

# Nature Spirituality, Environmental Movements, and Radical Politics

A Conversation with Professor Bron Taylor

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**Conducted by Joshua Gentzke and Morgan Shipley**

On 11 April 2023, Dr. Bron Taylor joined professors Joshua Gentzke and Morgan Shipley for an engaging public conversation on the history and current state of environmentalism and radical politics. Dr. Taylor is one of the world's leading scholars in the field of religion and nature, a core faculty member in the University of Florida's Graduate Program in Religion and Nature, and Fellow of the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society located in Munich Germany. He is the editor-in-chief of the award-winning *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature* (2005), and he founded the International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture and its affiliated *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture*, a quarterly journal, that he has also edited since 2007. Taylor's own research focuses on the emotional, spiritual, ethical, and political dimensions of environmental movements, both historically and in the contemporary world. He has led and participated in a variety of international initiatives promoting the conservation of biological and cultural diversity. His books include *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future* (2010), *Ecological Resistance Movements: The Global Emergence of Radical and Popular Environmentalism* (1995), and *Affirmative Action at Work: Law, Politics and Ethics* (1992).

Working through a host of topics and examples, Dr. Taylor unpacks the significance and impact of contemporary environmental movements that, when compelled by sociopolitical forces, turn to alternative, artistic, and, at times, increasingly radicalized expressions of action.

The following represents an edited adaptation of this conversation, which includes some of the sources Dr. Taylor mentions or otherwise was drawing on during his reflections.

**Joshua Gentzke (JG):** Dr. Taylor, you've had quite a wide-ranging scholarly career, which has entailed intensive study of grassroots environmental movements around the world, including the most radical of them, as well as efforts by some of the so-called world religions or global religions to mobilize their co-religionists in response to the environmental crisis. For decades now, you've also been studying what you call the "global environmental milieu," and you've argued that there's been a growing convergence among diverse pro-environmental actors across the world toward what you call "dark green religion," which is to say, an ardently ecological version of spirituality. You've even written about the connection to "mother ocean" that many surfers describe feeling, which has led many of them to become environmental advocates or activists. I wonder if you might tell us something about your background and how your interests unfolded. It would also be wonderful if you could briefly summarize some of the most significant things you've discovered along the way.

**Bron Taylor (BT):** Like many of the students who are listening in today, in my late teens and early twenties, I became very interested in and passionate about the predicaments we had put ourselves in, from nuclear war and nuclear power to wars in Central America and civil rights. I began to notice that religion was oftentimes a hindrance to moving forward on those causes, as well as sometimes a resource for them.

I studied grassroots movements for social justice when I was in college, specifically the liberation movements in Central and South America that were deeply informed by a radical reading of Christianity. I found those moving and compelling, but I also noticed that they were deeply—as we would put it in today’s terminology—anthropocentric, human centered; they really didn’t address the extent to which the erosion of Earth’s ecosystems were negatively impacting people in the various struggles that they were trying to ameliorate. When I was working on my doctorate at the University of Southern California, beginning in about 1987, I noticed that there were people who were engaging in acts of civil disobedience and even sabotage to prevent the erosion of biological diversity. Intrigued, I began to gather news about them as well as their own publications. I learned that this movement had formed around 1980. They called themselves Earth First!, which was announcing that we ought to be prioritizing the well-being of all the living systems of the earth, not only so that we can flourish, but so that all life can flourish. These folks were animated by a deep sense of belonging and connection to nature, as well as what we would call in environmental philosophy intrinsic value theory, namely, the idea that all life is valuable regardless of whether we find it useful to us.

I also began to notice that these activists were often deeply spiritual in the way they described their connections to nature. Some were drawing explicitly on religions originating in Asia, especially Daoism and Buddhism; some had been moved by and were intrigued by and were trying to borrow from Native American cultures. They also had a perception that religions that originated in the West, especially Christianity because of its power, but also at least implicitly Islam and Judaism, promoted environmentally destructive attitudes and behaviors. In this they were drawing on some of the early environmental historians, Clarence Glacken and Lynn White for just two examples, but this kind of critique goes back very far, actually.<sup>1</sup> Here we had some people who were mobilizing around efforts to reverse deforestation and biodiversity erosion who were drawing on various forms of religion, including no small number who were avowedly pagan in their orientation and typically had a critique of the dominant society and Western religion and philosophy. I wasn’t sure whether I agreed with their critique or their perceptions, but I thought that whenever people are willing to go to jail and risk their freedom to convince the rest of us about something, at the very least, we ought to take seriously their perspectives.

