for man, a presumption not supported by all the facts." He then sardonically provided examples that he thought disproved any such presumption while contending that everything in nature has value, apart from its utility for human beings:

Why should man value himself as more than a small part of the one great unit of creation? And what creature of all that the Lord has taken the pains to make is not essential to the completeness of that unit – the cosmos? The universe would be incomplete without man; but it would also be incomplete without the smallest transmicroscopic creature that dwells beyond our conceivible eyes and knowledge. (Muir [1916] 1997, 826)

As the historian Roderick Nash noted, if the Romantic impulse imagined that the divine spoke most clearly through nature, then the young United States had a "distinct moral advantage over Europe, where centuries of civilization had deposited a layer of artificiality over His works" ([1967] 2001, 69). This celebration of and reverence for nature intersected in important ways with the disappearance of the American frontier (Turner [1893] 1920) and a nationalistic anxiety over what the loss of wild nature might mean for American character. As the young nation expanded across the continent, the wild places that distinguished it from its European antecedents were disappearing.

By the middle of the nineteenth century it was clear that humans were dramatically degrading the continent (Marsh 1864). Such observations and concerns were sometimes linked to utilitarian ethics and concerns for social justice, for instance in the prophetic Social Gospel movement which became influential around the turn of the twentieth century (Pinchot 1910; Rauschenbush 1917). For some such Christians, their faith was less a metaphysical belief system than an ethical system concerned with social justice. This reflected a trend among some Christian intellectuals who valued the ethical teachings of their tradition but who found its supernaturalistic truth claims implausible, if not even fanciful.

While some religion-related conservationist trends emerged, largely from urban elites, most of the country remained focused on quickly extracting profits from the continent's natural riches. And, to this day, an important aspect of environmental politics in the United States remains the conflict between those who adhere to the dominion tradition in Christianity and those who have embraced nature-valorizing spiritualities and ethics.

Environmental Politics from the Turn of the Twentieth Century to Earth Day: The Increasing Influence of Science and the Widespread Emergence of Activism

By the end of the nineteenth century, many Americans had come to value the continent's wild lands as numinous, sacred places, the preservation of which was also essential for the development of good moral character.

No one better exemplified and promoted the trend than Theodore Roosevelt, who was president of the United States from 1901 to 1909. He was a complicated individual who had affinity with both the utilitarian and spiritual views of the value of nature. Roosevelt co-founded the country's first wildlife conservation organization in 1887, the Boone and Crockett Club, but he was also an avid hunter and outdoorsman, and, as president, he promoted and signed the Acts establishing the National Park Service and the US Forest Service. Roosevelt also was a social progressive opposed to the consolidation of wealth in the nation's first monopolies (and their environmental costs). Consequently, although he had affinity with John Muir, he appointed the more pragmatic, utilitarian reformer Gifford Pinchot to lead the Forest Service. Pinchot, who had been influenced by the Social Gospel movement, was at least nominally religious, and he used religious imagery to promote land use that would advance the interests of the greatest number of human beings possible in an effort to promote social harmony (Johnston 2013, 46–48).

The archetypal religion-related dispute in the early part of the twentieth century, as it turned out, was over a plan to build a dam in Yosemite National Park's Hetch Hetchy Valley. Muir wrote lovingly of the valley, but San Francisco and agricultural interests were hungry for the envisioned dam's water. Gifford Pinchot supported the dam on anthropocentric and utilitarian principles, and after a great earthquake and subsequent fire destroyed most of San Francisco in 1906, the dam proponents also contended that the dam was needed for public safety. Roosevelt sympathized with Muir's romanticism but sided with Pinchot's pragmatic utilitarianism, and signed the bill that funded it. The conflict reflected competing spiritualities, epitomized by what might be referred to as Muir's "biocentric pantheism" versus Pinchot's utilitarian Christianity. Subsequently, environmental conflicts have often been fueled by similar spiritual disputes.

