

# Surfing into Spirituality and a New, Aquatic Nature Religion

Bron Taylor

Advance Access publication on October 19, 2007.

# Contents

“Soul Surfing” as Aquatic Nature Religion . . . . .	3
Paradise and a Myth of Origins . . . . .	6
Spiritual Intensification and Globalization . . . . .	10
Surfing and Environmentalism . . . . .	15
Experience and Rhetoric . . . . .	17
Connection, Communion, and Healing . . . . .	20
Closeout . . . . .	22
References . . . . .	25

“Soul surfers” consider surfing to be a profoundly meaningful practice that brings physical, psychological, and spiritual benefits. They generally agree on where surfing initially developed, that it assumed a religious character, was suppressed for religious reasons, has been undergoing a revival, and enjoins reverence for and protection of nature. This subset of the global surfing community should be understood as a new religious movement—a globalizing, hybridized, and increasingly influential example of what I call aquatic nature religion. For these individuals, surfing is a religious form in which a specific sensual practice constitutes its sacred center, and the corresponding experiences are constructed in a way that leads to a belief in nature as powerful, transformative, healing, and sacred. I advance this argument by analyzing these experiences, as well as the myths, rites, symbols, terminology, technology, material culture, and ethical mores that are found within surfing subcultures.

I am the ocean

—Krish[n]a in the Bhagavad Gita 10:24

And the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the Waters

—Genesis 1:2.<sup>1</sup>

## “Soul Surfing” as Aquatic Nature Religion<sup>2</sup>

ON A SUNNY NOVEMBER DAY in 1997, I played hooky from the meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion meeting in San Diego, California. The surf was up and I was soon chatting with a young woman at a surf shop, deciding which board to rent. When she learned I was formerly an ocean lifeguard from the region, transplanted to Wisconsin, she exclaimed, “Whoa dude, no amount of money is worth living away from Mother Ocean.”

As anyone experienced with surfing cultures can attest, including surfers themselves, “Surfing isn’t easily categorized. It is based in sport, but can drift into art, vocation and avocation, even religion” (Warshaw 1997: inside cover), or as Brad Melekian mused in *Surfer* magazine, “Why can’t surfing be its own religion?” (Melekian 2005).

For some, surfing is a religious experience, and it does not take long analyzing material surf culture or its associated rhetoric to see its spirituality-infused nature. Surfer and amateur religion observer Melekian concluded accurately that surfing resembles

---

<sup>1</sup> Quoted by Warshaw (2004: ix–x).

<sup>2</sup> Theoretical underpinnings and discussion of terminology, such as religion, spirituality, and nature religion, appear in “Aquatic Nature Religion,” which precedes and introduces this article and its two companion studies exploring Fly Fishing and Kayaking. An unabridged version of this article is available at [www.religionandnature.com/bron](http://www.religionandnature.com/bron).

religion in important ways, even while he promoted surfing as a legitimate spiritual path, and asserted that it makes one more compassionate toward both people and nature. It is easy to multiply examples. Jay Moriarity in the *Ultimate Guide to Surfing* wrote

Surfing fits into all categories. It's an ART by the way you express yourself on a wave. It's a SPORT because you compete with it, and it's SPIRITUAL because it's just you and Mother Nature (Moriarity and Gallagher 2001: 10).

As the sport has spread globally so has this form of aquatic nature religion. A book, translated from German and published in English by a German publisher, and found in an Istanbul bookshop in June 2006, began with the claim that surfing

has a spiritual aura that you only get once you've experienced it yourself.... It's always a journey to the inner self... [Surfing] never will lose its soul and spirit, because the magic that envelops you when surfing is far too powerful (Mackert 2005: 3).

The ideas expressed in this statement—that there is a mysterious magic in surfing that can only be apprehended directly through the experience, that surfing fosters self-realization, that commercialization is a defiling act, that even such threats cannot obviate its spiritual power—have been expressed repeatedly, in various ways and venues, within surfing subcultures.

The present analysis springs forth from these sorts of perceptions. I argue that a significant part of the evolving global, surfing world can be understood as a new religious movement in which sensual experiences constitute its sacred center.<sup>3</sup> These experiences, and the subcultures in which people reflect upon them, foster understandings of nature as powerful, transformative, healing, and even sacred. Such perceptions, in turn, often lead to environmental ethics and action in which Mother Nature, and especially its manifestation as Mother Ocean, is considered to be worthy of reverent care. This produces a holistic axiology that environmental ethicists label biocentrism or ecocentrism. Surfers' deep feelings of communion and kinship with the non-human animals they encounter during their practice, which sometimes take on an animistic ethos, can also lead surfers to discrete political action on behalf of particular species and individual animals.

As yet there is no firm data on the number of surfers globally, let alone an empirical study that quantifies the ways in which religion becomes intertwined with surfing,

---

<sup>3</sup> Kocku von Stuckrad is correct that the term “new religions” is fraught with problems for all religions are new and innovative in different times and to various degrees (Stuckrad 2006), but I nevertheless find the term useful because the sport has been constructed, perceived, and practiced in new ways, religiously, over the last several generations.

or that documents the proportion of surfers whose spirituality can be characterized in the way provided in this introduction.<sup>4</sup> Individual surfers and surfing cultures are complicated and diverse, and they often reflect broader patterns of the society in which they are situated. A dissertation by Colleen McGloin focusing on Australian surf cultures, for example, mustered considerable evidence for her characterization of them as nationalistic, sexist if not misogynistic, and violent (McGloin 2005).<sup>5</sup> Although particular surf cultures and some surfers can easily be subject to such criticism, this is not the present focus. Instead, my analysis spotlights a subset of the surfing community that experiences the practice in spiritual terms, deriving meaning and important life-lessons from it, even understanding it as a religion in and of itself.<sup>6</sup> These people sometimes call themselves “soul surfers,” a term invented by them and which can be traced to the 1970s in both the United States and Australia (McGloin 2005: 70–75).

The Ultimate Guide to Surfing began one section asking “What is soul surfing?,” answering that it is “a powerful, elemental activity” that surfers indulge in “for the pure act of riding on a pulse of nature’s energy, and the contentment this instils (sic) in the heart.” In this account, surfing brings “magic that only comes from spending time on the moving canvas” (Moriarity and Gallagher 2001: 73, 75).<sup>7</sup> Explaining what this has to do with “soul,” Gallagher added that the key is how the experience connects the surfer to nature, its energies, and its wild creatures (Moriarity and Gallagher 2001: 77).

It may be surprising to find such spirituality associated with surfing. It will become more comprehensible if we analyze surfing subcultures with the lenses typically deployed by scholars of religion. Their foci include sacred texts, myths, symbols, beliefs and practices (including ritualizing, ethics, both everyday, and related to life’s most critical challenges and transitional periods); religious terminology and technologies; people, animals, plants, and places considered extraordinarily powerful or divine; gender and ethnic dynamics; institutions and processes for transmitting and spreading religious knowledge; and endogenous and exogenous relationships, including the ways these relationships are negotiated and contested. All such analyses can illuminate the

---

<sup>4</sup> Estimates of surfer numbers range from two million or more in the United States and from a low of five to a high of twenty-three million globally (Warshaw 2003: 605).

<sup>5</sup> McGloin acknowledges that not all surfers are violent or misogynistic but asserts “sexism and misogyny are commonplace in surf culture” (McGloin 2005: 217, 230, 233–247). The unabridged version of this article (see note 2) discusses McGloin’s research in more detail (see also Tomson and Moser 2006; Young 2000).