So, long story short, shortly after finishing my PhD, I left for the woods to study intensively this movement, and before long I decided that I needed also to look at the way these kinds of eco-social movements were evolving around the world. As I continued this study ethnographically, historically, and by reading the research of others focused on regions outside of the United States, I began to perceive that there were some

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<sup>1</sup> Bron Taylor, “The Greening of Religion Hypothesis (Part One): From Lynn White, Jr. and Claims That Religions Can Promote Environmentally Destructive Attitudes and Behaviors to Assertions They Are Becoming Environmentally Friendly,” *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 10, no. 3 (2016): 268–305, <https://doi.org/10.1558/jsrnc.v10i3.29010>.

patterns emerging. Some of those patterns we identified in a book called *Ecological Resistance Movements*,<sup>2</sup> which you mentioned, but over time I was privileged to travel widely around the world hanging out with grassroots environmental activists who were challenging their nations, and even the United Nations, to dramatically move toward more sustainable lifeways and livelihoods, and to address the climate emergency and so forth. Again and again, I began to see the same sorts of spiritualities. While very diverse in some ways, there were some common denominators to them, and eventually that emerged into the argument that I made in *Dark Green Religion*,<sup>3</sup> which has found a lot of interest in part because, as I said in the book, if I'm not crazy, people around the world will see their own examples of the phenomena that I'm describing and the patterns I'm observing, and they will see that this kind of thing has cultural traction.<sup>4</sup> My research suggests such spirituality and politics are spreading rapidly around the world and exercising at least some influence, but again, it's facing very strong obstacles, and some of those obstacles, as it happens, are deeply rooted religious values, not only in the West but actually around the world.

Questions raised while studying such movements also led me to examine the world's religions to see whether those who were enamored with Buddhism or Daoism were correct that these traditions actually lead to greater environmental mobilization. So Morgan, with your colleague Gretel Van Wieren and Bernie Zaleha, another colleague from the University of California in Santa Cruz, we collaboratively reviewed some 700 articles focusing on religion and environmental behavior. We ended up concluding that it didn't appear that there was significant mobilization emerging from the world's predominant religions. Rather, a great deal of mobilization was coming from the kind of countercultural, radical movements that emphasize spiritualities of belonging and connection to nature, and kinship with all organisms, that often have animistic and Gaian spiritualities, as well as a deep love of nature. People with these kinds of perceptions and worldviews were really the ones who were most dramatically mobilizing to address the ecological and social crises that we're facing today.

**Morgan Shipley (MS):** Thank you for that response—it did a wonderful job situating the aim of this conversation, which is thinking through the complex relationships between religion, spirituality, and environmental responsibility, politics, and human actions. At this point, it might be helpful to break down some of these examples, ori-

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<sup>2</sup> Bron Raymond Taylor, ed., *Ecological Resistance Movements: The Global Emergence of Radical and Popular Environmentalism*, *Suny Series in International Environmental Policy and Theory* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> Bron Taylor, *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> For examples of such interest outside the United States, see Bron Taylor, *Dunkelgrüne Religion*, trans. Kocku von Stuckrad (Leiden, The Netherlands: Wilhelm Fink, 2020); Bron Taylor, "Dark Green Religion: A Decade Later," *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature, and Culture* 14, no. 4 (2020): 496–510, <https://doi.org/10.1558/jsrnc.34630>; and in the inaugural issue of the multilingual journal *AJGOS: Perspectives in the Study of Religion* 1, no. 1 (2022).

entations, and manifestations more concretely. Could you provide a brief history or sketch of the radical environmental movement in the United States?