Environmental crises early in the century such as the Dust Bowl (in the 1920s and 1930s) elevated the social importance of ecologists, who, it was imagined, might lead efforts to understand, arrest, and prevent such crises (Robbins 2004, 9). By the 1930s many ecologists were not only land managers but also conservationists. Aldo Leopold, for example, whose writing and fieldwork began in the 1920s, became widely known for his posthumously published *Sand County Almanac* (1949). His book became a sacred text for many environmentalists, with its subtle critiques of western economic priorities, philosophy, and religion, while promoting both a pragmatic conservation and a biocentric worldview transformation (Callicott 2011). In 1924 Leopold created the blueprint for the Gila Wilderness, the first area designated for heightened protection outside the national parks, which became the prototype for the later call by forester Bob Marshall for a nationwide wilderness system. In 1935 Leopold, Marshall, and

others founded the Wilderness Society, an important incubator for future environmental leaders. But World War II then forced environmental concerns into the background for nearly two decades.

Prior to World War II, most agriculture in the United States had been local and what is now referred to as organic. During the war patriotism was connected to self-reliance and simplicity in order to free up resources for the war effort. After the war, however, the nation's expanded productive capacity was unleashed in the construction of massive interstate highway systems, fossil-fuel-driven automobiles, and petroleum-based fertilizers and pesticides. Moreover, consumption soon replaced thrift as an economic and even patriotic good. In response and analogous to the Romantic reaction to industrialization, however, an environmental milieu began to emerge in resistance to these trends and their negative environmental and social impacts (Johnston 2013, 51).

No such response has been more important than Leopold's, who argued that the primary obstacles to ecological and social wellbeing were a failure to see all of the land's inhabitants as morally valuable, notions he traced in no small part to Abrahamic religions that considered nature to be a mere resource for people:

Conservation is getting nowhere because it is incompatible with our Abrahamic concept of land. We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect. (Leopold [1949] 1966, xvii–xix)

This is the most-often quoted expression of Leopold's famous "land ethic" in which the land is shorthand for all the living things that constitute environmental systems (Leopold [1949] 1966, 261). The crucial ingredient in preserving the land, Leopold claimed, was an "ecological conscience" ([1949] 1966, 243–45), which was necessarily rooted in one's deep, affective experience of and connection with the land, which for Leopold also involved science-based feelings of kinship with all living beings and an "organicist" understanding of the interdependence of all things in environmental systems (Leopold [1949] 1966, 190). (Organicism is the perception that the entire world is deeply interrelated and mutually dependent, as are the organisms in the human body. It is a perception with ancient roots but one that has become more prevalent in the scientific age.)

In such views Leopold was articulating a kind of naturalistic (as opposed to supernaturalistic) nature spirituality. Yet he was reticent to speak about God; for example, when pressed by his daughter about his religious beliefs, "He replied that he believed there was a mystical supreme power that guided the universe, but this power was not a personalized God. It was more akin to the laws of nature" (Meine 2005, 1006). Leopold's son understood his father's spirituality as "kind of pantheistic. The organization of the universe was enough to take the place of God" (Meine 1988, 506–7). Thus, Leopold's understanding of the interconnection and mutual dependence of all life was related to a kind of naturalistic nature spirituality which led to his reverence for life and a corresponding biocentric (or life-centered) ethics.

In the 1950s, increasing numbers of young people were turning away from traditional western sources of political, economic, and religious authority and embracing worldviews, such as Leopold's, which they understood to be more sympathetic toward nature.

Some embraced (often simplistic or otherwise inaccurate) understandings of Buddhism, Daoism, Paganism, and Native American traditions, and corresponding socio-political arrangements, as alternatives (Fields 1992; Rist 1997; Taylor 1997, 2002; Geertz 2004; Johnston 2006; Barnhill 2002). Importantly, individuals affected by these subcultural influences in the United States were, more than their Abrahamic counterparts, receptive to the growing scientific evidence of environmental decline.

