

The Future and Foundation of the 'Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture'

Bron Taylor

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Abstract

A paramount responsibility of any scholar is to acknowledge the contributions of others to their own work. As I step back from my role as the long-term Editor in Chief of the *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture*, who founded our journal and led the effort to create the scholarly society with which it is affiliated, it is time to do that, as well as to say something about what we have accomplished. I begin by introducing my successor, explaining why he is such a good fit for this role, thus celebrating his ascension to it.

Joseph Witt Assumes Editor in Chief Responsibilities

On 1 January 2025 Joseph Witt became the *JSRNC*'s Editor in Chief. I know him well and that he is exceptionally well qualified to assume these responsibilities.

In 2004 professor Witt matriculated with the second cohort of the then new Religion and Nature graduate program at the University of Florida (UF), having just graduated from Hendrix College where he studied with a prominent early eco-theologian, Jay McDaniel (McDaniel 1989, 1990, 1995). Soon I realized he was a lucid and breviloquent writer, and that he was exceptionally well organized. Given these talents, which were, quite obviously, relevant to the production of a scholarly journal, I asked him to become the *JSRNC*'s first Managing Editor. He agreed, learned quickly, and served in this role during the critical startup years, from 2005 to 2009. In 2009 he became an Assistant Editor and a year later, became Senior Assistant Editor. In 2011, Witt not only defended his dissertation but secured a tenure-stream position at Mississippi State University. He subsequently published his well-received book, *Religion and Resistance in Appalachia* in 2016, and in 2017, he earned his Associate Professor title. That year, he assumed even more responsibilities with the journal, agreeing to take on the critically important role as *JSRNC* Co-Editor, which he did admirably, from 2017 to 2020. Thus, over 15 of the first 20 years in which the *JSRNC* was in development, and during the production of our first 18 volumes, none of the many talented individuals on the journal's editorial team did more than Witt to keep the journal coming out on time and with a quality that has become widely recognized.

Given these contributions, which have included orchestrating special issues and a steady stream of articles in the *JSRNC* and elsewhere, I was unsurprised when in 2022, after a national open-rank search for a Religion and Nature specialist, the University of Tennessee appointed him as Associate Professor of Religion.

I have been privileged to chair professor Witt's graduate committee, extremely fortunate that he pitched in so positively for most of the *JSRNC*'s history, and grateful that he has agreed to step up, once again, this time as the Editor in Chief. I have every

confidence that under his leadership the journal will continue to be the foremost venue for critical inquiry into the religion and nature nexus.

Before turning to others who also have made decisive contributions to the journal and to celebrate their willingness to continue as journal anchors, I want to acknowledge the contributions of Lucas (Luke) Johnston in advancing the synergistic relationship between the *JSRNC* and the affiliated International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature, and Culture (ISSRNC).

Johnston, who a year before Witt, in 2004, matriculated into UF's Religion and Nature program, helped orchestrate the ISSRNC planning meetings in 2005 and became the Society's first volunteer Executive Director. Soon after that, in 2007, he took on various roles with the *JSRNC* as Book Review Editor and Assistant Editor. A decade later he joined Witt, serving as *JSRNC* Co-Editor from 2017–2020. And like Witt, after a short breather from his *JSRNC* labors, he has stepped up again, agreeing to stand for and winning an election to become the next President of the ISSRNC.¹ His three-year term will begin after the Society's twelfth international conference at the University of California, Santa Barbara, which will take place in June 2025. Many others have contributed to the success of the society and journal, but no one else has done so longer and in so many ways than have Witt and Johnston. I am immensely grateful for their hard and competent work, collegial friendship, and willingness to assume these leadership roles with the society and journal about to enter their third decade.

JSRNC Editorial Continuity

I am also grateful and delighted that the key contributors to the current editorial team will continue in their roles, including most critically, Dr. Amanda Nichols, who will continue as our Managing Editor.

Like Witt and Johnston and many other *JSRNC* and ISSRNC stalwarts, Nichols got involved immediately after she matriculated as a Religion and Nature Graduate student at UF. Soon after matriculating in 2015, she played a leading role organizing the 10th anniversary conference of the ISSRNC, which took place at UF in 2016. By helping to avoid an organizational catastrophe, I quickly learned of her extraordinary organizational and communicative skills. The next year she served as one of the lead organizers of the ISSRNC conference in New York City.² Well aware of her talents,

¹ For information about the society, including its history, conferences, and membership benefits, see <https://www.issrnc.org>. Most importantly, all of the journal's articles are available for free to ISSRNC members.