**BT:** Quite a few years ago I wrote about the tributaries to radical environmentalism.<sup>5</sup> The central ideas upon which radical environmentalism has been based had been gestating largely in the West for generations, so today, I'm not going to go into that. What I'm going to do now is to start with the advent of what most people understand radical environmentalism to have begun with, and that is Earth First! In the 1970s, wildlands advocates were trying to work with a process being promoted by the United States Forest Service to determine what remaining areas owned by U.S. citizens ought to be designated as wilderness reserves. They lobbied really hard and their approach was based in science, but they felt like they got nowhere, that they lost everything. They concluded that it was the extractive industry people and the off-highway enthusiasts who prevailed, using religious terminology to say that capitalism is sacred, and our right to be anywhere we want in North America is a sacred, individualistic right. These wildlands activists felt they weren't arguing passionately enough—they were arguing dispassionately based on science and their concern for biodiversity. They decided that as a counterweight to the kind of fanaticism that is often rooted in conservative religiosity, a radical, passionate, spiritually-attuned movement was needed, and so they formed Earth First! They also thought that the environmental crisis was so grave, and the extinction crisis was accelerating so rapidly, that it was time for civil disobedience—even sabotage—to try to stop the destruction in its tracks.

From the early 1980s, they began some publicity stunts to try to dramatize the destruction and mobilize resistance to it. This was also a time when, with the waning of the Cold War, many activists from the 1960s and early 1970s were looking for what's next. Where do radicals go at that point? Many activists from various radical traditions resonated with Earth First!, so a lot of radicals from the previous decades gravitated toward this movement.<sup>6</sup> This led to heterogeneity, a lot of diversity in the movement, which ultimately precipitated significant tensions within it. After about a decade, the movement splintered into those who really wanted to focus on biodiversity and wildlands preservation, and those who, to use today's jargon, wanted to be more intersectional, to take seriously environmental causes but to network with all the other kinds of social justice-oriented causes out there. Now that's a bit of an oversimplification, but that's a significant part of the great schism that took place around 1990.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The article was published in this very journal: Bron Taylor, "The Tributaries of Radical Environmentalism," *Journal for the Study of Radicalism* 2, no. 1 (2008): 27–61, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41887590>.

<sup>6</sup> For a case study that exemplifies this point, please see Amanda Nichols' contribution to this special issue, "Karen Coulter and the Religious Roots of Radicalism in North America," *Journal for the Study of Radicalism* (2023): 51–82.

<sup>7</sup> I first wrote about Earth First!, and described this schism, in Bron Taylor, "The Religion and Politics of Earth First!," *The Ecologist* 21, no. 6 (1991): 258–66.

Also, in the late 1980s some people— especially the more anarchistic among these radicals— decided that tactics such as arson were legitimate. From the late 1980s and into the 1990s that kind of tactic increased. In 1992, some activists in the United Kingdom invented the trope “The Earth Liberation Front,” or the ELF for short, thus evoking a mischievous elvish ethos. But these elves were hardcore advocates of sabotage. Some of these folks thought that capitalist industrial civilization is inherently unsustainable and it needs to be brought down, so they would even advocate attacks on the energetic infrastructure of advanced industrial civilizations.

Long story short, early in this century, soon after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, some two dozen people associated with the Earth Liberation Front were arrested in the United States. The radical environmental movement divided again in the wake of these arrests. Some two-thirds of these activists ended up cooperating with the authorities. The movement wasn’t sure how to deal with these people, and great internal divisions erupted, so in subsequent years much less was heard of the movement.

However, the movement did not disappear as much as it shape-shifted. Lots of regional radical environmental movements and groups emerged. A law-based radical environmental group known as the Center for Biological Diversity, for example, was founded in the early 1990s. The Rewilding Institute soon followed, focusing on wildlands. Recently, we have had many kindred movements emerging, at least until the pandemic. Extinction Rebellion was becoming really big, for example, especially in Europe, and there are signs it is gearing up and getting moving again.

There are many different forms of this radical environmentalism. They’ve always tried to be in solidarity with indigenous people, which has been difficult at times but also productive.<sup>8</sup> We could talk about specific campaigns and successes and failures, but I think all the conditions that gave rise to this movement in 1980 have intensified since then, so we can only expect, in my judgment, more radical environmental action in the coming years.

