

The Origins of the International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture and its Journal

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The idea to create the International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture began in conversations I had with Sarah McFarland Taylor and Rebecca Gould in the late 1990s, as we lamented the difficulty at large conferences, such as the American Academy of Religion, in sustaining extended conversations with those interested in the complex ways that what we construe as “religion” is entangled within Earth’s socioecological systems. I had also been frustrated with the field we then young scholars had inherited, labeled ‘religion and ecology,’ for its idealistic premises, namely, the tendency to assume that religious ideas are decisive in shaping environmental behaviors, as well as the lack of interdisciplinary cross-fertilization when it came to analyzing the religion and nature nexus. Specifically, I considered it to be critically important to integrate evolutionary theory and cognitive science into the emerging field, and to consider these in light of both qualitative and quantitative research, so as to better understand how religious beliefs and practices come into existence and how they sometimes facilitate ecological and socially adaptive socioecological systems, while other times become maladaptive.

About the same time in the late 1990s Jeffrey Kaplan, who had experience developing encyclopedias, suggested that we create an Encyclopedia to reflect the state of the field and push it in new directions. Soon afterward Janet Joyce, then an editor at Continuum International publishers, commissioned the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature* (ERN). The envisioned work exploded in size to 1,000 entries and 1.5 million words. The ERN was produced by 30 contributing editors (most notably Jeffrey Kaplan, Adrian Ivakhiv, Michael York, and Laura Hobgood), and 520 contributors from around the world. It went on to win awards for its range and originality—including its inclusion of “practitioner entries”—and quickly became the benchmark reference work for the Religion and Nature field. (I wrote two articles in it that explained its interdisciplinary and critical rationale: Introduction to the Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature and Religious Studies and Environmental Concern.)

When in 2004 we put this monster project into production it was clear that we had precipitated a conversation that was far richer than we expected and that it had only just begun. It was also apparent that this sort of interdisciplinary work needed habitat if it were to continue and flourish. Serendipitously, in 2002, I was invited to join the faculty at the University of Florida in order to launch a new Ph.D. program with an emphasis on Religion and Nature. With the modest funding that came with the position, in August 2005, working closely with Kristina Tiedje, who at the time was based at the University of Lyon in France, and Kocku von Stuckrad then at the University of Amsterdam in the Netherlands, as well as with the precociously bright graduate students who had been drawn to the program, including Lucas Johnston and Joseph Witt, I was able to host a meeting of two dozen scholars at Cocoa Beach, Florida, to brainstorm the possibility of creating such scholarly habitat.

The extensive conversations during this meeting led to this consensus: “The mission of the Society is to promote critical, interdisciplinary inquiry into the relationships among human beings and their diverse cultures, environments, and religious beliefs and

practices, and to provide a scholarly network to advance research in this area.” We also agreed that the society would aspire to be wildly international and interdisciplinary, and while acknowledging that many scholars drawn to the field were concerned about environmental degradation and related social justice issues, the Society would not, as a society, take political stances.

This non-partisan principle was for several reasons: Firstly, because the Society was neither a religious nor a political organization with moral or ideological commitments; Secondly, because taking political positions might dissuade scholars from involvement who might disagree with such advocacy, and; Thirdly, because when an organization advocates for one group or cause, there is no plausible answer for why they have done so in one case but not another. In a nutshell, those involved in establishing the organization agreed that to ensure a ‘taboo free’ zone for critical enquiry, where all scholars and perspectives were welcomed into the ferment, regardless of their ideological, ethical, religious, or areligious views, the society, as a society, ought not make normative religious, ethical, or political claims or engage in related advocacy.

After establishing the vision for the society and addressing the many practical challenges in creating one, we decided to test the market for the idea by inviting scholars from diverse disciplines to what became the inaugural conference of the society. Titled *Exploring Religion, Nature and Culture* the conference took place 1–8 April 2006 and drew approximately 300 participants, demonstrating that indeed, there was a scholarly thirst for such interdisciplinary engagement. At the meeting, delegates considered and approved the name, The International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture (ISSRNC), its bylaws (which I had worked up with Professor Hobgood), and the procedures for electing a board and officers to guide the society.