<sup>6</sup> Those who find lessons in surfing that reinforce their mainstream religious beliefs include Bethany Hamilton who lost a limb to a shark but not her faith in Jesus (Hamilton et al., 2004), “the surfing Rabbi” Norm Shifren (2001), and those involved in Christian surfing associations and publications, as represented in Web sites such as [www.christiansurfers.net](http://www.christiansurfers.net) and [www.christiansurfmag.com](http://www.christiansurfmag.com).

<sup>7</sup> In an online reflection about “soul surfing” TinCanFury wrote that surfing is not about money or fame but rather it “puts you *one with nature*, clears your *soul* of *bad vibes*, and can make you a more *humble* person” (available at [everything2.com/index.pl?node\\_id=717980](http://everything2.com/index.pl?node_id=717980), posted 23 August 2003. Accessed on June 2003, author’s emphases).

religious dimensions of surfing, and the following sections examine a number of these forms.

## Paradise and a Myth of Origins

Among soul surfers, there is no common story about the origins of the biosphere. There is, however, significant agreement regarding how surfing practice emerged, that it assumed a religious character, was suppressed for religious reasons, and has been undergoing a revival since the early twentieth century.

Glenn Henning, who in 1984 founded the environmentalist Surfrider Foundation and assembled the team of surfer visionaries who would develop the organization, began during the late 1980s to explore the possibility that ancient Peruvians were the first surfers. He based his speculations on their art and architecture, about which he began to learn during a Peruvian surfing trip (Henning and Taylor 2005: 1610– 1611). Ben Finney, a southern California ocean lifeguard and surfer turned anthropologist, later found some evidence for ancient Peruvian wave riding, which was eventually published in a co-authored book (Houston and Finney 1996). He speculated that Peruvians may have ridden waves using small reed-woven boats as early as 3000 BCE.<sup>8</sup>

Until these suppositions, a somewhat less speculative origin myth, based on extant documentary records, had gained currency within surfing cultures. This was then embellished in a way that turned history toward myth-making. The dominant narrative traced the origins of surfing to the putatively Edenic Polynesian cultures of the South Pacific. A good example of this narrative, but hardly the only one, was articulated by Drew Kampion, one of surfing's most prolific chroniclers, in *Stoked!: A History of Surf Culture* (Kampion 2003a).<sup>9</sup>

According to this narrative, these oceanic cultures were at home in and at play with the forces and spirits of nature. For a millennium, these South Pacific cultures were engaged in prone wave riding on small boards. The practice was highly ritualized, the story continues, and this extended to standup board surfing, perhaps especially as it emerged in Hawai'i. Before trees were felled to construct boards, for example, the Kahuna placed a fish offering by the tree, prayers were said, and additional rites were performed at the board's dedication (Kampion 2003a: 34; drawing on Houston and Finney 1996).<sup>10</sup> In another typical recitation of surfing's origin myth,

---

<sup>8</sup> For reflections on surfing history, see Finney's in Coburn and others (2002: 82–103) and also Craig Stecyk, who draws on Henning's thesis about Peruvian wave riding in Colburn and others (2002: 32–81, 228–229).

<sup>9</sup> On Eden's continued cultural currency, see Eisenberg (1998) and Merchant (2003).

<sup>10</sup> The Web site of the Hawaiian Boarding Company demonstrates that surfboard making, understood as a spiritual practice, has survived into the twenty-first century, see [www.hawaiibc.com/surf.htm](http://www.hawaiibc.com/surf.htm). Accessed on June 2006.

As early as the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Hawaiians were masters of surfing, combined with a deep spiritual consciousness of water and nature...[But] this paradisaical situation was suddenly transformed with the first landing of the white man on Hawaii in 1778 under the leadership of Captain James Cook. Metal, guns, cannons, uniforms, alcohol, sexually-transmitted diseases and a strange new religion led to the cultural implosion of the indigenous Hawaiian civilization....With the destruction of the old civilization, the original surfing culture disappeared (Mackert 2005: 8).

The demise of the surf-focused culture in Hawai'i was accelerated by the arrival of European missionaries, beginning in 1820, many of whom sought to destroy what they considered to be the pagan dimensions of Hawai'ian culture, including surfing, with its accompanying nakedness and casual sexuality. According to surfing historians, this dark period of cultural genocide and deterioration almost ended the sport and by the late nineteenth century surfing was rarely practiced (Houston and Finney 1996; Young 1983; Colburn et al., 2002, esp. 82–100; Kampion 2003a: 30–36).

Suddenly, however, after Jack London and other adventurers began to write about the practice in the late nineteenth century and commercial interests saw its potential as a tourist attraction, a renaissance began in Hawai'i in the early twentieth century, and soon after in California, which adopted much of the Polynesian/Hawai'an ethos. This revitalization was driven in part by George Freeth, the Irish-Hawaiian surfer lionized by Jack London in a 1907 magazine article on surfing in Hawai'i. Freeth later moved to California, becoming a surfing icon as well as the state's first professional lifeguard (Warshaw 2004: ix). But by most accounts, the most decisive figure in the revitalization and transmission of the sport was the charismatic, full-blooded Hawai'ian swimmer and surfer, Duke Kahanamoku.

After swimming his way to an Olympic gold medal in 1912, Kahanamoku demonstrated surfing to enthusiastic crowds on both coasts of North America and then in Australia. Glenn Hening, who later in his activist career co-founded the Groundswell Society, in part to carry forward Kahanamoku's legacy, commented, "The Duke promoted surfing around the world, and modern surfers see him as the embodiment of an ethical spirituality that may be just this side of a religious belief system" (Hening and Taylor 2005: 1610). Hening and many other soul surfers trace surfing's "Aloha spirit" to Kahanamoku.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> Among soul surfers, discussion of surfing's Aloha spirit is sometimes accompanied by understandings of the word Aloha as originally having to do with one's frontal presence and breath, and with the exchange of breath or spirit, and even the breath of life. For some surfers, and the native Hawai'ians they are inspired by and with whom they feel affinity, the expression of Aloha is indeed as much a spiritual blessing as a salutation or goodbye. "Aloha: Literally, alo means 'experience' and ha means 'breath of life'," according to Drew Kampion in *Stoked!: A History of Surf Culture* (2003a: 38). For a similar understanding, see Mackert (2005: 17). When I asked Kekuhi Kealiikanakaole, a native Hawai'ian scholar about Kampion's understanding of Aloha, she replied, "'alo' means your frontal presence. So when we say, 'he alo a he alo' we mean face to face. 'Ha' means breath. The importance of this word...is that

In the wake of Kahanamoku's travels, the mainstream of the surfing history continued, as a self-consciously "tribal" surfer subculture evolved in California and Australia, eventually expanding to other continents. Describing this evolution, Kampion asserted,

Surf culture has a rich history and a unique system of rituals, distinctive language elements, symbolic elements, a loose tribal hierarchy, and unique lifestyle characteristics that have been broadly imitated and emulated around the world. Even today, aspects of surf culture express fundamental and persisting Polynesian cultural values, which regarded surfing as noble, positive, and deeply imbued with spiritual meaning (Kampion 2003a: 46).