**JG:** Thank you so much— it’s wonderful to hear about the historical context of these still-emerging forms of radical religiosity. I’m wondering if we could zoom out for a moment; could you perhaps comment on how you would describe humanity’s current relationship to nature, especially if we focus on a more “mainstream” level, as it were, as opposed to speaking about some of the more countercultural and radical environmentalist perspectives that we encounter in your work? And as a follow-up, I wonder if you might be willing to comment on whether you think we’re in the midst of a radical shift in environmental consciousness that will gain widespread traction—

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<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Bron Taylor, “Resacralizing Earth: Pagan Environmentalism and the Restoration of Turtle Island,” in *American Sacred Space*, eds. David Chidester and Edward T. Linenthal (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 97– 151; and Bron Taylor, “Earthen Spirituality or Cultural Genocide: Radical Environmentalism’s Appropriation of Native American Spirituality,” *Religion* 17, no. 2 (1997): 183– 215.

or do you fear that visions of radical ecological awareness will continue to be relegated to the cultural margins?

**BT:** To speak generally about humanity's current relationship to nature, in a word, I would say it's maladaptive. Many studies have shown that given our growing numbers, increasing per-capita consumption, and the understandable aspirations of poor people to move beyond the quest for food security to have greater life comforts and more fun, at current and future levels, we're clearly exceeding the carrying capacity of the earth while dramatically eroding biodiversity and Earth's life support systems. We certainly should be looking hard at what are the reasons for these kinds of maladaptive human societies. A reason that I think the study of philosophy and religious studies is so important is that many of the reasons for the disconnection between humans and nature involve a failure to understand how we belong to nature, how we're utterly dependent on it. Certainly, religions and philosophies play a very important role in our inability to figure out what's going on. I can elaborate on that if you like, but maybe you have another follow-up.

**JG:** It would be great to hear a bit more about that. For example, I wonder if you see calls for ecological awareness and change becoming more centripetal forces as some of the countercultural environmentalist movements that arose from the margins of what we might think of as the history of Western religiosity gain more renown and become increasingly visible. Do you think that what was once considered radical will soon appear more centrist?

**BT:** Some of the early radical environmentalists thought that by having a truly radical kind of environmental left that you would shift the political continuum away from the far right and this would, during regular contemporary politics, provide more opportunities for greens, whether they were moderate or radical. I think there's some evidence that radical environmentalism has had some such effect. Reflecting on nature spiritualities more broadly, I have argued in *Dark Green Religion* that movements with such spiritualities have tremendous cultural traction around the world in part because the portion of people who no longer find the world's traditional religions or the world's predominant religions compelling are nonetheless looking for meaning and purpose. These data suggest that many people find meaning and purpose in nature. If you look at such data, where do people put their trust? Increasing proportions of people will just say, "I put my trust in nature." That's almost the definition of idolatry because in the Western tradition, idolatry requires that you put your trust in God, so if you put your trust anywhere else, you're an idolater and that, in the minds of many, is spiritually dangerous, even politically dangerous.

These sorts of countercultural movements have been starting from a fairly small part of the human societies in which they're situated, but the cultural ground is fertile for them in part because of growing secularity, the desire for people to find meaning, the increasing environmental alarm around the world, and the fact that many young people are aware of the grave threats to their own existence and the flourishing of their futures by the climate crisis. Many of them understand these threats as deeply related

to the biodiversity crisis. Many of them are inclined to get uppity, and so, where can they go?

Well, if you care about these things you're going to tend to gravitate toward these social movements. These social movements are incubators for ideas. This is what I call "the environmental milieu," where people come together who are concerned about these things and they learn from one another, not just strategies and tactics, but they learn the critiques of the world's predominant religions that are there; they learn about alternative spiritualities, Paganisms for example; they learn respect for indigenous societies.

There are also many people who are entirely secular or naturalistic who are drawn to these movements but nonetheless have a sense that nature is sacred. Such people tend to use religious terminology when talking about their ultimate concerns and when expressing their love of nature. That sort of reveals that there's a blurry line between what we have traditionally called religion (many people think for religion, you must have invisible divine beings of some sort), and nonreligion. It is difficult to demarcate such a boundary.