Another influential scientist who expressed and promoted nature spirituality and ethics was the biologist Rachel Carson, who is best known for her 1962 work *Silent Spring*, and whom many credit for providing the most important catalyst for the modern environmental movement. Carson argued that human health and many species were threatened by the proliferating use of herbicides and pesticides in agriculture. Less well known today are her earlier writings, which clearly reveal a biocentric ethical outlook that was both naturalistic and animistic in orientation, wherein she attempted to adopt the perspective of sea creatures, and, at least poetically, personified the ocean (Carson 1941, 1951; Taylor 2010). In a way that may be the earliest example of an eco-feminist sensibility, Carson also contended, in a candid 1954 talk to women journalists, that they had "a greater intuitive understanding" of the kinship of all life (Carson 1998, 161). Few readers knew the significance of her dedication of *Silent Spring* to Albert Schweitzer, with whose "reverence for life ethics" she had a deep affinity – but this is a critical window into her spirituality. Indeed, as her biographer Mary McCay noted, the most powerful themes in her work were "a religious reverence for the sea, the womb of life, and a belief in the connectedness of all living things," as well as a belief that the sea "was the generator and grave for all: the alpha and omega of the planet" (2005, 270).

The political impact of Carson's fusion of a reverence for life, scientific analysis, and moral outrage at profligate use of chemicals was profound. She strengthened dramatically the environmental movement and was one of the most important individuals whose work led to globally unprecedented landmark legislation in the early 1970s, including the National Environmental Policy Act (1969), Clean Air Act (1970), Clean Water Act (1972), Endangered Species Act (1973), Safe Drinking Water Act (1974), and Toxic Substances Control Act (1976).

These important developments are inconceivable in the absence of the inspirational figures previously discussed. But they are also impossible to imagine without the emergence of countercultures that put pressure on politicians to protect the nation's air, waters, and lands. All this forcefully came into view with the first Earth Day in 1970, spawning a new era of environmental activism in which nature-related spirituality was sometimes overt, sometimes subtle, but always present.

Religion, Nature, and Politics from Earth Day to Climate Activism

Although some have argued that the first Earth Day was spurred by the first photos of Earth from outer space (1968) (Alter 2013),³ as already shown, its diverse antecedents go much further back in US history, abetted by the fledgling post-war countercultures, first in the American West, with their opening to non-western religions, which began to flourish during the 1960s.

Countercultures and the Politics of the Environment

American countercultures, which have often included ecologies and spiritualities of interconnection and belonging to nature, frequently draw on Indigenous and Asian spiritualities that are presumed to be more environmentally friendly. Bioregionalists and those involved in "back-to-the-land" movements contributed alternative social and political philosophies to the flourishing environmentalist milieu (Taylor 2002; Gould 2005). After the waning of concern about nuclear warfare and the ebbing of the Cold War following the collapse of the Berlin Wall (1989), anti-nuclear movements that had established organizational and communicative capacities gravitated toward environmental concerns. But long before this, biocentric and pagan spiritualities had become important tributaries to environmentalist countercultures in the United States.

The philosophy of Deep Ecology, for example, which was first articulated by the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess in 1972 and published a year later (1973), became for several decades the most common term used for non-anthropocentric environmental ethics. Deep ecologists emphasized highly affective personal experiences of fellow-feeling, or deep interconnection with other-than-human nature which ground perceptions that all life, or even entire ecosystems, are sacred (Taylor and Zimmerman 2005). Dave Foreman, the most charismatic of the founders of the radical environmental group Earth First! (EF!), which was established in 1980 to combat environmental destruction with civil disobedience and sabotage, considered Deep Ecology to be the most important philosophical development of the twentieth century. Foreman argued that EF!'s radical strategies and tactics reflected the principles of Deep Ecology (Foreman 1982).⁴

Subsequent to Earth Day, increasing numbers of environmentalists were involved in America's broad counterculture, and many of them expressed and promoted animistic and pantheistic religious sentiments. These were often expressed in rich metaphors such as the "Gaia Hypothesis," which posited that the Earth itself functions like a self-regulating organism (Lovelock 1979, 1988). David Abram, for example, argued that natural habitats are comprised of communions of subjects who interact and sustain the Earth system, and that all of them are morally and spiritually significant (Abram 1996, 2010; Taylor 2012). Such animistic perceptions were attributed to ancient human cultures by the human ecologist Paul Shepard, who argued that foraging societies were more sustainable and suited for physical and spiritual flourishing than agricultural civilizations (Shepard 1967, 1973, 1982; Shepard and Shepard 1998). Both Abram and Shepard postulated that humans had devolved from a more harmonious relationship with their habitats when agricultural and text-based civilizations, with their otherworldly gods, spread around the world, destroying or displacing oral, animistic, foraging cultures.