The ritualizing even included sacrifices (usually of real or model surfboards in bonfires) and prayers to call forth waves, which were loosely based on what was known or surmised about Polynesian and Hawai'ian rituals (Finney in Colburn et al. 2002: 87–88; cf. Fournlander 1916). Much of this was playfully performed at surfing-themed parties and was not taken seriously.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, play can become profound ritual, and for some surfers, it did precisely that.<sup>13</sup>

Suring historians credit Tom Blake (1902–1994) with much of the extension of a Hawai'ian-flavored surfing spirituality to California. Born in Northern Wisconsin, Blake saw a newsreel about surfing a decade later, met Duke Kahanamoku in a Michigan movie theatre lobby as an eighteen-year old, and soon afterward moved to Los Angeles to pursue the sport. He eventually revolutionized surfing by inventing lighter, hollow surfboards, thereby making surfing easier and thus more popular. Blake also became deeply involved in both lifeguarding and surfing subcultures in California, Hawai'i, and Florida, before returning to Wisconsin in 1967. There he wrote the animistically themed "Voice of the Wave," which was published in *Surfing* in 1969 (Warshaw 2003:67).

Elsewhere Blake expressed reverence for the sea and a biocentric kinship ethics.<sup>14</sup> At times, Blake put his faith simply: "Nature=God" (Lynch and Gault-Williams 2001: 217, cf. 181–182; Kampion 2003a: 46; Warshaw 2003: 67). Blake's spiritual message was not lost on soul surfers. For Kampion, Blake

---

when each of us breathe those cavities that we use to have air enter and leave are the same cavities with which we share the breath of a friend, neighbor, relative or acquaintance. That is the meaning. And surfing, well for the local surfer guy, it's his/her daily spiritual experience, a sort of reconnection or meditation. On another level, the ocean for us is Kanaloa, or deep knowing and ancestral memories. This is why we need the salt water for cleansing, whether it's a sea bath or just a stroll" (6 October 2005, email).

<sup>12</sup> Surfboard sacrifice to bring larger surf is depicted in a number of surfing films, including *Point Break* (1991) and *Big Wednesday* (1978). A proper rite, including solemn prayers to the god of the sea, is described at [www.hawaiiibc.com/surf.htm](http://www.hawaiiibc.com/surf.htm).

<sup>13</sup> Robert Orsi asserts that playfulness can play a dramatic role in transforming individuals and social realities (Orsi 1997: 10, 13). Scholars should be alert to when and how play (including satire) can become invested with religious meaning. For examples from radical environmental subcultures, see Manes (1990) and LaChapelle (1989), and for a study of them, see Taylor (2002).

<sup>14</sup> For the most remarkable quotes, see Lynch and Gault-Williams (2001: 216, 219, 222).



believed that it was all God. The intrinsic sustaining balance of the natural world is self-evident. It is something that is educated into each surfer. If you ride waves long enough and keep your eyes and heart open, you get it (Kampion 2003b: 187).

Blake's spiritual epistemology is shared by many soul surfers, who believe the sacredness of nature will naturally occur to surfing's openhearted practitioners. The writer and surfboard shaper Dave Parmenter placed Blake at the right hand of Duke Kahanamoku in the surfing world's pantheon:

Some argue that surfing is a religion. If so, the great Hawaiian surfer and Olympic swimming champion Duke Kahanamoku would certainly have to be seen as surfing's messiah or prophet, and from the vantage point of the present day we can see that Tom Blake became his chief apostle.

The resulting friendship, with Duke as the catalyst, helped to accelerate a modern rebirth of the Hawaiian sport of kings, which had been in a state of lethargy brought on by the decimation of the Hawaiian people and their culture by Western encroachment....The missionaries brought their western God to Hawaii, but in the end it was surfing missionaries such as Duke Kahanamoku and Tom Blake who had the last word. Not only is surfing more widespread than many established religions; it has also proved to be a far more peaceful, benevolent, and inclusive "faith" than most. Aside from isolated pockets of territoriality, surfers of many races and languages co-exist with a degree of tolerance and harmony that should be envied by many world faiths.<sup>15</sup>

This passage, written early in the twenty-first century, illustrates the ways in which the narrative cosmogony of surfing faith had, by then, come to be understood by some soul surfers. It also reveals an understanding of some of the things that usually constitute a religion (beliefs, saints, ethical ideals), and a sense that surfing had become a globalizing religious movement. Perhaps most remarkable, it demonstrates a faith in the beneficence of this movement and a belief that it might even help promote world peace.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> Parmenter, Dave. "The Uncommon Journey of a Pioneer Waterman." Available at [www.tomblakebiography.com/](http://www.tomblakebiography.com/). Accessed on June 2006. See Warshaw (1997: 93) for Parmenter's naturalistic metaphysics of interconnection and environmental concerns. While Parmenter overstated the tolerance and harmony found in surfing cultures (Young 2000; Anonymous 2004), others have exaggerated surfing-related violence (Warshaw 2004: xix).

<sup>16</sup> The Ultimate Guide to Surfing depicts surfing as a practice that is uniting all nationalities and races (Moriarty and Gallagher 2001: 88). Much earlier, Tom Blake asserted that surfing's spiritual teachings promote respect for all living things as well as the peacemaking mission of the United Nations (Lynch and Gault-Williams 2001: 214).

Such contemporary depictions of the sport as a religion are possible only because of the gestalt changes in religion that began largely in the 1960s, which decisively transformed the West's religious land and seascape.

## Spiritual Intensification and Globalization

It was during the 1960s that surfing's spiritual revival intensified as it fused with new religious and political currents, blending anti-establishment and anti-hierarchical attitudes with holistic metaphysics that were connected to psychedelics, religions originating in Asia or found in indigenous societies, America's own metaphysical traditions, and neo-Paganism. The impact was that surfing, for some, became a part of a wider American turn toward nature religion (Taylor and Van Horn 2006; Taylor 2005; Albanese 1990, 2002).

The influence of the psychedelic age was then and can still be discerned in surfing cultures. Any number of graphics from surf magazines, surf-film posters, surf-music album covers, and designs on surfboards and other elements of surfing's material culture can illustrate the sport's psychedelic dimension, especially those dating to the late 1960s and the 1970s.<sup>17</sup> As Matt Warshaw observed, beginning in the late 1960s, surf movies revealed that the sport had "proudly and enthusiastically joined the counterculture," some even amounted to "a bigscreen promo for LSD" and other drugs (Warshaw 2005: 11).

This psychedelic influence often appeared in the titles and advertising copy upon film posters, further illustrating the growth and development of nature spirituality in the sport, and how this was sometimes intertwined with the psychedelic era (Warshaw 2005: 66–101). The film *Evolution* (1969), for example, was "a surprising new color film depicting the natural change surfing is experiencing" (Warshaw 2005: 66), *The Natural Art* (1969) was "an organic 90 minutes of positive vibrations" (Warshaw 2005: 67), and *Pacific Vibrations* resembled "Woodstock on a wave" (Warshaw 2005: 71). This last film's famous poster was crafted by Rick Griffin, who was considered one of San Francisco's psychedelic-era "Big Five" illustrators (Warshaw 2005: 70–71). During the 1970s, Griffin also illustrated the poster for *Five Summer Stories* (Warshaw 2005: 76) and produced cartoons in surfing magazines which depicted surfing as a mystical, nature-bonding experience.

