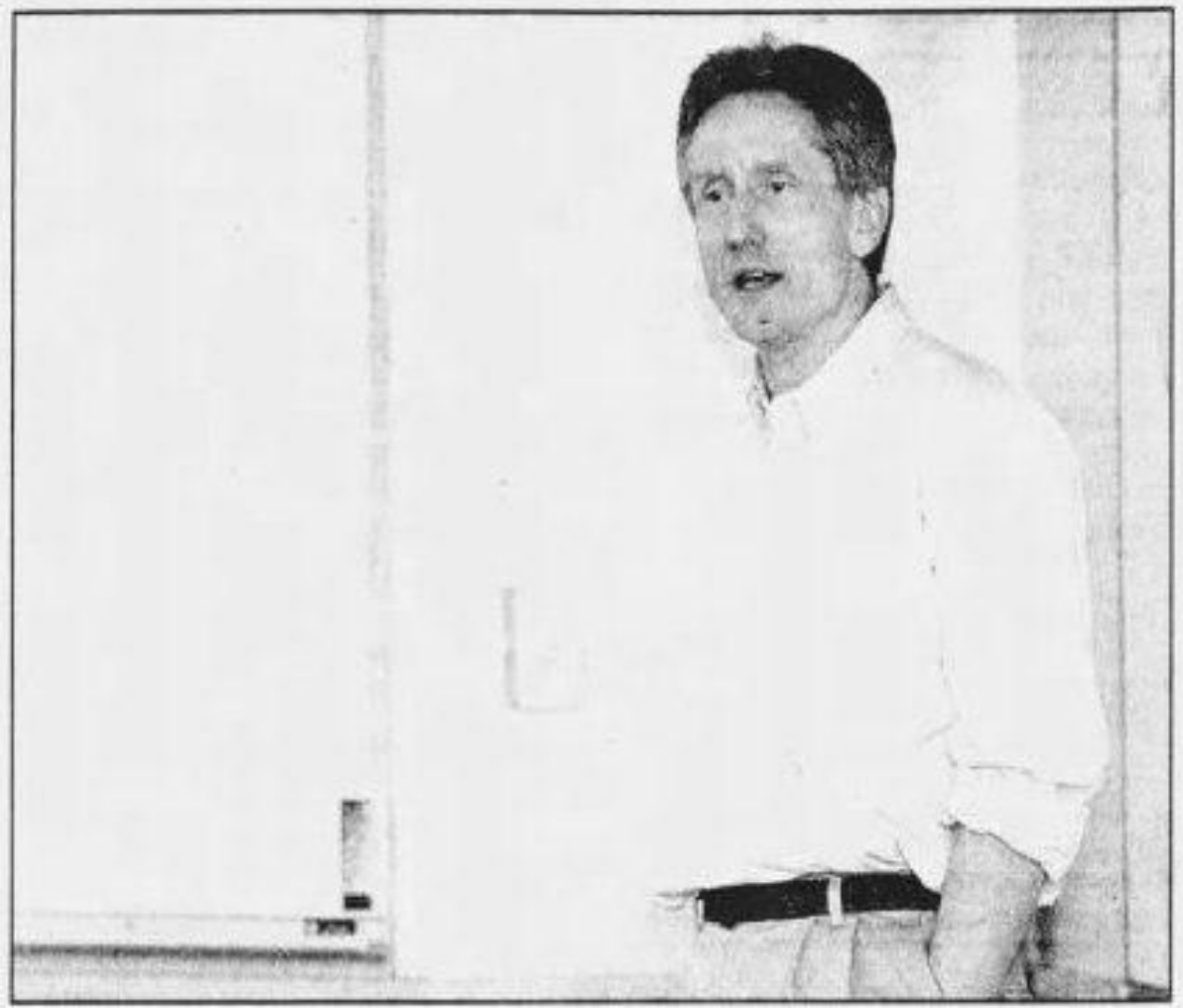


Author sees a growing move towards earth-based spirituality

Larry Mitchell

Apr 27, 2002



Steve Keegan/Enterprise-Record

Bron Taylor, author of “Dark Green Religion,” speaks to Chico State University students Thursday afternoon.