Many authors have suggested that such perspectives are inaccurate and some such critics even contend that environmental concern is an elite, western preoccupation (Guha 1989, 1997; Warren 1990; Spence 1999; Burnham 2000; Jacoby 2001; Dowie 2009). The Native American (Lakota Nation) scholar Vine Deloria contended in contrast that Native American religions *do* promote environmentally friendly practices and when properly understood can be adapted and deployed to resist colonizing and capitalistic forces. And his perspective has been buttressed by studies that show that, even

when traditional land tenure and rights have been usurped by distant political elites, native peoples have deployed place-based epistemologies and metaphysics of interconnection in defense of Mother Earth (Gill 1987; Taylor 1995; Weaver 1996). Other works have illustrated that many traditional societies have intimate knowledge of their habitats (Rappaport 1967; Schultes 1979; Berkes, Folke, and Colding 1998; Berkes 1999; Johnston and LeVasseur 2011). Such works provided common ground on which activists from the environmentalist milieu and from Indigenous sovereignty and rights groups could make contact and cross-pollinate.

One example of this cross-fertilization was the religious struggle over the Gasquet to Orleans (G-O) road through the Six Rivers National Forest in California, much of which was sacred to Native Americans from the region. Even though the Supreme Court rejected arguments that Native American religious freedom required the protection of their sacred sites, a coalition of tribal leaders and environmentalists achieved protection of the land based on ecological concerns (Emenheiser 2005). Campaigns elsewhere between environmentalists and Native Americans protesting the construction of telescopes on Mount Graham in Arizona also deployed arguments based on religious and environmental values, and corresponding political pressure led to partial successes (Taylor 1997). Although relationships between environmentalists and Indigenous rights groups were often fractious, they also often led to mutual respect and long-term solidarity in common cause to defend places considered sacred, often in very different ways, to both groups (Taylor 1997).

Significant organized resistance to the environmentalists began to emerge in 1972 as the Bureau of Land Management and the Forest Service conducted the first Roadless Areas Review and Evaluation (RARE) to determine which areas might qualify for wilderness designation. In what became known as the Sagebrush Rebellion, several legal and advocacy organizations linked the ideals of the free market, individual liberties, and states' rights, to a longstanding distrust of the federal government, whose representatives were perceived as outsiders. The Center for Defense of Free Enterprise, for example, emerged in 1974, the Mountain States Legal Foundation in 1976, and the Competitive Enterprise Institute in 1984, and each claimed that environmentalists threatened individual liberty and economic growth. Others expressed fears rooted in conservative Christian understandings that environmentalists were not only un-American but that they promoted spiritually dangerous paganism, pantheism, and nature worship (Kearns 2005, 1755–58). One exemplar of this emerging political contest was James Watt, Ronald Reagan's Secretary of the Interior (1981–83), an evangelical Christian who had also founded (during the Sagebrush Rebellion) the previously referenced Mountain States Legal Foundation, a politically powerful organization that frequently battled environmentalists. Watt invoked millenarian sentiments, which had long been related to American destiny, individualism, and economic opportunity, when he asserted that the responsible execution of his job required him to "follow the Scriptures, which call upon us to occupy the land until Jesus returns" (Glass 2005, 1043–44).