² Chris Crews worked hand-in-hand with Nichols organizing the New York City and subsequent conferences, managing all things technological while also developing the society's website and serving many years as a society board member and as its current Secretary (through 2027). He has also co-orchestrated a special issue of the *JSRNC* (see Crews and Taylor 2022). For information about all of the society's conferences, see <https://www.issrnc.org/conferences/>.

based both on her performance in her graduate studies as well as with these conferences, I was fortunate when in 2019 she agreed to become the *JSRNC* Managing Editor. Anyone who has been involved with the *JSRNC* and ISSRNC knows that she has become a leader in both organizations; she is even serving currently as the ISSRNC's elected Treasurer (2022–2026). I am grateful to her for her many contributions to the journal, which has made it possible for me to continue as Editor in Chief longer than I could have otherwise.

Fortunately, the two JSRNC co-editors since 2000, whose superb work has also been indispensable, will be continuing in these roles: Professor Emeritus of Philosophy Mark Peterson (University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee) and Lecturer in Archeology and Classics, Joseph A. P. Wilson (University of Massachusetts Amherst). I learned of Wilson's wide scholarly range while he was still an anthropology graduate student at UF when he agreed to serve as a journal Editorial Assistant in 2013, and as Book Review Editor from 2017 to 2020, before his appointment as Co-Editor. I have been privileged to know Peterson since we were young professors within the University of Wisconsin System. Peterson not only helped to ensure that the JSRNC publishes high quality articles and on schedule, he has served many highly effective years on the board of the ISSRNC, including five years as treasurer before becoming ISSRNC President (2018–2021). He is one of those without whom I think the society might not have survived to this day. His contributions to the society and the journal have been indispensable.

I have every confidence in the ongoing leadership team, that they share the passion for the *JSRNC*'s critical remit and have the talent and work ethic to make the journal even stronger as we move into the third decade of its development.

These roles have intrinsic rewards, such as deepening one's interdisciplinary knowledge of the field, making life-long collegial friendships, and the gratification that comes from knowing one regularly improves, sometimes dramatically, the work of those who submit to our journal. Especially satisfying is knowing one has helped younger scholars, both those who apprentice with the journal and those who submit to it, to learn their craft. Involvement in the journal also increases one's scholarly profile and reputation. But most of all, these roles are arduous and challenging. Our editors have to make judgments not only about the quality of submissions and revisions but of the quality of the external reviews we receive, which, like the submissions we receive, vary significantly in quality. Sometimes, our decisions are unwelcome and we must deal with a testy subspecies of the academic animal, which we do our best to handle diplomatically and professionally. Meanwhile, these important labors are typically little recognized and appreciated by those institutional officials who are responsible for evaluating our scholarly contributions. In my view, given the contributions editors make, such editorial labors are not only a service to the profession but scholarly contributions in their own right. It is gratifying when authors acknowledge and appreciate the extent to which our reviewers and editors contribute to the quality of their scholarly work. As I step back, I want to make sure that those who have contributed to the quality

of the scholarship published in the JSRNC know that many of us do understand how valuable their contributions have been and will continue to be.

It is in recognition of such contributions that I want to provide a little more information about the foundations of the journal and society and what we have accomplished in the nearly three decades that went into their development.

The Foundations of the ISSRNC and JSRNC

I have written elsewhere about these foundations and those without whom we would have neither the society nor the journal. I will here, therefore, only provide a brief overview while pointing to earlier published sources where one can gain a greater appreciation for those who made decisive contributions to these efforts, as well as for the way this field has been developing.

The story begins much earlier than many recognize as diverse thinkers began theorizing about the role of religion in what scholars today increasingly recognize as entangled, co-evolving, socioecological (biocultural) systems.

As environmental alarm grew during the 1960s and intensified during the 1990s, so did scholarly attention to the relationships between cultural and environmental systems. Some such attention focused on whether religions, and which religions, promote or hinder proenvironmental behavior, and on whether religions (or some of them) might evolve in strongly proenvironmental directions. In this journal I have called for more research into such possibilities (Taylor 2011, 2015), provided an extensive history of this ferment (Taylor 2016), and with Gretel Van Wieren and Berhard Zaleha, published a comprehensive research review exploring the research-based reasons for skepticism about what I have dubbed the ‘greening of religion hypothesis’ (Taylor et al. 2016).

During the 1990s, shortly after assuming my first full-time university position at the University of Wisconsin, Oshkosh, I got involved with those pursuing such questions within the American Academy of Religion. But within a few years for three main reasons, I had become dissatisfied with much of the field as it was emerging. Firstly, because so much of the discourse was hortatory, apologetic, and unduly sanguine about religions and their proenvironmental values, behaviors, or at least, their potentials. Secondly, because most of the discourse assumed that religious ideas are decisive variables in environmental-related behavior, rather than taking such a possibility as one among many hypotheses that warranted critical research and analysis. Thirdly, because few religion scholars were drawing on the evolutionary sciences when considering the role of religions in whether human societies were or could be ecologically and socially adaptive. In short, I thought it was as important to study not only how religious perceptions and beliefs influence the natural environment but how evolutionary processes are shaping cultures, religions, and socioecological systems.

