



Bron Taylor's *Dark Green Religion* after Twelve Years

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Abstract

Bron Taylor's book *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future*, published in 2010, remains to be an important resource still today. This article discusses the book in the light of Bron Taylor's work in the field of religion and ecology, interpreting the "global greening of religion" as a strong movement that is driven by discourse communities, consisting of scholars (both from the humanities and the natural sciences), writers, artists, practitioners of all walks of life, politicians, and environmental activists. After briefly discussing examples from recent literature and fiction, the article reviews some influential tendencies within the field of religion and ecology that followed the publication of *Dark Green Religion*. Besides further research that tests the book's main hypotheses, these tendencies include a new interest in animism as a key concept both for practitioners and researchers.


1. Bron Taylor and *Dark Green Religion*

When it comes to critical research in the study of religion and ecology, Bron Taylor certainly is one of the most prolific and internationally known contributors. Based at the University of Florida, where he was instrumental in building up a graduate program in "Religion and Nature", he has been at the forefront of the field's development for many years. Within the large area of religion and ecology, he focuses on environmental ethics and environmental philosophy, and he is an internationally acclaimed historian and ethnographer of environmentalism and radical environmentalist movements, surfing culture, and nature-based spiritualities. Taylor was the editor-in-chief of the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature* (2005), a major publication that not only provided the emerging field of religion and ecology with cutting-edge information and analysis, but also fostered the formation of scholarly networks and societies. One of them is the *International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature, and Culture*, which was founded in 2006 and had Bron Taylor as its first president until 2009. Affiliated with that society is the *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture*, a flagship journal in the field, also thanks to Taylor's work as its main editor since its founding in 2007.

Among his many publications, *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future* stands out as Bron Taylor's most influential contribution to a discussion that has only intensified since the book's publication in 2010. The interest among scholars to translate the book or parts of it into other languages, including Mandarin, Spanish, Portuguese, Turkish, German, and now Italian, or to engage with it in scholarly work, suggests that *Dark Green Religion* made an argument that many people in various disciplines and regional contexts find compelling.

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In his book, Taylor provides an analysis of processes of sacralising nature in North America that took shape in the nineteenth century, accelerated in their impact in the 1970s, and entered a new phase recently with what Taylor—following Roderick Nash (1989: 87–120)—calls “the global greening of religion”. In his historical reconstruction, the celebration of the first Earth Day in 1970 coincided with the renewal of and upswing in environmental movements in North America, as well as what can be called “nature religion” or “nature-as-sacred religion” (Taylor 2010: 5). What we have seen since then is a globalisation of *dark green religion*. In contrast to “green religion”, which considers environmentally friendly behaviour to be in harmony with religious duties, Taylor defines *dark green religion* as the conviction that nature is sacred, that it represents an intrinsic value, and that it therefore deserves reverence and protection (2010: 10). Hence, this is less a religion in the traditional sense of the term than it is a set of beliefs and corresponding actions, which derive from nature’s intrinsic value and its spiritual significance for human beings. In the introductory chapters of *Dark Green Religion*, included in this issue of *ARJOS*, Taylor also asserts that belief in the sacrality of nature does not necessarily involve belief in supernatural beings or forces. Hence, *dark green religion* can be understood as a “religion of immanence” that identifies the sacred in empirically accessible nature. This also means that the differentiation between “religion” and what many people rather would call “spirituality” gets blurry. Taylor, along with Benson Saler (1993) and others, focuses on the “family resemblances” that social phenomena may have with longstanding religions, without trying to demarcate where the boundaries of “religion” lie.

From the perspective of discourse theory, which is my own scholarly habitat, I am also not so much interested in whether “religion” or “spirituality” is the most appropriate (general) term. I would describe *dark green religion* as a discursive arrangement that generates meaning and orders of knowledge related to the more-than-human world; these orders of knowledge reach broad audiences in a wide variety of social circles and offer guidance for action on individual, cultural, and political levels (for my take on “The Globalization of Dark Green Religion”, see von Stuckrad 2022: 221–231).