Alarming conservative Christians all the more was environmentalist concern about growing human numbers and support for abortion. Opponents of environmentalists began referring to themselves as the "Wise Use Movement" by the mid-1980s, fusing conservative religion and political ideologies in a powerful anti-environmental

coalition. Ironically, their influence often thwarted environmentalist goals and thus helped to provide a rationale for radical environmentalism, whose advocates claimed that the current political and religious powers were deeply hostile to Earth's biological and cultural diversity. Therefore, these radicals held, direct action resistance was not only permissible but obligatory. New forms of radical environmentalism would splinter and emerge from the original one, including the Earth Liberation Front and the Animal Liberation Front. Wise Use partisans, alarmed at these movements and their sometimes inflammatory tactics, believed these politically, economically, and spiritually dangerous radicals must be converted or incarcerated (Taylor 1995, 1998, 2002, 2004, 2005b, 2005c, 2010). For their part, radical environmentalists averred that the real danger was the death-culture of western civilization, which was precipitating an apocalyptic extinction crisis (Taylor 2005b, 2005c), and consequently nothing short of the overthrow of the existing capitalist/industrial world would protect the biosphere they considered sacred.

Reforming Mainstream Institutions: Natural Sciences, Economics, and Religious Traditions

Meanwhile, within mainstream institutions, environmental understandings grew. In the natural sciences, for instance, the organicist impulse was articulated by one of the fathers of systems science, Howard T. Odum. Odum argued that religion was an emergent property of ecological systems and subject to the same energetic limitations and laws of exchange that characterized all systems (1971). For Odum, religions that did not promote environmentally friendly behaviors resulted in energy imbalances and were maladaptive. The trans-disciplinary thinker Gregory Bateson likewise posited that humans were embedded in ecological systems, and that individuals affected the broader system in ways beyond their immediate physical context (Bateson 1979).

The physicists David Bohm and Fritjof Capra influentially contended that physics shows that the Earth and even the entire cosmos are deeply interconnected (Capra 1975, 2002; Bohm 1981). These figures lent credence to holistic spiritualities long present within the environmental milieu. Narratives that envisioned humans as comprised of stardust, or sharing common biological and cosmic ancestry with all things, were spread widely through television programs such as "Cosmos" (1980) (written and produced by Ann Druyan and Carl Sagan), an approach reflected by scientist writers, most famously, by the biologist E.O. Wilson (1984).

As early as the 1960s, there were also movements within some mainstream religious institutions toward environmental responsibility, as for example when the US-based National Council of Churches formed a Faith-Man-Nature Study Group (later reframed as the Eco-Justice working group) (Johnston 2013, 55). Religious leaders were instrumental in litigation against a 1978 toxic release in North Carolina, which was widely regarded as the birth of environmental justice movements (Figueroa 2005, 608). By the early 1980s it was clear that people of color and the poor bore a disproportionate burden from toxic pollution. Drawing on the prophetic traditions in the Hebrew Bible, a number of Jewish and Christian thinkers, organizations, and

initiatives began to frame such burdens as an injustice. The National Religious Partnership for the Environment provides what may be the most prominent example (Womersley 2005).⁵

Meanwhile, the economist Herman Daly criticized both capitalist and socialist economic systems as promoting an impossible goal – perpetual economic growth – arguing instead that the economic goal should be a "steady state economy" that would be "more in harmony with both basic religious insight and the scientifically verifiable limits of the natural world" (Daly 1996, 218; Daly 1973; Daly, Cobb and Cobb 1989). But few were willing to challenge the view that the axial social organizing principle was to increase economic growth and wealth.

But no criticisms were more trenchant than those claiming that western religions fostered environmentally destructive attitudes and behaviors. Such arguments increased in number and influence during the 1960s. Best known among these is an article by the historian Lynn White, Jr., who contended that the most important variables in environmental decline were Christianity's deep anthropocentrism and its disenchantment of nature (1967).