Serendipitously, given such intellectual preoccupations, in 1997, professor Jeffrey Kaplan, who had experience orchestrating encyclopedias, suggested to me that the time was ripe to create an encyclopedia that would both reflect the state of the emerging inquiry into religion/nature entanglements. Kaplan's idea led to discussions with a number of publishers, including Janet Joyce, who was then an editor with Continuum International. More than all of the others approached, Joyce understood the vision and, moreover, liked my intention to break the traditional encyclopedia model by including 'practitioner entries' and 'scholarly perspectives' as well as the traditional 'just-the-main-facts-and-key-references' encyclopedia genre. By the time we published the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature* (Taylor 2005a), the originally-contracted 350 entries had grown to 1,000 entries and a million words written by 520 contributors, with each entry being double-peer reviewed by a large editorial team. I cannot do justice here to this history or those who made it possible, but I have honored and expressed appreciation to them previously (Taylor 2005b, 2005c).

The encyclopedia not only won awards but the way it snowballed in size demonstrated that we had precipitated a more interdisciplinary and global inquiry than had previously existed. In 2005, as the encyclopedia moved into production and sensing that this enriched ferment had only just begun, I began planning for the creation of the ISSRNC with a number of the graduate students (most notably the aforementioned Joseph Witt and Luke Johnston, along with Bridgett O'Brien and Michael Lemons) and a number of well-established scholars (most importantly, professors Kristina Tiedje, Kocku von Stuckrad, and Laura Hobgood). By this time Janet Joyce had established her own publishing company and we began discussing, and soon were planning, to launch the *JSRNC*.³

In 2006, we officially launched the ISSRNC with an inaugural conference at the University of Florida that included over 300 participants. The following year, we published the first issue of the *JSRNC*.

Throughout the years, the society and journal have unfolded synergistically. In June 2025, 20 years after our first major organizational meeting, we will host our 12th international conference at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Earlier venues in the U.S. included Florida, Arizona, California, New York City, and conferences in other nations have taken place in Mexico, the Netherlands, Australia, Italy (at the Vatican Museums), and Ireland. We have also co-hosted conferences in South Africa, Germany, and Sweden.⁴ Typically, the presidents of the society (including myself, Kocku von Stuckrad, Laura Hobgood, Sarah Pike, Mark Peterson, Evan Berry, and Lisa Sideris),

³ At that time, Joyce was the publisher of the biannually published *Ecotheology* but she wanted to broaden its focus, which fit well with my vision for the *JSRNC*, so she replaced that title with the *JSRNC* and we started afresh with volume one in 2007, which has been published quarterly ever since. Issues of *Ecotheology* remain available at the Equinox website, and within the *JSRNC* archives.

⁴ For information about the conferences, see <https://www.issrnc.org/conferences/2009-conference/>. For a brief history of the society, see <https://www.issrnc.org/about/history/>.

have played major roles in fundraising for and orchestrating our conferences, as well as by making significant regular contributions to the journal.⁵

The society aspires to continue to expand its list of international conferences and networks and welcomes initiatives from its members in this regard. The conferences typically lead to quality submissions of special issues and individual papers to the journal and, of course, the journal helps to draw scholars to society events, which exemplifies the synergies between these efforts. Both the society and journal share a commitment to critical, interdisciplinary enquiry into the complex relationships between religious (and religion-resembling) perceptions and practices, and the rest of the living world. Society leaders laid out these aspirations in the society's founding documents and newsletters, which I explained in the inaugural issue of the journal (Taylor 2007).⁶

If we count the time it took to develop and produce the encyclopedia, twenty-eight years have now gone into the efforts to enrich the religion and nature enquiry with a wider field of view that is historically and regionally wider and to illuminate the religion/nature nexus with a wider range of disciplinary lenses. Clearly, the efforts to establish the society and journal, both of which are flourishing, is no small accomplishment. Before I conclude, however, I want to focus in more detail on the journal's accomplishments while pointing interested readers to those most responsible for them.⁷

JSRNC Accomplishments

As an editor I have come to focus on word counts, so I will begin there. In eighteen volumes comprised of four issues a year averaging about 55,000–60,000 words per issue, we have so far produced over four million words of scholarly work. Together with the encyclopedia our collective scholarly production tops five million words.