After completing the encyclopedia, I began discussing with Janet Joyce—who had by then founded Equinox Publishing Ltd.—the possibility of launching a quarterly journal devoted to the emerging field. She welcomed the initiative and so I began developing plans to create the quarterly *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* (*JSRNC*). The ISSRNC decided to affiliate with the *JSRNC*, making copies of it a membership perk. We published the journal’s initial issue early 2007. In *Exploring Religion, Nature and Culture: Introducing the Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture*, I discussed the remit for the Society and Journal, and in this issue we published versions of the invited keynotes presented at the inaugural conference. The interdisciplinary diversity of our keynoters (evolutionary and cognitive scientists Stephen Kellert and Stewart Guthrie, ethologist Marc Bekoff, environmental studies scholar Adrian Ivakhiv, historian Carolyn Merchant, anthropologists Robin Wright and Penelope Bernard, religious studies scholars Kocku von Stuckrad and Sarah McFarland Taylor, and philosopher Roger Gottlieb), exemplified our intention to provide the widest possible chronological, regional, and disciplinary range when examining the affective and spiritual dimensions of nature/human relationships. We have also made clear subsequently that we have also been keenly interested in the environmental dimensions of worldviews beyond the world’s most widespread, so called “world religions,”

to focus on Indigenous traditions, Paganism, new and emerging religions, and religion-resembling secular understandings of the human place in and responsibilities toward the natural world. This year, in 2026, we are publishing our 20th volume, the same year we are celebrating the Society's 20th anniversary.

Since its founding conference the Society has convened conferences in California (Malibu and Santa Barbara); Morelia, Mexico; Amsterdam, the Netherlands; Perth, Australia; Cork, Ireland; and Tempe, Arizona, while co-sponsoring additional meetings at the Vatican Museums in Vatican City; in Cape Town, South Africa; Trondheim, Norway; and Berlin, Germany; as well as its 10th anniversary meeting, which was again in Gainesville. Its 20th anniversary gathering will take place in Venice, Italy, 10–13 October 2026.

Creating and managing the society has taken the time and talents of many. Among the dozens who have played leading roles a number deserve special mention, including the Society's Presidents, who have served three-year terms after my own (2006–2009): Kocku von Stuckrad, Laura Hobgood, Sarah Pike, Mark Peterson, Evan Berry, Lisa Sideris, and Lucas Johnston (from 2025). The editors who have contributed the most to the JSRNC during its initial two decades are Joseph A. P. Wilson, Mark Peterson, Kocku von Stuckrad, Kristina Tiedje, and four of my former graduate students: Robin Veldman, Luke Johnston, Joseph Witt, and Amanda Nichols. In addition to Johnston for his presidential role, Witt and Nichols deserve special recognition. As a long-term associate editor of the journal, Witt took on Editor-in-Chief responsibilities in 2025 (relieving me of those responsibilities, which included the start-up time I had assumed for 20 years). Nichols not only has served as the journal's Managing Editor since 2019 but she has done more to keep the society moving forward over the last decade than any other individual, including by playing a central role in organizing all of its conferences since 2016. Chris Crews has also been indispensable: in the mid-2010s he took over managing the society's digital infrastructure—including creating and maintaining a more user-friendly website—and working hand in glove with Nichols in organizing the society's conferences since 2017.

Looking back, what is striking about the origins of the ISSRNC is how organically the society emerged. A desire to have more scholarly discussion beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries helped to motivate the creation of a reference work, which both revealed and began assembling a large, interdisciplinary community, leading in turn to a small planning meeting and the inaugural conference that confirmed our working hypothesis that there was a need to create habitat for scholarly cross-fertilization and a publishing venue for envisioned investigations.

Ultimately, the ISSRNC and JSRNC grew out of collaboration, conversation, and a shared recognition that scholars studying religion, culture, and the natural world needed institutions capable of sustaining those conversations. What began as scattered scholarly inquiries has now coalesced into a recognizable field—a development that is deeply gratifying for those who helped bring the society and journal into existence. As the ISSRNC and the *JSRNC* enter their third decade, I fully expect that the

conversations and collaborations we produce will generate new insights about the complex relationships among the affective and spiritual dimensions of human experience and Earth's living systems.

I wrote a more detailed account of the origins and accomplishments of the society and the journal when I passed the Editor-in-Chief responsibilities to Joe Witt; see the open-access article, The Future and Foundation of the Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture, *JSRNC* 19.1 (2025) 5–14.

This blog post is the first in a series about the history of the ISSRNC. In preparation for the ISSRNC's 20th-anniversary conference in Venice in October 2026, all of the association's former presidents will share their experiences and insights.

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