Others piled on, including the British scholar Ernest Friedrich Schumacher, who published an influential article, "Buddhist Economics," and book, *Small is Beautiful* (Schumacher 1966, 1973a, 1973b). The American Buddhist Gary Snyder, whose work lauded Indigenous cultures and Zen Buddhism as ecologically beneficent, published *Turtle Island*, which later would be awarded a Pulitzer prize (Snyder 1974). Snyder influentially argued that religions originating in Asia and American Indian traditions offered more ecologically beneficent ideals and practices than those found in the western world. Another British scholar, Arnold Toynbee, offered an especially trenchant critique of Abrahamic religions. He contended that the injunction in Genesis that humans should subdue the Earth is "immoral, impracticable, and disastrous" and, consequently, we should reject western religions in favor of religions originating in Asia, or switch "from the *Weltanschauung* [worldview] of monotheism to the *Weltanschauung* of pantheism, which is older and was once universal" (Toynbee 1972, 145). Clearly, partisans on many sides of the ecological and political divide understand their divergent beliefs about nature to be deeply related to religion.

By the early 1990s a great deal more scholarly attention was focused the role of religion in promoting or hindering environmentally concerned attitudes and behaviors. Much of this scholarship focused only on "world religions," in most cases almost exclusively on the mainstems of those traditions. Much of the research assumed an empirically questionable idealism, presupposing that religious worldviews were critically important variables in the quest to establish environmentally sustainable societies (Tucker and Williams 1997; Tucker and Berthrong 1998; Chapple 2000; Hessel and Ruether 2000; Girardot, Miller, and Liu 2001; Grim 2001; Chapple 2002; Tirosh-Samuelson 2002; Foltz, Denny, and Baharuddin 2003). Such studies represent concerted efforts by scholars to spur political action by generating a positive vision of the world's religions coming together to fight for environmental causes. This sort of scholarship provided examples of environmental concerns by some individuals and groups, in grassroots campaigns, and from some religious elites, but little evidence that those

involved have significantly influenced their own traditions or environmental policies (Taylor 2005a; Johnston 2013, 121–22).

One possible exception might be the evangelical Christians who lobbied against efforts to get Congress to weaken the Endangered Species Act (Kearns 1996, 1997). But such environmental concern among mainstream religious groups also spurred significant and powerful opposition. Richard Cizik, former Vice President for the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE), for example, left his post in 2008 due to backlash from his endorsement of consensus climate science, arguing that Christians have an obligation to support public policies to slow and adapt to climate disruption.⁶ The Evangelical Declaration on the Care of Creation,⁷ engineered by the Evangelical Environmental Network (EEN), prompted other evangelicals to release the Cornwall Declaration, which asserted that the Bible taught human exceptionalism and dominion over nature. The declaration claimed that good theology endorses free-market capitalism, while dismissing worries about climate disruption, biodiversity loss, and overpopulation as unduly alarmist and as not a priority for Christians.⁸ Subsequent studies also provide little evidence of a significant and influential upwelling of environmental concern and action by evangelical Christians, let alone other Christians and those of other faiths (Jones, Cox, and Navarro-Rivera 2014; Taylor 2015).

Whatever potential the world's predominant religions may have in promoting environmentally friendly behavior, it may be that new forms of nature-related spirituality and ethics will prove to be more important. Some of the most creative modes of cultural production occur at the margins of society or within the creativity that emerges among social movements variously opposed to dominant mores and policies (Taylor 1995). Indeed, the number and complexity of green religions is growing, and it appears that the strongest eco-religious movements are emerging outside of the world's predominant religions (Taylor 2010). It may also be that, in an increasingly globalized and dynamic world, new amalgamations of religious, scientific, and philosophical ideas will be more important than the axial-age religions that have flourished and competed since they arose. Some participant-observers in contemporary paganism, for example, have sought, with at least some modest success, to frame their religious sensibilities as environmentally concerned nature religions (Adler 1979; Starhawk 1979; Harvey and Hardman 1996; Harvey 1997; Taylor 1997, 2001a, 2001b; York 2004).