There’s much of interest and some things that are hopeful in “dark green religion,” according to professor Bron Taylor.

Speaking at Chico State University Thursday, Taylor said there “appears to be a growing convergence towards this earth-based spirituality.”

Dark green religion refers to the spiritual underpinnings of radical environmentalism, he said. Increasingly its flavor can be tasted “in the mainstream,” for example in the rhetoric of entities like the U.S. Forest Service and the Sierra Club.

The Sierra Club, for instance, advertises that “there is something out there that is much bigger than all of us,” and goes on to exhort; “Accept your connection to Nature You are a part of it.”

Basic to this way of thinking is the idea, first, that “the earth and its life processes are sacred,” and, second, that humans and modern civilization have brought the world to the brink of destruction.

Taylor, a graduate of Chico State and an expert on environmentalism and religion, teaches at the University of Wisconsin, Oshkosh. He spoke at an anthropology forum in Ayres Hall on the Chico State campus to an audience of about 150.

He’s long been interested in religion and politics, he said, and when, in the 1980s, he noticed radical environmentalists using religious language, his curiosity was piqued. He set out to the woods to study what was going on.

Some radicals who engaged in illegal activity spoke of mystical experiences and spiritual calls to action to defend the earth.

There was a case in the Arizona desert in the late 1980s, where environmentalists, who were later arrested, sabotaged power lines that brought electricity to a nuclear power plant.

Taylor said he interviewed one of the suspects, who had eluded authorities for a time. She related having a mystical experience that involved her consciousness being transformed into that of a ring-tailed cat. This, she claimed, protected her and helped her escape.

Taylor mentioned Julia “Butterfly” Hill’s reporting that she fell to her knees and cried before taking up her vigil in a giant redwood tree. The spirit of the forest gripped me,” she said.

“For these activists, redwood forests are restorative, and time spent there is transformational,” Taylor said.

In the value system of dark green religion, he said, animism, pantheism. Eastern religion, biocentrism, intuition and anarchism are good. Monotheism, Western religion, human-centeredness, reason and statism are seen as bad.

“Grief and anger fuel the movement’s passions,” Taylor said. He played bits of several recordings of songs that gave a sense of that.

One singer, in a sort of folk-music style, proclaimed, “That townhouse used to be my tree fort, that golf course used to be the pond, that building used to be the beach, that brown haze used to be the sky. Say good-bye. Say good-bye. We’re sailing on a time bomb. Is there nothing we can do? We dream of a day when all things can again be wild and free.”

Within the trend are sub-movements with various labels, such as “deep ecology,” “bio-regionalism” and “spiritual biocentrism,” he said.

Adherents believe the world faces “an extinction crisis fueled by the greed of corporations and corrupt governments,” he said. The groups’ tactics vary according to how imminent they feel the crisis is. Those who feel there is time, typically focus on changing their own lifestyles to harmonize with nature. Those with a sense of greater urgency emphasize political action.

“Part of what unites these movements is the myth of the fall from a foraging paradise,” he said. The idea is held that once people lived in harmony with nature, before the natural world was subdued to allow for agriculture.

It’s believed that “when humans began to domesticate other species, we domesticated ourselves and that we need to get in touch with our wild selves,” he said.

Taylor was asked if this wasn’t like the idea of “the noble savage” held by some Romantic writers in the past.

He said it was but that there is a difference. In the past, such theorizing was based on speculation, but now there is anthropological evidence that some pre-agrarian peoples did live a harmonious, sustainable existence.

And some modern people seem to be succeeding at experiments to live in this way, he added, citing certain communities in California’s north coast.

“Where it all ends up, your guess is as good as mine,” he said.

Author sees a growing move towards earth-based spirituality

By LARRY MITCHELL
Staff Writer

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