These perceptions also dominated the films themselves. Perhaps the two most perennial themes in surf movies, whatever differences may inhere to them, are surfing as an ecstatic and mystical experience, and the pursuit of perfect waves and paradisiacal surfing places. During the 1960s and 1970s, surf movies had not yet gone Hollywood,

---

<sup>17</sup> For a good start, see Kampion (2003a, 2003b); for the famous "Tales from the Tube" cartoons, created by Rick Griffin, in which the surfer experiences mystical experiences and even "satori" through surfing, see Warshaw (1997: 72), Colburn et al. (2002: 136–139). For psychedelic designs on surfboards in 1975, see Colburn et al. (2002: 209).

and were usually shown at Civic Auditoriums and fraternal clubs, and other small venues, where great and even riotous enthusiasm was often expressed, reminding or vicariously conveying some of the experience for which many surfers had taken up as their personal quest. Having attended surf movies in such venues, it is easy for me to retroactively apply scholarly lenses indebted to Victor Turner and view these events as powerful ritual forms that produce and/or reinforce the perception that surfing induces liminal experiences.

Turner's understanding of the centrality of ritual in fostering "liminal" religious perception is pertinent to the analysis of surfing in general and its movies in particular. For Turner, rituals offer "decisive keys to the understanding of how people think and feel about relationships and about the natural and social environments in which they operate" (Turner 1969: 6). His thesis, about how rituals not only maintain the social order but also sometimes create new social possibilities, is equally apropos to the current analysis of surfing subcultures. Also pertinent is Jonathan Z. Smith's contention that ritual is an act that creates the sacred: "Ritual is not an expression of or a response to 'the Sacred'; rather, something or someone is made sacred by ritual" (Smith 1987: 105).

Surf movies help construct the experience of surfers at the same time that they remind surfers of the pleasures and ecstatic (even sometimes mystical) experiences they have while surfing. Viewing such film together promotes and reinforces participants' "collective identity," a we-feeling that is often expressed with the self-referential term "tribe." Turner can help us to understand why some prominent soul surfers today suggest surf film viewing is best when it is a collective experience, held in small, intimate, non-commercial venues. "Context is everything with surf movies," as Warshaw noted in 2005, but

Watching a surf movie on TV today is like seeing a photo of Woodstock on a postcard. The genuine surf movie experience was (and to some degree still is) dependent on place and locale, requiring not only a big screen but crowds and anticipation and noise and at least a dozen quick-witted hecklers, plus a half-pint of Schnapps getting handed your way, and a nice big fatty in your shirt pocket. A passing and slightly manic togetherness was the surf film's strangest byproduct (Warshaw 2005: 7).

In addition to reinforcing the "stoked" feeling that surfing brings, surf films reprised the dream of Edenic return common within surfing cultures. The most famous surf film, Bruce Brown's *Endless Summer* (1963), depicted a global search for pristine places and "the perfect wave." According to Warshaw, it "now and then slipped over into profound, even spiritual areas" and became "the sport's finest emotional and spiritual envoy," explaining even to those who never surfed how surfing feels (Warshaw 2005: 10-11).

Similarly, *Morning of the Earth* (1972), which was produced by the Australian Albert Falzon, focused on surfing in Australian and Indonesian places constructed as paradises. Its poster described the movie as “a fantasy of surfers living in three unspoiled lands and playing in nature’s ocean,” whereas *Surfer* magazine’s review explained that the film was “about the Garden of Eden, plus waves, minus serpent” (Warshaw 2005: 80–81).<sup>18</sup>

Almost every issue of the hundreds of surfing magazines has photographs or other graphics that reprise the Edenic theme, and shows pristine beaches, waves, and ocean-loving communities. The accompanying articles normally feature pilgrimages to such places and often the pursuit of harmonious relationships with the people and habitats there. The two surfing magazines that best represent this kind of vision are the beautifully produced *Surfer’s Journal* (from 1992), which eschews advertising (which would represent a kind of commercial defilement of the pristine experience the journal is designed to evoke), and *Surfer’s Path* (from 1997), which through its title, articles, and photographs expresses the pilgrimage theme common in surfing cultures.<sup>19</sup> The latter journal especially insists that the “surfer’s path” must also involve the quest for environmental sustainability, announcing in 2004 that it would henceforth publish using “100% post-consumer recycled paper using non-GMO soy-based inks,” and in 2005, it established “Green Wave Awards” to recognize environmental initiatives within the surfindustry.<sup>20</sup>

These journals draw from the longstanding depiction of the sublime in nature in American and European landscape art. Sam George, an editor of *Surfer Magazine*, in a preface to a book of surfing photography, wrote in this tradition when he spoke of “the sublime communion of the “green cathedral” (Adler 2003:2). Surfing-themed art, including photography, depicts natural habitats as sacred places, and pilgrimages to them as a way to discover one’s authentic self (Sears 1989). In January 1978, the psychedelic pioneer Timothy Leary was lauded in *Surfer* magazine in a way that illustrates how, for some, surfing is understood as a path to self-realization. Leary reportedly said: “It’s perfectly logical to me that surfing is the spiritual aesthetic style of the liberated self. And that’s the model for the future” (Kampion 2003a: 211, cf. 118).

Drew Kampion, who in 1968, as a 24 year-old, became the editor of *Surfer* magazine, made his own contributions to the construction of surfing as a nature religion.<sup>21</sup> According to Matt Warshaw, who also took a turn editing *Surfer*, Kampion “led the effort to

---

<sup>18</sup> Other films that illustrate the ethos of the era include *The Cosmic Children* (1970) and *Nirvanic Symphony* (1972) (Warshaw 2005: 72, 82).

<sup>19</sup> The U.S.-based *Surfer’s Journal* had a circulation of 30,000 in 2003, the U.K.-based *Surfer’s Path* had 28,000 in circulation in the UK and exported another 20,000 to the States and other countries. The oldest and leading *Surfer* magazine (originally *The Surfer*), which began publication in 1960, had a monthly circulation of 118,000 in 2002 (Warshaw 2003: 754–757), whereas the more youth-focused *Surfer’s* magazine, circulated 120,000 in the same year (Warshaw 2003: 602– 610).

<sup>20</sup> See *Surfer’s Path*, #50, August/September 2005, which according to Drew Kampion (25 June 2006, email) began its green publishing process with issue 42 (May/June 2004).

<sup>21</sup> Kampion was the editor of *Surfer* when he became the editor of *Surfing* in 1972.

transform the industry-leading magazine from a...sports publication into an innovative, mischievous, drug-influenced counterculture journal” (Warshaw 2003: 311–312).

Combined with books he continued to produce in subsequent years, and his contributions as an editor and writer for *Surfer’s Path* a generation later, Kampion played an especially influential role in promoting surfing as a practice with religious value, continuing to express views that had affinity with those he penned at the apex of the Vietnam War in 1970:

When wars and flags and religions and nations and cities and rockets...are gone, there will still be an order of things far beyond the order of power-crazed men. It will be the order of a universe at equilibrium with all natural forces in balance. And that’s what riding a wave is (Warshaw 2003: 312).

