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Dark Green Religion: Re-Enchanting the World through the Original Vision of Sacred Unity

The contemporary landscape of nature-based spirituality represents a significant and increasingly prevalent departure from the anthropocentric frameworks that have characterized traditional biblical monotheism for centuries. This essay argues that contemporary nature-based spiritualities provide a biocentric alternative to the dualistic frameworks of monotheism by re-establishing the biosphere as an immanent and sacred entity.

As a scholar of religion and environmental ethics, Bron Taylor's comprehensive work on the subject of "Dark Green Religion" centers this global movement on the foundational belief that nature itself is sacred, imbued with intrinsic value, and worthy of reverent care (Taylor 2010, ix). This perspective directly challenges the long-standing Abrahamic view that nature exists primarily to serve humanity, or as a secular, inert "object" from which the divine must be sought through transcendence or supernatural rescue (White 1967, 4). Focusing her career on the intersection of religion and environmentalism, Susan Bratton informs us that, "Both indigenous and world religions sacralize natural objects" which can cultivate a greater degree of human respect for the natural world (Bratton 2020, 11).

Taylor argues that this kind of nature religion is far more widespread than is commonly recognized, often manifesting as a deep spirituality that involves one's most profound moral

values and religious experiences that are centered on the earth. Within this broader movement, Taylor identifies four distinct pillars (Spiritual Animism, Naturalistic Animism, Gaian Spirituality, and Gaian Naturalism) which serve as the critical conceptual framework for modern nature-oriented beliefs and practical activities.

Taylor identifies the first pillar, “Spiritual Animism,” as involving the perception that natural entities, forces, and non-human life forms possess a soul or specific spiritual intelligence (Taylor 2010, 14). This path often includes direct communication with these intelligences, treating the earth as teeming with spiritual beings with whom one can enter into a relationship. In contrast, the second pillar, “Naturalistic Animism,” shares a similar felt kinship with life but remains skeptical of supernaturalistic dimensions (Taylor 2010, 22). Instead, it focuses on those who are agnostic about parallel spiritual worlds but still wish to understand natural forces through a deeply ecological and biocentric lens. Both forms of animism foster an ethical ethos where all species are considered intrinsically valuable and where the destruction of nature is viewed as a desecrating act.

Practically, these beliefs often manifest in Neopaganism, which is a movement characterized by a “polytheistic imagination” with practices that, according to scholar Sarah Pike, “highlight the centrality of the relationship between humans and nature” (Pike 2004, 18). I interpret Pike’s words on Dr. Sarah Gagnebin’s podcast to be an attempt to critique the old Christian “dominion mindset” for helping to fuel the West’s history of exploiting nature, and instead moving toward true stewardship or even equality as our reimagined connection to nature.

The third and fourth pillars fall under the umbrella of “Gaian Earth Religion” (Taylor 2010, 16), which perceives the biosphere or cosmos as an interdependent living system resembling an organism. “Gaian Spirituality” takes a supernaturalistic approach, perceiving the super-organism of the biosphere to have an actual consciousness (Taylor 2010, 16). Conversely, “Gaian Naturalism” is skeptical of supernatural metaphysics and restricts its claims to the scientific mainstream (Taylor 2010, 16). Taylor informs students that this form of naturalism utilizes the “Gaia Theory” of James Lovelock, which asserts that the biosphere functions as a self-regulating organism, as a powerful metaphor for interdependence. According to Taylor, Lovelock concludes that if humanity could revere the planet with the same respect previously reserved for God, it would benefit both the species and the earth. These perspectives replace monotheistic concepts of “stewardship” with a model of biological humility, arguing that stewardship is often flawed by an “unconscious hubris” (Taylor 2010, 36).

Scholar and Tribal Chairman, Greg Sarris, provides a contemporary Indigenous perspective on the “Original Vision” by illustrating how the landscape is a rich, narrative *being* rather than passive matter. In his work *How a Mountain Was Made*, Sarris draws from Coast Miwok and Southern Pomo traditions to present Sonoma Mountain as a “sentient entity with its own agency and ‘Chief’s Song’” (Sarris 2017, 107). He argues that knowledge is specific to geographical locations, and by listening to the stories of the land, humanity can move away from modern detachment and back toward a state of enchantment.

Activist writer, Gary Snyder, serves as a modern bridge between ancient animism and contemporary environmentalism, blending Zen Buddhism with Native American concepts of

North America. In his collection *Turtle Island*, Snyder critiques the "mind-body dualism" of monotheistic culture and advocates for a return to the understanding that humankind "is but a part of the fabric of life—dependent on the whole fabric for his very existence" (Snyder 1974, 91). Snyder's legacy remains a primary force in the revival of animism and deep ecology in Western society.

For students of religion, these concepts will inevitably resurface in both academic conversations and personal passions whenever the intersection of religion, ethics, and the environment is discussed. As the global community continues to grapple with ecological crises, the debate between "stewardship" and "biocentrism" will remain a central point of tension in interfaith dialogues and policy-making. Furthermore, students will find these pillars relevant when exploring modern "spiritual but not religious" identities, as many people now find their most profound religious experiences in the direct contemplation of and communion with nature rather than in institutional doctrine and rote ritual.

Equipped with this understanding, students of religion are now better prepared to engage in critical conversations regarding the "greening of religion or religious environmentalism" and the potential for traditional faiths to reform their environmental stances (Taylor 2010, 10). They can lead nuanced discussions on how religious narratives shape our impact on the land, and can participate in the "metaphysics of reconnection" with the landscape by advocating for the intrinsic value of non-human life (Taylor 2010, 13). Ultimately, by recognizing the "Original Vision" of a unified, sacred cosmos, students can act as bridges between scientific naturalism and spiritual reverence, helping to heal the ancient fracture between humanity and the environment.

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