One of the things I do in *Dark Green Religion* is discuss people who are expressing and promoting and feeling deep connections to nonhuman organisms in such a way that we can call them animists. Some of these people self-identify as animists, and some of these people are entirely naturalistic in their animism. Many of these arrive at such perceptions and felt kinship through science, the science of ethology, for example, or through evolutionary biology. Others are more conventionally religious, in some ways, perceiving that there are spirits in the trees or something like that. The same thing can be found with this kind of dark green perception about the interrelatedness of all life within the biosphere, which is increasingly referred to as Gaia, the ancient Greek goddess of the earth. Those with such perceptions can also be entirely naturalistic in the ways in which they look at Gaia, through biosphere science, or they might be more conventionally religious and view the entire biosphere as the body of God, as some theologians do, considering the whole universe as tantamount to God. These people we might call pantheists, which captures the notion that the whole world, or the universe as a whole, is divine. While there are many differences among these emerging green subcultures, there are also interesting convergences. I've actually identified ten major traits that we tend to find in these movements.

**MS:** Thank you very much for that thorough and engaging response. Building on these themes, and specifically the challenge mainstream global religions face when it comes to environmental stewardship, could you expand, as you do in your book *Dark Green Religion*, on what you see as the difference between religion, green religion, dark green religion, and even spirituality, specifically if we understand spirituality as describing our interconnection to the environment?

**BT:** I use the term "religious environmentalism" to refer to those people in the world's predominant religions who have sincere and ardent environmental concerns and are trying to mobilize their traditions to address our environmental predicaments.



All the world's predominant religions have actors like that; if you talk to them in some depth, as I and many other researchers have, you find that they're having a hard time turning their traditions green. In my research with Gretel [Van Wieren] and Bernie [Zaleha], we've identified some of the reasons for that.<sup>9</sup> But one of the interesting dynamics with these efforts is that to fully integrate these sciences into your religion, you must have what I would call a liberal epistemology.

In other words, you have to be willing to leave behind some of the traditional doctrines of your religion to fully incorporate the science because a lot of these traditions have ideas that don't cohere with science. Once people make that move away from considering their sacred traditions and their sacred texts to be inviolable, that can be a slippery slope *out* of the tradition, and it can also be a slippery slope to less influence *within* the tradition. To borrow a line from Kermit the Frog, "It's hard to be green," and this is especially true for those within the world's predominant religions. These folks, to use the expression, are trying to do the Lord's work, but it's difficult.

One reason for that I think, if I can be permitted to overgeneralize a bit, was advanced by the novelist Daniel Quinn in his novels *Ishmael* and *The Story of B*. In these books, Quinn argues that all the world's predominant religions are about divine rescue. The Abrahamic religions tend to want to rescue us from this world, which implicitly or explicitly devalues it at least in some way. Even if we're supposed to be good stewards, those sorts of doctrines consider Earth to be of penultimate value. Consequently, the religious priority tends to not focus on the health of the biosphere. The traditions that originated on the Indian subcontinent, for their parts, tend toward passivity given the doctrine of karma. Where you are in the social hierarchy is where you belong, and that works against a prophetic and activist orientation.

Also, with the Dharma traditions, the common attitude is that the world is characterized by suffering and through religious practice you can be released from the cycles of suffering; well, that's a pretty negative attitude toward earthly life. That's really the opposite of what we find in dark green spiritualities, which embrace the biosphere, speak of life as a miracle, and recognize that life can be ecstatic. Those with dark green sentiments even valorize death because that's always the wellspring of new life, it's part of the cycle of life, just as Simba from *The Lion King* taught. The worldviews are really quite different, and I would argue that starting from a small place, these kinds of dark green spiritualities cohere more with contemporary scientific understandings than do religions that emerged thousands of years ago. All of those, by the way, are agricultural religions and consequently, they tend not to be too fond of those organisms that are predators on our agricultural domesticated plants and animals. So, you can analyze the sacred texts and you can see that really there is not a robust biodiversity ethic

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<sup>9</sup> Bron Taylor, Gretel Van Wieren, and Bernard Daley Zaleha, "The Greening of Religion Hypothesis (Part Two): Assessing the Data from Lynn White, Jr., to Pope Francis," *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 10, no. 3 (2016): 306–78, <https://doi.org/10.1558/jsrnc.v10i3.29011>; and Huaiyu Chen, *In the Land of Tigers and Snakes: Living with Animals in Medieval Chinese Religions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2023).

in them, no matter how hard some people try to cherry-pick their traditions to claim that they do, in fact, enjoin the conservation of biological diversity.<sup>10</sup>

**MS:** Could you chart or define for us what exactly dark green religion entails? It might help situate Joshua's next question.