This idea that surfing can put human follies and tragedies in perspective is common among soul surfers. And in diverse ways, soul surfers articulate the peace and equanimity they find only in the ocean.<sup>22</sup>

A cinematic example of this understanding of the ocean’s power can be found in the film *Five Summer Stories* (1972), which in 1987 was selected by *Surfer* magazine as one of the three best surf movies of all time (*The Endless Summer* topped the list) (Warshaw 2003: 203). It began with a stunning sequence in which the camera is enveloped in rolling surf, and an evolutionary cosmogony is invoked, depicting the beginning of creation in the sea. The narrator then suggests that through surfing people can “escape the confusion onshore” (presumably including the antipathy that characterizes human societies) and thereby find “peace of mind.”<sup>23</sup>

Like many in America and beyond during the 1960s and 1970s, some surfers drew directly on religions originating in Asia as a means of seeking alternatives to what they considered to be a materialistic and violent mass culture. Most famous among such surfers was Gerry Lopez, considered by many to have had the most elegant surfing style of all time, and one of the first who learned to “rip” the Banzai Pipeline in Hawai’i. Beginning in 1968, his image sitting in Lotus position appeared and reappeared in surfing publications and he became known for a “Zen-like” equanimity in monster surf.<sup>24</sup> Reflecting on this era and his surfer friends of the time, Lopez later recalled,

---

<sup>22</sup> Victorin-Vangerud (2003), drawing on Australian survey research by Bentley and Hughes (1998), demonstrates the deep connection to the sea and corresponding sense of peace the majority of Australians derive from it.

<sup>23</sup> For Rick Griffin’s *Five Summer Stories* poster, see Warshaw (2005: 76).

<sup>24</sup> Surfing great Tom Curren called his style “pure Zen” (Warshaw 2003: 345). See also the 1968 photograph of board-shaping guru Richard Allan Brewer, meditating with Gerry Lopez and Reno Abellira, an image that “defined an era” (Kampion 2003b: 52/text, 53/photograph; see also Kampion 2003a: 105; cf. Warshaw 1997: 80).

We became hippies and got into yoga and that whole self realization thing and started to realize that those moments when you were completely focused on riding a wave are actually kind of spiritual...religious moments.<sup>25</sup>

As a part of this new way of life, Lopez led explorations of discovery to paradises he likened to “heaven,” in Indonesia and beyond. Indeed, surf travel to pristine, untrammelled surfing Shangri-Las is a form of pilgrimage that has long been a centerpiece of surf culture.

Asian religion continues to infuse surf culture and spirituality today, as seen in “Surf Zen,” a 1998 painting by Edem Elish and printed in *Surfer’s Journal*, and in a variety of other ways and venues.<sup>26</sup> This construction of surfing as a “Zen-like” experience is not limited to men, as exemplified by an interview with Marilyn Edwards, the Publisher of *Wahine* magazine, which caters to female surfers.<sup>27</sup> Blending surfing spirituality with an ecofeminist ethos in which women more easily apprehend the spirituality of surfing, Edwards asserted,

When I see a female on a wave, I see the connectedness with the wave. Women’s emotional energy is about unity. The masculine energy is more independent, more “me” out front. And that is not true for all men, but sometimes men surf “on” the wave, whereas women surf “with” the wave.<sup>28</sup>

Surfing is not about achievement, she continued. “It is about balance, blend and unity. It is about being a part of, not about dictating or ruling it. The Zen of surfing is about being mindful of the energy you are joining forces with, not conquering it.”<sup>29</sup> For Edwards, women more easily understand that surfing is not about aggressive conquest but about ‘going with the flow’ of universal energies.

Yet in this discourse, Edwards is actually articulating the spirituality of connection and belonging that is common in all nature religion, and for which there is little evidence of gendered difference (Taylor 2001a, 2001b). A male Unitarian seminarian, for example, explaining the spiritual lessons to be found in surfing, described just such a sense of belonging to nature:

---

<sup>25</sup> From an undated *Surfer* magazine interview available online at [www.surfermag.com/magazine/archivedissues/intervu\\_gerrlopez/index4.html](http://www.surfermag.com/magazine/archivedissues/intervu_gerrlopez/index4.html). Accessed on November 2005. For an extended interview with Lopez, see Kampion (2003b: 109–121).

<sup>26</sup> *Surfer’s Journal* 13/3 (Summer 2004): 65.

<sup>27</sup> *Wahine* is borrowed from the Hawai’ian language for woman. The magazine published between 1995 and 2002, falling victim to the advertising revenue downturn that followed the terrorist attacks on New York’s World Trade Center; it maintains a Web site presence, however, at [www.wahine.com](http://www.wahine.com), and may return to print.

<sup>28</sup> “Interview with Marilyn Edwards,” the Publisher of *Wahine* Magazine, in the Groundswell Society’s Annual Edition (#3) published in 2001, 10–25 (this quote at 24), available in pdf format via [www.groundswellsociety.org](http://www.groundswellsociety.org), or directly at [www.groundswellsociety.org/publication.php](http://www.groundswellsociety.org/publication.php).

<sup>29</sup> “Interview with Marilyn Edwards,” 25.

I've heard other soul surfers talk in mystical terms about being one with the wave and feeling as if...they were no longer spectators in the ocean but part of it. This comes, I believe, from the total focus of energy and attention on the one task of surfing. It's absolutely meditative...Surfing make[s] all the noise of life melt away until it is just a surfer...and the wave in a perfect synchronous dance of life.<sup>30</sup>

This sense of belonging to nature in general and the sea in particular represents an important affective dimension of the surfing experience. When such feeling incubated in the environmental age, it inspired environmentalist values and action among some surfers.

## Surfing and Environmentalism

Overt surfing environmentalism began as early as 1961 when "Save our Surf," the first surfing environmental non-governmental organization, was founded in Hawai'i (Kampion 2003a: 161). It was formed to stop a development that would have ruined a surfing break but it soon developed a broader environmentalist agenda. In Southern California in 1984, surfer-activists formed the Surfrider Foundation, initially to prevent the destruction of prime surfing breaks, and to promote the positive dimensions of surfing culture. Like "Save our Surf," however, it soon developed a clear environmentalist identity, even adding as a primary principle a concern for biodiversity.<sup>31</sup> This development was in large part due to Tom Pratte, one of the most important initial members of Surfrider's board of directors, who had been deeply influenced by Arne Naess and deep ecology philosophy, as well as by the radical environmental movement, which was defending biodiversity and spreading deep ecology through dramatic protests often involving civil disobedience (Kampion 2003a: 161; Taylor and Zimmerman 2005). By 2006, the Foundation boasted 50,000 members and well over sixty chapters and affiliated groups around the world.

Despite its avowed environmentalism, however, a number of individuals split from the Surfrider Foundation in 1994, complaining that it had become unduly bureaucratic and insufficiently aggressive in defense of nature. They formed the Surfer's Environmental Alliance, and borrowing their ecocentric mission statement directly from Aldo Leopold, declared that their central goal was to "preserve the integrity, stability and

---

<sup>30</sup> From a 1994 sermon entitled the "Tao of Surfing," by James D. Meacham 3<sup>rd</sup>, posted online at [facs.scripps.edu/surf/tao.html](http://facs.scripps.edu/surf/tao.html). Accessed on June 2006.

<sup>31</sup> In 2006, biodiversity protection was the first principle among others listed at their Web site (see [www.surfrider.org](http://www.surfrider.org). Accessed on June 2006). According to Michelle Kremer, Surfrider's Legal Director, and Rick Wilson, its Coastal Management Coordinator, this principle was incorporated into the Foundation's statement of principles in 1985 (email communication, June 2006). Surfrider Foundation founder Glenn Hening, however, contradicted this chronology and recalls that such avowed environmentalism arose later (interview, July 2006).

beauty of the biotic community” (Leopold [1949] 1971: 262). They nevertheless stressed their continued respect for their comrades at Surfrider, acknowledging that although the split was difficult interpersonally, they still considered their one-time adversaries part of the same “tribe,” adding that respect for all surfers was a foundational principle.<sup>32</sup>

In 2001, Glenn Hening led another start-up effort, co-founding the Groundswell Society with two surfer-colleagues, “for the sake of tending the soul in surfing” (Kampion 2003a: 162). The Society celebrates indigenous cultures and their connection to the sea, evoking images of a past and hoped-for paradise in which people would be in harmony with nature. The society’s founders also sought to reprise the Aloha spirit of the sport, which they felt had been marred by commercialism and violence. Hening’s passions extended to a desire to help the surfing community better appreciate and develop the best of its own culture, including its spirituality (Hening and Taylor 2005).