But, increasingly, people's religious identities are fluid – because they are religious *bricoleurs* – cobbling together their spiritual sensibilities from diverse cultural, political, and religious perceptions and practices (Taylor 2002; Harvey 2013). There are religious dimensions to much of human life that do not fall neatly within the dominant religious traditions of the world, and forms of green religion outside of long-established religious traditions are now coming into view (Taylor 2001a, 2001b, 2010; Benthall 2008). Still other evidence suggests that, contrary to more sanguine assessments, the people involved in the world's most prevalent religions engage in occasional and small-scale environmental efforts and rarely prioritize engaging in the kind of politics that targets the policy, legislative, and structural reforms that are needed to address today's environmental predicaments.⁹

Religion and Environmental Politics from the United States Goes Global and Promotes a Kind of Civil Earth Religion

Especially since Earth Day, environmental movements in the United States have increasingly engaged in international environmental politics and, in the US case, such dynamics cannot adequately be understood without attending to their religious dimensions. For instance, in 1986 His Royal Highness Prince Phillip of the British royal family orchestrated a meeting in Assisi, Italy, which included the World Wildlife Fund (of which he was President Emeritus)¹⁰ and the leaders of five of the major world religions (Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism). The meeting represented an effort to link conservation organizations with the membership and financial power of religious groups in order to combat climate change and biodiversity loss. The Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC), which was established as a direct outcome of this meeting, has had modest success funding and facilitating environmental projects among religious groups at a number of locales. It has also periodically enjoyed high-level access to the World Bank and the support of important political dignitaries and other international groups (Johnston 2013). Importantly, ARC sought to draw out and spread teachings from these religious traditions said to be environmentally friendly.

By the mid-1990s a broadly held set of assumptions had emerged among many religious individuals and groups as well as among religion scholars, including notions that: (1) religious worldviews shaped behaviors; (2) western and particularly Abrahamic worldviews are tethered to dualistic metaphysics and human exceptionalism, which lead to indifference or hostility toward nature; and (3) that Asian, Indigenous, and contemporary animistic religious movements, in contrast, promote metaphysics and ethics of interdependence and care for nature. From these presuppositions emerged an approach that Poul Pederson and Arne Kalland termed the “religious environmentalist paradigm” (Pederson 1995; cf. Kalland 2005). They claimed that those exemplifying this paradigm sought to revitalize the world's religions by recovering what they supposed were more authentic and ancient values, and thereby to craft a global environmental ethic by blending the collected wisdom of these traditions. Those involved were, indeed, participants in what can be considered a new, ecumenical religious movement that, while undergirded by scientific understandings, seeks to find common religious grounds for an ecologically salutary global environmental politics (Tucker and Williams 1997; Tucker and Berthrong 1998; Chapple 2000; Hessel and Ruether 2000; Girardot, Miller, and Liu 2001; Grim 2001; Chapple 2002; Tirosch-Samuels 2002; Foltz, Denny, and Baharuddin 2003; Grim and Tucker 2014).

It is inconceivable that such initiatives could have emerged without the history and initiative in the United States in which a wide and increasing variety of social actors have advanced the idea that Earth's environmental systems should be understood as sacred and treated with reverent care. US religion scholars Mary Evelyn Tucker and Steven Rockefeller have certainly exemplified this approach, playing leading roles in the drafting of the Earth Charter, which articulates interreligious and ethical outlines for a global Earth ethic that incorporates many of the typical aspects found in the religious environmentalist paradigm, including a metaphysics

of interconnection and a moral obligation to work toward social equity, peace, and ecological integrity.¹¹ Such international movements have been analyzed as shaping and promoting a sort of civil religion not bound by national boundaries, but rather, grounded in a global sense of community and communion, which the political scientist Daniel Deudney has termed "terrapolitan earth religion" (Deudney 1995, 1998; cf. Taylor 2010, 2012).

Whether such an Earth religion could be widely embraced would depend on many factors. The promotion of a global religio-scientific civil religion, and the arguments from other UN publications that stronger international governance is needed to combat environmental issues, have been viewed by some as evidence of an emerging pernicious global government or a threat to liberty and capitalism. Sometimes such envisioned hopes are viewed as rooted in perilous pagan, pantheistic, or other supposedly pernicious religions. Clearly, any possibility of the development of a civil Earth religion and corresponding global polity would require transformations and processes that are difficult to foresee anytime soon.