**BT:** The main traits and characteristics of what I've called dark green religion include the ideas that nature is sacred; all living things have intrinsic value; all life forms share a common ancestor; that we all evolved in the same way and thus are literally kin, we are biologically related; all life's interconnected and mutually dependent. These movements and these people have deep feelings of belonging and connection to nature, and a humility about the human place in the world. They also tend to think that the best way to access these kinds of spiritualities is through direct visceral sensory experience in nature, but also through the sciences, which displace human beings from the center of the universe and challenge the notion that the world was made just for us. The arts can evoke similar perceptions, even for those who don't have the privilege of having access to biologically intact ecosystems. Also, death is not to be feared but embraced as a wellspring for new life. Typically, people with such perceptions and sentiments have had experiences of awe and wonder in nature, and a profound love for it.

**JG:** Thank you. Earlier, you acknowledged the potential that dark green religions hold for helping to reimagine and foster relationships with the other-than-human world. There is certainly much here that is encouraging. But, given the title of today's conversation, which invokes the intersection between environmental spirituality and radical politics, I would like to focus for a moment on the complicated notion of "radicality" itself. If I understand you correctly, the descriptor "dark green" appended to "religion" is meant to evoke the intense passion that certain religious or spiritual movements harbor for healing the relationship between humans and the other-than-human world, in contrast to those traditions whose commitments to progressive environmental action are nominal at best. But does it also hint at a potential shadow side? I was wondering if you could say a bit about any potential dangers you might see in politically or religiously "radical" approaches to environmentalism.

**BT:** Anybody who's paying attention can see that radical political movements can be exceptionally dangerous. Religion as well can be and often is very dangerous, and it can fuel radical political movements. Religion is dangerous because it tends to place people into categories of superhuman and holy people, regular people, and those who are somehow subhuman. This is just a long-standing dynamic in religious traditions. I invented the notion of "dark green" religion to be ambiguous and to acknowledge that danger. On the one hand, dark means deep ecological, a view that all life has value apart

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<sup>10</sup> For a couple of apt examples, one focused on religions that originated in the Near East, the others on the Indian subcontinent, see James Nash, "The Bible Vs. Biodiversity: The Case Against Moral Argument From Scripture," *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 3, no. 2 (2009): 213–37, <https://doi.org/10.1558/jsrnc.v3i2.213>; and Huaiyu Chen, *In the Land of Tigers and Snakes: Living with Animals in Medieval Chinese Religions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2023).

from its usefulness to human beings. This contrasts with reform environmentalism, in which we care about nature because we need it. It's also dark in terms of danger, as you suggested— it has a shadow side, and whenever we're looking at social movements we should be alert to their excesses, to their dangers.

Of course, the adversaries of green spiritual movements say, often on religious grounds, that these movements are spiritually dangerous. Or they say that these movements are economically dangerous, that if you follow these people, we will all soon be starving. It's important to look at the shadow sides of these movements. Well, what might they be? We've talked a little bit about the Earth Liberation Front, and about people who are convinced that we should bring down the energetic infrastructure of society as we currently know it. People can make their own judgments about that, but many people would view that as a danger, including to democracy and the rule of law.

There's also a deeper philosophical issue at stake. Whenever a philosophical or religious ethic focuses on wholes, the danger is that the well-being of the individuals within the wholes can be overridden in the interest of the broader whole. Radical environmental movements tend to focus on the whole, the well-being of the whole biosphere, the well-being of whole ecosystems, and the well-being of the species within them. Some people therefore, and not without cause, believe that with such wholism, individual human rights might be eroded. This even leads to charges that deep ecologists and radical environmentalists are eco-fascists or eco-terrorists.

In *Dark Green Religion*, I spend a significant amount of time looking at how likely it is that these kinds of wholistic environmental ethics, with their spiritual undertones, might be dangerous. I argue that when you have a view that all life is sacred, it's a high bar to countenance repressive actions that can hurt people or other organisms. If you want to try to make it so that all life can flourish, that doesn't mean that there aren't hard choices; that doesn't mean that if we're going to deal with the climate emergency, that there are not going to be sacrifices that are going to need to be made. But clearly, these social movements would like those sacrifices to be made by plutocrats and authoritarians, not regular people.