The preceding sections have introduced some of the ways in which surfing can be analyzed as a religious phenomenon. It has a sacred story wherein an earlier, nature-spiritual and ecologically harmonious surfing culture was nearly exterminated during the colonial, mission period. Surfing as a practice was revived and spread globally, by charismatic spiritual leaders during the twentieth century, leading many surfers to increasingly assume a self-consciously spiritual and environmentalist identity. Surfing spirituality is, moreover, expressed through a variety of ritualized behaviors, including the construction and aesthetic embellishment of the materials needed for the practice.

Surfing’s most important ritual dimension is early rising to greet the sun, waves, and sea creatures. It also has a collective if irregular service, involving attendance at surf films held in small, intimate, non-commercial venues, which remind practitioners of the experience that inheres to the sport’s main sacrament, and reinforces a “tribal” identity. Other identity-expressing and solidarity-promoting adornments, objects, and practices are prevalent: Surfers read and scatter surf magazines about their homes, mark their automobiles with surfing symbols and slogans, decorate their homes with surf and nature-themed art, listen to surf music, and wear clothing covered with ritual objects (like surfboards), and on fancier occasions, wear Hawai’ian shirts or dresses.<sup>33</sup>

It is not just outside observers, as we have seen, who understand surfing as a religion. Some surfers have come to such an understanding, and many others, when they see such an analysis recognize themselves, and their subculture, in it. After I posted an early version of this article online and invited surfers to comment on it, for example, I received numerous messages expressing approval, and an editor of a surfing

---

<sup>32</sup> See [www.surflife.com/mag/coastwatch/greencards/sea\\_usa.cfm](http://www.surflife.com/mag/coastwatch/greencards/sea_usa.cfm). Accessed on November 2005. The organization’s Web site is [www.seasurfer.org](http://www.seasurfer.org). An important social scientific study of surfing reported that survey research in the U.K. showed a dramatic increase in stated affinity for environmentalism among surfers the longer they pursued the sport (Ford and Brown 2006: 73). The religious dimensions of the sport were, however, not carefully analyzed.

<sup>33</sup> This analysis has affinity with the increasingly popular idea of studying “lived religion,” popularized by scholars such as Orsi (1997) and Hall (1997).



magazine requested permission to publish excerpts. In the issue in which the excerpts appeared Howard Sanwick, the magazine's editor, explained his rationale for featuring such analysis:

For most of my life it seemed that religious ideals are nothing more than conjecture, but then I started surfing. I have come to understand that my religion is nature, just as Blake discovered...Bron Taylor's piece captured my imagination, and also summarized my own thoughts toward religion and secular beliefs (Swanwick 2007; cf. Taylor 2007).

Sanwick's desire to promote an understanding of surfing as religion by publishing these excerpts and this explanation for doing so, is further evidence for my argument.<sup>34</sup> And given how surfing-related nature religion seems to contribute to surfing's increasingly environmentalist ethos, it is unsurprising that Sanwick aspires to publish an environmentally friendly surfing magazine.

I will now turn to the experience of surfing, which is the sensual center of the practice, the terms used to describe it, and the benefits that are believed to derive from it. This will reveal how the sport has come to be understood as promoting personal transformation, renewal, healing, meaning, belonging, connection, and even, "the meaning of life" (Marcus 2006).

## Experience and Rhetoric

The rhetoric attending surfing is distinctive in many ways. Many surfers speak of surfing as "going to church" and refer to the sea as "Mother Ocean," just as the young wahine did that day in a San Diego surf shop. "Mother Ocean" as a trope goes back at least to *Surfer* magazine, with the beginning in 1970 of its environmentalist "for Our Mother Ocean" column (Kampion 2003a: 161). It has become a metaphor for the intimacy with the ocean that many surfers feel.

A segment from *Five Summer Stories* focusing on the hollow waves breaking over a reef at the famous Bonsai Pipeline in Hawai'i provides a good example. After showing footage of surfers both riding and wiping out on big waves, the film turns to more graceful surfing on smaller waves, as the background music shifted from dramatic and energetic to melodic and gentle. These shifts seemed designed to evoke the sublime as the narrator's voice intoned, "On smaller days, pipeline is the perfect place for intimate

---

<sup>34</sup> It also shows how one's scholarship can, intentionally or not, promote religious perceptions and points of view. Regardless, I have found it exceptionally valuable to give those I write about a chance to comment and criticize my writing about them. This is both to insure accuracy and to give them an opportunity to offer alternative interpretations. The responses I have received to this and previous work convinces me of the value of such an approach, for when one's interlocutors recognize themselves in a work, even if they would not accept or understand every analytic point set forth, the researcher can have greater confidence that the representations are fair and the interpretations are at least plausible.

relationships with Mother Ocean.” Here is the heart of surfing spirituality for many—in its connection to Mother Ocean—which can be understood, in an almost animistic way, as a beneficent personal presence. The final segment of the film begins with the words “Heaven’s Gift to Man: THE TUNNEL OF LOVE,” in which a stunning sequence of tube rides by world famous surfers ends blissfully with one by the surfing guru Gerry Lopez.

Other surfing neologisms such as the exclamation “cowabunga!” and references to being “stoked,” express the joy if not ecstasy that can accompany the experience (Leuras 1984; Wardlaw 1991). Such terminology testifies to the power of the practice. So does surf-writing, which repeatedly returns to the experience of wave riding as the sensual center of the practice; and this practice does what many religions purport to do: transform consciousness and facilitate the development of an authentic, awakened self.

One of the most dramatic examples of such writing describes what happens perceptually to those in dangerous situations, especially when riding “in the tube” of a large hollow wave. The two things one hears the most from those with such experiences is how they focus attention in such an intense way, and that one truly must “live in the moment” to flourish in large, breaking waves. This latter notion of living in the moment is something of a goal in some religions originating in Asia (especially Zen and some other forms of Buddhism), and the idea has been appropriated and spread by New Age subcultures. Living in the moment is believed to bring peace, purpose, and wisdom.

This idea is often equated with a “Zen” state of mind, as for example, when in a Surfer magazine interview Gerry Lopez said, “To be truly successful at riding a wave we’re approaching a Zen state of mind...and you’re in the pure moment. Other parts of your life might be in shambles, but because you’re tapping into the source you’re truly happy.”<sup>35</sup> Lopez did not define what he meant by “the source.” Yet we can surmise that it has something to do with the source of life, however differently this can be understood, and that they would both agree that connecting with this source is part of the surfer’s experience.

