

Toward a natural religion

Bron Taylor

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One hundred-fifty years ago, on Nov. 24, 1859, Charles Darwin published *On the Origin of Species*, shattering traditional explanations for the diversity of life on Earth. Scientific understanding will never be the same. Neither will religion.

Religious conservatives often reject evolution, religious liberals incorporate it, and secularists embrace it. But there is a little-recognized, rapidly growing fourth reaction to the Darwinian revolution. It is emerging from those engaged in what we might call nature spirituality, or nature religion.

Devotees of this religion are consecrating evolution, understanding it as a new-found and compelling sacred story. They find meaning and ethical guidance in the evolutionary-ecological worldview — without appealing to divine beings.

This religious naturalism is inspired by iconic figures such as Henry David Thoreau, Aldo Leopold, Rachel Carson, Edward Abbey, Jane Goodall and many others. It can be seen in the rise of the sustainability movement, the popularity of ecotourism, the mainstreaming of vegetarianism.

We celebrate it with its own holidays, such as Earth Day, and pilgrimage en masse to its cathedrals, our national parks.

It is on full view even in unexpected settings. At Disney's Wild Kingdom theme park, the interconnectedness of life is symbolized by a massive tree of life at the park's center and explained at a conservationist interpretive center.

Earth-venerating pageantry has become commonplace at the world's most important international events. It was present, for example, in the Mother Earth spirituality expressed in the opening ceremony of the 2002 Winter Olympics in Utah — as well as during the United Nations World Summit on Sustainability in Johannesburg the same year. There, human emergence from Africa was repeatedly invoked to point up our common humanity and connection to all life through the evolutionary process.

Religious naturalism is further expressed in the documentaries produced on *Animal Planet* and in movies like *Happy Feet*, *the Lion King* and *Carl Sagan's Contact*. We even see it in corporate advertising — as when Sanyo announced its “think Gaia” corporate philosophy and a corresponding intention to work toward a world in which all life would flourish.

Religious naturalism is characterized by ecological understandings of the interdependence, and mutual dependence, of all life. Its understanding that all life is related, and sacred, is grounded in the Darwinian view that we share a common ancestor and came to be through a similar struggle for existence. When empathy and logic are fused to this understanding, ethical obligations toward all species follow.

Although nascent and fragile, such evolutionary nature spirituality may eventually inspire a planetary, civil Earth religion.

In this religion nature, not nation, is sacred. Uniquely, this spirituality can be grafted onto long-standing religious traditions while providing meaning and ethical guidance for those skeptical of conventional religious beliefs. It can enhance the ability of individuals, regardless of whether they consider themselves religious, to understand all life as worthy of reverent care. Unlike religious nationalism, it is unlikely to mutate

into virulent strains that exploit those beyond its borders, for it includes all life, and the biosphere itself, within the community of moral concern.

If the early roots of the word religion have to do with being connected to something greater than ourselves, we can accurately say that 150 years ago, Darwin contributed decisively to the most radical religious reformation of all time.

After eloquently discussing the way nature's laws have shaped life on Earth, with his concluding words in *On the Origin of Species*, Darwin conveyed the sentiment shared by many today:

“There is grandeur in this view of life. ... Whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved.”

Darwin was far from the first to express awe and wonder at Earth's processes. Yet through his long and close observation of nature he arrived at such sentiments personally — and kindled a sensory, and sensible, nature religion.

With its spirituality of belonging to the biosphere and kinship feelings toward other living things, such nature spirituality provides an emotional landscape upon which we can construct ways of being compatible with the flourishing of life on Earth.

Darwin knew his theory would erode conventional religious faith. Ironically, he may have launched a faith we, and all our relations, can live with for millennia to come.

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Tampa Bay Times (St. Petersburg, Florida), December 6, 2009.
<www.newspapers.com/image/331875998>

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