**MS:** Given that response, when we think about contemporary politics, about radical politics, do you see that the sociocultural labeling of movements— as examples of eco-terrorism, eco-fascism, or even radical environmentalism— as a mechanism to devalue the underlying critique and knowledge that these groups are bringing? We obviously need to be concerned with excess, with turns to violence and destruction, but is there a tendency, within mainstream politics and even environmental movements, to describe something as radical or as fascistic or as terroristic in order to not only devalue that movement, but also to change the discourse away from their underlying critiques that highlight how capitalism, for example, exacerbates environmental catastrophe, or the way that certain religions and their dominionist claims over the earth add to that? In other words, do you see those labels problematizing our ability to respond to the crises we face?

**BT:** Absolutely. Adversaries of these movements, people who have an economic interest in the current status quo, use these kinds of critiques to denigrate the movements that they consider to be a threat to their privileges. It's also the case that sometimes academicians parrot those kinds of critiques in exaggerated ways that are counterproductive to creating the multi-issue coalitions that are needed. I mean quite clearly, if you're going to promote environmental well-being, human beings need to be taken care of, because if they're not, if they're on the margins and to survive they need to cut down a tree and plant something or kill endangered animals in a forest because it's the only food that's available to them, as they are increasingly marginalized, they'll do it. And nobody who has enough calories themselves can condemn such actions if, in fact, that is someone's situation.

It's quite clear that we need to have movements that recognize the complexity and the interdependency of all these issues. It's not the case in my judgment, however, that everybody can or should be working on the same issues. What those who are focusing on wildlands conservation and biodiversity might say, and I think legitimately, is that there are far fewer people working on those issues and who care about those issues than those who care about all the human injustices in the world. While through my research I know that wildlands defenders are overwhelmingly supportive of human-focused social justice movements, and vote in ways that support those movements, and while they may show up at a demonstration here and there to support those movements, these activists insist that somebody needs to put the earth first, to borrow that movement's slogan. That's what they are prioritizing in their own activist lives.

**MS:** Outside the way in which we might emphasize spectacular moments of environmental activism, more broadly, when we think about spirituality and religiosity, where do we see an effort to change the way in which humans relate to the natural world? How might individuals who are raised within a setting that says nature is something for humans to use, it's something for humans to consume, that we as humans are separate from it, how might those individuals find a way to think differently about their relationship and sacred interconnections to nature?

**BT:** I think anyone who is moved by these sorts of movements and trends, who feels affinity with them, needs to find community. There was an old book by Sharon Welch, an early Christian feminist and liberation theologian, called *Communities of Resistance and Solidarity*.<sup>11</sup> Its title provides a good expression: communities of resistance and solidarity. Where are you on the land? Where do you live? Who are your allies?

I've talked about the kind of radical environmental movement in terms of Earth First!, but there were other forms emerging forcefully at the same time as Earth First!, including something that became known as the bioregional movement. This was a movement that was less overtly political than Earth First! but was working on creating

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<sup>11</sup> Sharon D. Welch, *Communities of Resistance and Solidarity: A Feminist Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985).

sustainable models in communities.<sup>12</sup> The bioregionalist ideology and perception was that people who live in a place—in a bioregion, in a watershed—are better able to learn the lore, to understand the ecosystem, and to figure out ways to live sustainably in that place. There’s tremendous religious and philosophical sophistication going into this kind of thing, especially in California and elsewhere in the western United States, where this movement originated. Subsequently this movement spread elsewhere, and experimentation has been robust in such back-to-the-land movements.

Now today there are lots of different forms of this impulse: permaculture, regenerative agriculture, people going back to land trying to create ways to sustain human life that do not degrade the rest of the living world. People have to look at their own skill sets, their own personalities, their own regions, and figure out where they can fit in and can find a community to be mutually supportive and to grow with. Now maybe, for example, you’re in a region with native nations still there fighting for sovereignty and environmental justice; then you’re in proximity and you can develop relationships and figure out what your intercultural manners are so you can be in authentic alliance with folks in these kinds of causes.