What is it about surfing that gives it a religious aura? Joseph Price, in a path-breaking article analyzing the religious dimensions of outdoor recreational practices, including surfing, drew on a study by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, who concluded that there are cross-culturally universal characteristics to peak psychological experiences (which, of course, are commonly interpreted as religious). Csikszentmihalyi coined the word “flow” to describe these experiences, which he claimed, “usually occur when a person’s body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile” (Csikszentmihalyi 1990: 3). For Csikszentmihalyi and Price, flow is “the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing

---

<sup>35</sup> Undated Surfer Magazine interview, at [www.surfermag.com/surfermag.com/magazine/archivedissues/intrvu\\_gerrlopez/index4.html](http://www.surfermag.com/surfermag.com/magazine/archivedissues/intrvu_gerrlopez/index4.html). Accessed on May 2005 and June 2006.

else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost” (Csikszentmihalyi 1990: 4, also quoted in Price 1996: 425).

Surfers would likely find this study interesting, for they often wonder why their pastime is so addictive, despite its risks. Jay Moriarty found part of the answer in the way surfing transforms consciousness (Moriarty and Gallagher 2001: 80). For this, he offered a naturalistic explanation for fear, understanding it as an adaptive form of evolution,

A good dose of fear is soothing for the human psyche. When the brain detects danger, the human body sends out norepinephrine to every part of the body. Once this danger has passed, the body sends out dopamine to the brain, a pleasurable chemical, as a way to congratulate the brain for surviving. These chemicals are what make people want to surf big waves (Moriarty and Gallagher 2001: 81).

Whatever naturalistic explanation may be applicable, this did not prevent Moriarty from labeling as “spiritual” the “stoke” of surfing (Moriarty and Gallagher 2001: 10; also in text, above). And whatever brain chemistry may be involved in what surfers crave, there are certain patterns reflected in the reports of surfers about their experience. This is certainly true when surfers recall dangerous surfing, especially inside the hollow part of a breaking wave, an experience that can relativize one’s sense of time.

Jay Moriarty and Chris Gallagher describe such experience in this way: “Riding in the tube is by far the most frightening and exhilarating part of surfing. One top surfer in the 1970s, Shaun Thomson [sic., should be Tomson], summed up its indescribable delights by saying that ‘time slows down in the tube’.”<sup>36</sup> This phrase, coined by the South African surfing champion Shaun Tomson, has been often repeated as a way to describe the experience, or surfers use other words convey it. In response to a question about how he could stay calm in the tube, for example, Gerry Lopez replied, “The faster I go out there the slower things seem to happen” (Warshaw 2003: 345).

Glenn Henning has also described how riding inside the tube can alter one’s sense of time:

In the tube one has no frame of reference except the cylinder of water spinning above, around, and below you. The only thing in your vision that provides a sense of place is the opening, or mouth of the wave in front of you. What can happen next is truly remarkable: if the wave starts peeling faster than you are surfing, the illusion is created that you are either not

---

<sup>36</sup> Moriarty and Gallagher (2001: 52). Moriarty drowned 15 June 2001, a day short of his twenty-third birthday, while free diving alone in the Maldives Islands. See the Surflife story at [surflife.com/surfaz/surfaz.cfm?id=868](http://surflife.com/surfaz/surfaz.cfm?id=868). Accessed on 9 July 2006. As can be seen in Tim Godfrey’s reflections, the tragedy reinforced the humility that soul surfers consider an important lesson of surfing: “our great mother ocean can never be fully mastered, even by the most committed waterman” (available at [www.sacklunch.com/benm/benm\\_062601.shtml](http://www.sacklunch.com/benm/benm_062601.shtml). Accessed on July 2006).

moving at all, or are moving backwards. And in relation to your only visual frame of reference, you are. So you can be going at top speed forward, but the sensation can be that you are going backward (Hening and Taylor 2005: 1610).<sup>37</sup>

Surfers often describe the experience in this way or similarly, whether in conversation or writing, both in print and in online discussion groups.<sup>38</sup>

Hening concluded, “From the unique and extraordinary vision while riding inside a perfect wave the mystic kernel of the religious in surfing grows” (Hening and Taylor 2005: 1610). From the many descriptions of such experience, it is easy to see why he would make this assertion, and little wonder that many surfers refer to their surf sessions as “going to Church,” or use other religious terminology, as they construe their experiences as spiritual or religious.

## Connection, Communion, and Healing

Much of the spiritual experience of surfing is also related to a feeling of belonging and communion with other living things, the earth, and even universe itself, as well as a perception that such connections are transformative and healing. Articulating this sense of connection, some surfer intellectuals speak poetically of flowing and participating in cosmic energy waves, as did Drew Kampion in *The Book of Waves*,

Everything is waves. The universe of space and matter is charged with energy...waves of energy. Like echoes of the heartbeat of the absolute being, waves give expression to the divine will. They give form to the universe...Waves pass through everything—steel, stone, flesh and blood and water and air and space alike. Waves are the imprint, the signature, not only of life, but of existence itself.<sup>39</sup>

In *Stoked*, Kampion echoed such sentiment, “Surfing is magic, riding liquid echoes of cosmic energy at the wild fringes of continents.” These words were superimposed over the book’s final photograph in which a surfer was sitting on his board facing a huge setting sun, with hands raised in symbolic embrace of these cosmic energies (Kampion

---

<sup>37</sup> For another and more scientifically sophisticated discussion by a surfer and author fascinated with the altered states of consciousness and time surfing can evoke, and the corresponding religious meanings surfers ascribe to such experiences, see Kotler (2006, esp. 138–140, 153–154, 161–163, 187–191). Kotler also described his own experiences of time slowing down while surfing and on the ways surfing, like Zen meditation, can promote empathy (2006: 182–183 and 255). I described my own experience of time slowing while surfing in Hening and Taylor (2005: 1611).

<sup>38</sup> Foondoggy (1997) and GrouchyOldMan, “Time stands still in the tube.” Available at [everything2.com/index.pl?node=Baja%20Malibu](http://everything2.com/index.pl?node=Baja%20Malibu), written 1976. Accessed on June 2006.

<sup>39</sup> From *The Book of Waves* by Kampion (1989), also at [www.drewkampion.com/books.htm](http://www.drewkampion.com/books.htm). Accessed on May 2005.

2003a: 214–215). Such passages and visual images show that for many surfers, the heart of the spirituality is in their felt connection to Mother Ocean and the energies of the Universe.

Equally critical for many soul surfers is the communion they feel with non-human creatures while engaged in their sport. As Chris Gallagher puts it,

I think the soul comes into it more when a surfer appreciates nature and the true gift of surfing. Much of the satisfaction comes not from a nice turn, but from the journey and the connection made with nature. Dolphins, whales, fish, birds, trees, reefs, sunsets—take these things away and you strip a perfect wave of its soul (Moriarity and Gallagher 2001: 77).

Trans-species encounters are for many as or more important to surfing spirituality than experiences with fast and dangerous waves.

Finally, some credit surfing not only with transforming their consciousness and promoting spirituality and environmental ethics, but also with facilitating physical healing. Mandy Caruso described how Mother Ocean washed away her fears and became an agent of healing, by bringing her a sea turtle as an oracle of hope, during a time when she was preparing for a mastectomy due to breast cancer (Caruso 2005). In a *Surfer's Path* article, which was accompanied by paintings depicting her surfing with animal companions, Caruso related her story with words demonstrating the importance of Polynesian/Hawai'ian themes among surfers:

In the Hawaiian culture, all ohanas, all families, have guiding spirits that watch over them. These spirits, usually dead ancestors, take visible form in the shape of animals: sharks, owls, turtles. The belief is that...at crucial moments...your guiding spirit, your amakua, will appear to you, and you will know you're being given a message, a warning, or a blessing.