It is exactly this collaborative work of meaning-making with reference to the more-than-human world that makes the concept of *dark green religion*—or, more generally, of nature-based spiritualities—highly useful. As Taylor makes clear in his book, we are dealing with an intellectual and cultural movement that is shaped by scholars (both from the humanities and the natural sciences), writers, artists, practitioners of all walks of life, politicians, and environmental activists. For example, the evolutionary understanding of kinship across species can easily lead to concrete ethical convictions that criticize anthropocentric systems, as well as to new spiritual practices (such as shamanism or paganism) or to environmental action (which sees the fight for the Earth—or Gaia—as “self-defence”).

If we look at this collaborative work of what I call discourse communities across cultural locations, we can better understand the fundamental change that has been going on when it comes to critiques of human exceptionalism and the strive for planetary kinship and relationality. The Disney productions Taylor analyses in *Dark Green Religion* are a case in point, but also blockbusters such as *Avatar*, which Taylor explored after the publication of his book (2013). I think it is not an exaggeration to say that we are dealing here with a profound cultural change that establishes an order of knowledge about life on Earth in which humans are seen as embedded in structures of

nonhuman life, intelligence, and consciousness. *Dark green religion* and nature-based spirituality should therefore be considered an influential global phenomenon.

Beside films, another indication of the broad acceptance of this order of knowledge is the fact that popular scientific and literary publications, which address precisely this discursive arrangement, have become bestsellers in recent years. Examples include Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants* (2013), Ursula K. Le Guin's *Late in the Day: Poems 2010–2014* (2016), David George Haskell's *The Songs of Trees: Stories from Nature's Great Connectors* (2018), Jeff VanderMeer's *The Strange Bird* (2018), Max Porter's *Lanny* (2019), and Elif Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees* (2021), among many others.

Perhaps most illuminating in our context is Richard Powers' novel *The Overstory*, which was published in 2018 and immediately became a *New York Times* bestseller (more on *The Overstory* and related works in von Stuckrad 2022: 227–231). It was included in the list of the “10 Best Books of 2018” in the *Washington Post* and the *Chicago Tribune*. At the end of the year, the book was shortlisted for the 2018 Man Booker Prize, and in 2019 Powers received the Pulitzer Prize for distinguished fiction for his book. *The Overstory* is about “reimagining our place in the living world”, as a review in the *New York Times* put it.¹ The novel describes nature and especially trees as powerful and animated. Powers' trees are integrated into a communicational space that encompasses nature and human beings, whereby the trees offer long-forgotten knowledge that is decisive for the future of the planet: “A chorus of living wood sings to the woman: if your mind were only a slightly greener thing, we'd drown you in meaning. The pine she leans against says: Listen. There's something you need to hear” (Powers 2018: 4; emphasis original). Through at first inexplicable and sometimes mysterious coincidences, different characters in the novel come together to actively engage in saving endangered forests in California and other parts of the world. Only over the course of the narrative does it become clear that the trees themselves—and their intelligence—are responsible for these events. Despite their very different origins and personalities, the protagonists are initiated into an animistic world, and they sense the insignificance of the human species in comparison to nature as a whole, as well as nature's livelihood and consciousness.

Richard Powers is part of a larger discourse community. His research for the novel included reading Bron Taylor's work, as he acknowledges in an interview with Everett Hamner:

“ The book is indeed filled with what Bron Taylor would call *dark green religion*. But in most cases, it's a religion without metaphysics, which is something that even the religion of humanism can't always claim! Tree-consciousness is a religion of life, a kind of bio-pantheism. My characters are willing to entertain a *telos* in living things that scientific empiricism shies away from. *Life wants something from us*. The trees say to each of these people: *There's something you need to hear*. (Hamner 2018; emphasis original)²

This example illustrates two things: First, Taylor's concept of *dark green religion* is a useful tool to analyse a wide range of spiritually, artistically, and politically influential developments in North America and Europe that are increasingly globalising. Second, the large field of nature-based

¹ For this and other reviews and information, see the author's website at www.richardpowers.net/the-overstory (22/05/2022).

² Taylor has written an essay that is, in part, about the real-life individuals who inspired some of the characters in *The Overstory* (Taylor 2019).

spiritualities, including its literary and artistic actors, is aware of academic interpretations and responds to such research in many ways. These diverse, reciprocally influential phenomena and actors represent exactly what discourse communities are all about.