When I reviewed the journal's history in recent days I was reminded of what a skeleton crew we had at the beginning. For the first three years my major collaborators in the daily grind were initially Joseph Witt and another Religion and Nature graduate student, Gavin Van Horn. Van Horn, who in 2003 matriculated at UF in the first cohort of Religion and Nature graduate students, and who along with Luke Johnston, helped immensely with encyclopedia copy editing and other chores, is now Executive Editor of Humans and Nature Press Books.⁸ Johnston joined the *JSRNC* effort in 2009 with the third volume after his term as ISSRNC's initial Executive Director.

⁵ For brief biographies of the ISSRNC presidents to date, see <https://www.issrnc.org/about/board-of-directors/past-presidents/>.

⁶ For the early society newsletters and founding documents, which provide much more detail about its history, see <https://www.issrnc.org/newsletter/>.

⁷ For more history of this ferment see Sponsel 2012.

⁸ For more information about Van Horn and his role and accomplishments at the Center for Humans and Nature, see <https://humansandnature.org/gavin-van-horn/>.

Thinking back, I recall several times of near panic when I, along with one or more core team members, had to drop nearly everything else to get sufficient, quality copy ready in time to meet our publication deadlines. Somehow, we rarely failed to meet deadlines and when we did, it was not by much, and the press managed to absorb the delay and publish on schedule. This is no small accomplishment in itself as anyone who has done journal work or who has otherwise had to herd academic cats will know.

With this record of publishing quality and timeliness in hand, in 2011 Janet Joyce submitted the journal for indexing to Thomson Reuters for its ESCI index and to Elsevier's SCOPUS. By the end of 2012, both firms accepted the *JSRNC* for indexing. This is no small feat in that period of time. And right after this indexing began, starting in 2013 and through 2023 (the currently available data), according to Resurchify (which draws on SCOPUS data), the journal consistently ranked in the top quartile of Cultural Studies and Religious Studies journals. Demonstrating significant interdisciplinary breadth, the *JSRNC* even ranked in the third Quartile of journals in the Evolution, Behavior, and Systematics category.⁹

On two earlier occasions we published overviews of the history of the journal's first 15 years and acknowledged those who made the most decisive (and sometimes heroic) contributions in the early years and through the publishing of its first 15 volumes (Witt et al. 2011, Taylor 2021: 437–47). I would not want the scholars mentioned there to be unacknowledged here, nor those who contributed selflessly as Executive Editors of the encyclopedia, nor those who since my fifteen-year retrospective have been doing the heavy lifting. I want, therefore, to acknowledge Jeffrey Kaplan, Laura Hobgood, Adrian Ivakhiv, and Michael York for their exemplary work on the encyclopedia; Laura Hobgood for working with me on the society bylaws and for her subsequent service as ISSRNC President; and Michael York and Adrian Ivakhiv, who continue to this day to regularly write and review for the journal. I also want to single out several scholars who in recent years have done especially heavy editorial work as key members of our editorial team, Jace Weaver, Robin Wright, Evan Berry (another former society president), and two additional former Religion and Nature graduate students, Robin Veldman (who also took a turn as Managing Editor when in graduate school and who subsequently served on the society's board of directors), and Sarah Werner (who for seven years between 2017 and 2023 did exemplary work as a book review editor).

A Swan Song?

While writing this I felt some nostalgia, wondering whether I was writing a swan song. Then I remembered that as a writer and editor, it is wise to look up definitions when there is any uncertainty as to their meanings.

⁹ See <https://www.resurchify.com/impact/details/21100239824>. Equinox publishing provides more information about the journal and access to its archives at <https://journal.equinoxpub.com/JSRNC>.

I therefore consulted various sources and fused them into this brief definition: The notion of a Swan Song is rooted in an ancient apocryphal belief that swans sing a beautiful song right before death; today it metaphorically refers to one's final acts, gestures, or performances before retirement or death.

Fates permitting, what I have written here will be no swan song.

Although I am stepping back from orchestrating the journal's day-to-day affairs, I will remain modestly involved, advising the journal's editors and publisher as they wish, continuing work on a special issue with the theme 'Dark Green Religion in Europe', and under my new byline as Editor at Large, I expect to periodically provide field reports and commentaries that fit the remit of the journal. I also intend to finish several books that are in various stages of research and writing, which time constraints, including decades of editorial work, have long delayed.

Most importantly, as I wrap up this missive, I want to directly address all those I have mentioned herein and in previous overviews of journal and society developments, as well as to the scores of scholars who have also contributed to the flourishing of both endeavors: I am profoundly grateful and wish you all the best, personally and professionally.

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