Now, being haole (white) and a malahini (not born Ka'maaina—in Hawaii), I liked the idea of the amakua, but I never expected to have one.

Yet, years before I learned to board surf, in the darkness before dawn, I would rise and drive to a little cove with the gentlest, most caressing body-surfing waves in the world....One morning, as I was running and diving, rolling and reveling in the luscious velvet caress of the waves, a head suddenly popped out of the foam beside me. My fast-beating heart caught in my throat as a large turtle floated to the surface of the water. His ancient gaze considered me for moments that seemed like eternities. It was as if the Earth herself had come to look at me (Caruso 2005: 126).

The rest of the story discussed how she came to surf alongside the turtle, gathering strength and courage from this aquatic relation, before and after her surgery. She concluded with an expression of appreciation to the ocean for her healing. This story

reprises the theme that the ocean (and her creatures) can bring serenity as well as ecstatic experience.<sup>40</sup>

## Closeout

The spirituality or religion of soul surfers involves a sense of connection and belonging to nature in general and the sea in particular and produces concomitant reverence toward nature and a corresponding environmentalist ethics. Its practitioners also report that it brings a wide range of benefits: physical, psychological, and spiritual. Both inside and outside observers note that the practice and its subcultural carriers resemble traditional religions in many ways, including in its myth, ritual, symbols, terminology, and technology; a sense that some places, animals, and plants are especially sacred; and convictions regarding what constitutes proper relationships within the community of practitioners as well as with outsiders (human and not). As with most contemporary religion in social contexts that are not insular, the spirituality of soul surfers is hybridized. Some blend their surfing spirituality with religions (or aspects of them) derived from Abrahamic or Asian roots. Others feel more affinity with (their not always accurate) understandings of indigenous traditions or various forms of Paganism. Still other surfers, and perhaps increasing numbers of them, are skeptical or agnostic about most if not all particular religious beliefs, and find sufficient resources in surfing, and within surfing communities, to construct meaningful spiritual lives. The result of such diversity and hybridity within surfing subcultures is an evolving and transmogrifying form of an aquatic nature religion that likely will remain resilient as long as there are people, waves, and sufficient leisure time for the two to interact.

As the practice of surfing continues to spread globally, there is every reason to expect that its construction as a contemporary religious alternative will continue as well. Because this relatively new aquatic nature religion is becoming increasingly intertwined with environmental activism, its political impact will likely also grow. This influence will be magnified to the extent that it builds alliances with the practitioners of other forms of nature religion, which are also growing and competing for religious allegiance. And yet, it brings something distinctive to contemporary nature religion: an evocative, ocean-baptized spirituality, capable of moving surfing enthusiasts who otherwise would have little to do with that which scholars construe as religion.

An article by Keith Glendon concluded with what is an excellent summary of the ethos of surfing spirituality, when writing about how the surfing “tribe” rallied to support a teenaged surfing star sent into a life-threatening coma after a skateboarding accident. Glendon described how surfers worldwide sent loving, “healing vibes” to the

---

<sup>40</sup> Steven Kotler began his own surfing quest as a way to seek healing from Lyme disease, and concluded his book with animistic stories, his own and of another surfer, of Hawaii’an turtle oracles, or amakua, who showed him and another surfer the way to the best waves, and implicitly, to surfing spirituality (Kotler 2006: 151–160).

injured surfer, while appealing prayerfully “to the spirit of the sea” (Glendon 2005: 74). After describing the apparently miraculous recovery, Glendon concluded with words that provide a suitable coda:

The sea holds a magic for those of us who know her. A magic so simple, pure and powerful it works as an unseen force in our souls. We’re drawn to her. The spirit of the sea moves in us as we move within her, undulating folds in pursuit of our peace. As surfers, we inherently know this to be so. The sea brings comfort, solace, release and escape. The sea brings healing. The spirit of the sea, for some of us, is the very essence of life (Glendon 2005: 70).





# References

Adler, Tom (photographer editor) 2003	Surf Life: 32–02. Santa Barbara, CA: T. Adler Books.
Albanese, Catherine L. 1990	Nature Religion in America: From the Algonkian Indians to the New Age. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
2002	Reconsidering Nature Religion. Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International.
Anonymous. 2004	“Haole Go Home.” In Zero Break: An Illustrated Collection of Surf Writing, 1777– 2004, ed. by Matt, Warshaw, 312. Orlando, FL: Harcourt Books.
Bentley, Peter and Philip, J. Hughes 1998	Australian Land the Christian Faith: Facts and Figures. Melbourne, Australia: Christian Research Association.
Caruso, Mandy 2005	“Healing Waters.” Surfer’s Path 50 (August/ September): 124–129.
Colburn, Bolton, Ben, Finney, Tyler Stallings, Craig R., Stecyk, Deanne Stillman and Tom Wolfe 2002	Surf Culture: The Art History of Surfing. Corte Madera, CA: Ginko Press.
Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly 1990	Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience. San Francisco: Harper & Row.
Eisenberg, Evan 1998	The Ecology of Eden. New York: Random House.
Foondoggy 1997	“The Seed of Stoke.” Available at <a href="http://www.Altsurfing.Org/Alt/Foondoggy/Foon011.Htm#stoke">www.Altsurfing.Org/Alt/Foondoggy/Foon011.Htm#stoke</a> . Accessed on June 2006 and July 2007
Ford, Nick and David Brown 2006	Surfing and Social Theory: Experience, Embodiment, and Narrative of the Dream Glide. London & New York: Routledge.
Fournlander, Abraham 1916	Abraham Fournlander’s Collection of Hawaiian Antiquities and Folklore; Memoirs of the Bernice P. Bishop Museum, vol. 4–6, 1916–1920 ed. by Thrum, Thomas G. Honolulu, Hawaii.
Glendon, Keith 2005	“Chad Compton: The Comeback Kid.” Carbon 2/1:70–75.
Hall, David, ed. 1997	Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
Hamilton, Bethany, Sheryl Berk and Rick Bundschuh 2004	Soul Surfer: A True Story of Faith, Family, and Fighting to Get Back on the Board. MTV.
Hening, Glen 2001	“Marilyn Edwards, Publisher, Wahini Magazine” (includes interview with Glen Hening). Groundswell Society Third Annual Publication, 10–24. Oxnard, CA:

---

Bron Taylor, Department of Religion, 121 Anderson Hall, POB 117410, Gainesville, FL 32611–7410, USA. E-mail: bron@religion.ufl.edu. I wish to thank Greg Johnson, Arne Kalland, Whitney Sanford, Sam Snyder, Drew Kampion, Gordon LaBedz, Stewart Guthrie, and especially Kocku von Stuckrad, Glen Hening, and Terry Rey for (variously) their encouragement, comments, corrections, and suggestions, in response to earlier versions of this work. Mahalo! I also wish to apologize for having to eliminate some improvements that resulted from these consultations to meet this journal’s space limits. I hope to remedy these omissions by producing a longer work on surfing as nature religion.

The Ted K Archive

Bron Taylor

Surfing into Spirituality and a New, Aquatic Nature Religion

Advance Access publication on October 19, 2007.

Journal of the American Academy of Religion, December 2007, Vol. 75, No. 4, pp.

923–951 doi:10.1093/jaarel/lfm067

The Author 2007. Published by Oxford University Press, on behalf of the American Academy of Religion. All rights reserved. For permissions, please e-mail:

journals.permissions@oxfordjournals.org

**[www.thetedkarchive.com](http://www.thetedkarchive.com)**