2. Recent Discussions and Developments

Indeed, *Dark Green Religion* provides a rich collection of examples of a huge field of phenomena. Many more could have been added to the analysis, as Taylor points out in his new introduction to the German edition in 2020.³ As a trained sociologist of religion with a background in mixed-methods research, Taylor considered his findings in *Dark Green Religion* to be an evidence-based working hypothesis that deserves further critical investigation. Consequently, subsequent to the publication of the book, he orchestrated a multi-year comprehensive review of social scientific research, both qualitative and quantitative, to further assess the perceptions he had arrived at through his own research. This review found that worldviews and values akin to what he had called *dark green religion* are indeed gaining cultural traction; moreover, they do appear to lead to pro-environmental behaviour.⁴ Taylor also designed his own survey instrument to test whether the traits that are typical of *dark green religion* are associated with pro-environmental behaviour; the first study that included this instrument found that they are.⁵

As an important development since the publication of *Dark Green Religion* I want to mention the strong academic tendency to take animism seriously, a concept that had been negatively connotated in anthropology and the study of religion for a long time (see the different positions of Chidester 2005 and Harvey 2005a in the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*). The new interest in animism also corresponds with an upswing of animistic ideas and practices in vernacular forms of religion, particularly in milieus of nature-based spiritualities. In 1999, Nurit Bird-David proposed a reassessment of the anthropological concept of animism (Bird-David 1999). This thread was taken up by other researchers, such as Anne-Christine Homborg in her exploration of “other ways of understanding indigenous peoples’ cosmologies than ‘primitive’ ” and her question of “whether these ways might allow us to understand animism, not as a failed epistemology but a relational one” (Homborg 2016: 27). This research provides new perspectives on nature-based spirituality, as expressed in religious practices such as paganism and shamanism, but which also influences cultural milieus and lifestyles such as veganism, mountaineering, or surfing. These worldviews attribute intrinsic value to nature, often with religious connotations that sacralise nature and conceive of it as animated or ensouled. Today the term “animism” is also used as a self-designation for such spiritual orientations. It is yet another example of discourse communities that scholars are intra-acting (as Karen Barad would call it; see Barad 2007: 33) with these new identifications and practices, and the study of animism has brought forth innovative analyses that

³ Taylor provides additional examples of phenomena not discussed in *Dark Green Religion*, including music and videos, at http://www.brontaylor.com/environmental_books/dgr/favorites.html (22/05/2022).

⁴ The review also found that contrary to the perceptions and hopes of some scholars and religionists, there is no compelling evidence of a significant “greening” of the world’s predominant religions. See Taylor / Van Wieren / Zaleha 2016. For a history of the scholarly ferment over religion and environmental behaviour see Taylor 2016.

⁵ In this research, the scale that was based on the dark green religion hypothesis was combined with an environmental humility instrument developed by Taylor’s collaborators in this project; see Taylor / Levasseur / Wright 2020.

radically question earlier convictions (see, for instance, Kohn 2013; Haberman 2020; Johnston 2021).

Relationality has become a key concept for analysing animistic approaches to the world. Graham Harvey's definition reflects this understanding: Animists are "people who recognize that the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human, and that life is always lived in relationship to others. Animism is lived out in various ways that are all about learning to act respectfully (carefully and constructively) towards and among other persons" (Harvey 2005b: xi). Graham Harvey also edited an impressive *Handbook of Contemporary Animism* (2013), which confirms that we today can speak of a broad movement that connects theoretical and practical elements of spiritualities, which often position themselves outside of the more institutionalised religious traditions.

Indeed, looking at the discourses of nature-based spirituality, there is not much evidence of a negative connotation to the term animism. On the contrary, the concept stands for the (positive) assumption that everything that exists is alive and animated, even—for some—supposedly lifeless things, such as stones or rivers. This confirms the usefulness of Bron Taylor's considerations in *Dark Green Religion*, where he uses the term as a key concept to analyse *dark green religion*, distinguishing a "spiritual animism" from a "naturalistic" one (Taylor 2010: 15–16).

In conclusion, it is very good to see that with the publication of the first chapters of *Dark Green Religion* in *ARJOS*—and an Italian translation of the whole book coming up—the conversation about *dark green religion* and nature-based spiritualities enters a next round of discussion. We can only hope that this contributes to our learning to act respectfully towards and among other persons on this planet.

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