Conclusion: The Contested Terrain of Religion and Environmental Politics in the Twentieth Century

Although some scholars, religious intellectuals, and lay people involved with the world's major religious traditions have paid significant attention to environmental issues and obligations and there is no small number of official pronouncements from religious organizations and individuals about their environmental responsibilities and, although a number of organizations say they are engaged in environmental initiatives for religious reasons, there is little evidence that these developments have significantly influenced US or international environmental politics. This apparent lack of impact may be related to the counterweight of denial and even outright hostility from many influential religious individuals and groups who are indifferent to environmental concerns or view environmental advocacy negatively, in some cases even as a form of spiritually dangerous paganism (Taylor 2010).

At the same time, if we look at US environmental history and the way individuals and groups effectively promoted wildlands conservation and other environmental protections, it is fair to say that many have been motivated by differently expressed but deeply felt spiritual connections to nature, which lead to felt kinship with non-human organisms and a reverence for life. Consequently, with a different lens than one focused on the world's predominant religions, we can understand that nature-as-sacred or "dark green" religions (Taylor 2010) have exercised significant influence and likely will continue to do so despite entrenched and powerful opposition from those with different economic, political, and religious perceptions and interests.

In a very real sense the battle is on for the hearts and minds of Americans as to whether the sacred is right here in the biosphere and in the ecosystems of North America and the rest of the world, or rather, whether the sacred is above or beyond the world.

Notes

- 1 Colin Campbell (1972) argued that subcultures opposing the religious and political mainstreams in western societies are characterized by a *cultic milieu* in which deviant ideas and practices are expressed and promoted as a means for a hoped-for dramatic transformation toward more communitarian and harmonious social and political goals. Central to Campbell's idea was that these oppositional individuals and groups tend to be highly receptive to the ideas and practices of others who share, in their own ways, an identity in opposition to mainstream western ideals. Bron Taylor adapted Campbell's theory to postulate similar dynamics within a global environmental milieu in which diverse environmentally-engaged actors interact (Taylor 2002).
- 2 Nash's complete statement about this, which involves no small amount of speculative overstatement, but also more than a grain of truth, was: "Appreciation of the wilderness began in the cities. The literary gentleman wielding a pen, not the pioneer with his axe, made the first gestures of resistance against the strong currents of antipathy" (Nash [1967] 2001, 41).
- 3 See for example an EPA blogger who makes this claim: <http://blog.epa.gov/blog/2009/07/science-wednesday-earthrise/>, accessed December 2014, while one nature photographer referred to it as the "most influential environmental photograph ever taken," <http://www.abc.net.au/science/moon/earthrise.htm>, accessed December 2014.
- 4 Interestingly, some of those in the environmentalist milieu perceived that Deep Ecology was a more formalized restatement of Aldo Leopold's famous Land Ethic, and that Deep Ecology's emphasis on affective experiences of deep interconnection was reminiscent of Leopold's "ecological conscience" (Taylor and Zimmerman 2005).
- 5 <http://www.nrpe.org/>. Accessed December 2015.
- 6 Private conversation, and public address, Wake Forest University, 2013.
- 7 See <http://creationcare.org/creation-care-resources/evangelical-declaration-on-the-care-of-creation/> Accessed November 2014.
- 8 See <http://news.heartland.org/newspaper-article/2000/06/01/cornwall-declaration-environmental-stewardship> Accessed July 2014.
- 9 A group of scholars is actively reviewing all social scientific research into what Taylor (2011) labeled "the Greening of Religion Hypothesis," namely the assertion that the world's religions are, as the perspective's most prominent proponents have put it, "entering their ecological phase" (Tucker 2003, 2014). Publication of this work is expected, probably in 2016; for information, contact Bron Taylor via his website at www.brontaylor.com.
- 10 The organization is now called the Worldwide Fund for Nature.
- 11 Evidence of these trends is also outlined, and in some cases drawn from, the social scientific analysis of the greening of religion hypothesis, mentioned in endnote 9.

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