Or maybe you live in a big urban area and there are all kinds of ecological injustices that disproportionately impact people of color. Whatever your ethnicity, you can be involved in those kinds of causes where you are. We don’t really know what the tipping points are to create a more sustainable society, but we do know that if everybody who feels this way is not dramatically active, then there will be no tipping points.

*Dark Green Religion* is about as optimistic a book as I could write because we see that, even though the odds are long and not much time remains to avert the worst of what’s unfolding, the countermovements are rapidly growing. There’s tremendous cultural creativity going into awakening, evoking, and reinforcing human connections to nature and they have tremendous cultural power.

**MS:** Considering this optimism and the creativity you just referenced, what final thoughts might you offer as it relates to “radical environmentalism”? What lessons can we cull from your study of these movements, their efficacy, and broader social awareness?

**BT:** Radical environmentalism is a more diverse social phenomenon than many realize. When I think about its main premises, I find compelling its ecocentrism. After careful analysis, I have concluded as well that its assertions that humankind is pre-

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<sup>12</sup> For bioregionalism’s history, see Michael Vincent McGinnis, ed., *Bioregionalism* (New York: Routledge, 1999); and Bron Taylor, “Bioregionalism: An Ethics of Loyalty to Place,” *Landscape Journal* 19, nos. 1. & 2 (2000): 50–72, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43324333>. For the most important early sources see Gary Snyder, *Turtle Island* (New York: New Directions, 1969); Freeman House, “Totem Salmon,” in *North Pacific Rim Alive* (San Francisco: Planet Drum, Bundle No. 3, 1974); Peter Berg and Raymond Dasmann, “Reinhabiting California,” *The Ecologist* 7 (December 1977): 399–401; Peter Berg, ed., *Reinhabiting a Separate Country: A Bioregional Anthology of Northern California* (San Francisco: Planet Drum, 1978); and Van Andruss, Christopher Plant, Judith Plant, and Eleanor Wright, eds., *Home!: A Bioregional Reader* (Philadelphia: New Society, 1990).

precipitating a massive and egregious extinction event are all too accurate, as are their claims that the erosion of the diversity and health of environmental systems is the direct result of corrupt and often illegal behaviors by corporations and the governments that are in collusion with them.

Radical environmentalists also engage in illegal activities, which range from civil disobedience to sabotage, sometimes including arson. Some of these actions risk harming adversaries, first responders, and bystanders, risks they typically downplay. But with almost no exceptions, radical greens have not sought to cause physical harm to people or other living things. The only deaths, in decades of radical environmental campaigns, have been of activists engaged in resistance, and in at least one case, the logger who felled a tree in the direction of the activist, although not charged, had threatened the activist shortly before the tragic incident.

I have carefully studied the campaigns and claims of these activists, and it is clear by any judicious analysis that the lawlessness of corporations and governments has been far greater than any committed by environmentalists, radical and not. The record of lawsuits finding lawlessness by corporations and the government itself provides grim testimony of this fact.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, because extinction is forever, these activists have a strong moral claim that their lawbreaking is morally permissible because the stakes are so high, and politics as usual (lobbying and electoral politics) so slow if not also corrupt, that it cannot prevent irreversible harms. It is possible to coherently argue that conscientious lawbreaking, if deemed more likely to produce morally important outcomes than other tactics, is permissible. Conscientious lawbreaking can even be seen as a means to precipitate changes that would overturn corrupt lawmaking and lawbreaking by powerful corporate and governmental actors. A key to such analysis is what sorts of lawbreaking are likely to be more effective than other political means, and this requires also an assessment of whether a given action is likely to precipitate an effective and counterproductive backlash by the opponents or wider publics. In short, deciding whether and if so how to break the law is a weighty decision that some radical greens take far too lightly.

There are many examples in history, these points made, including in U.S. environmental history, in which radical environmentalists, including through conscientious lawbreaking, have contributed decisively to surprising and inspiring victories. There is a role for extralegal tactics when, as I have argued previously, they are scrupulously nonviolent.<sup>14</sup> Ironically, for the anarchists who have increasingly been drawn to radical environmental campaigns, and who deny the legitimacy of the governments with which they are in contention, every significant victory must ultimately be secured

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<sup>13</sup> For example, see Bron Taylor, “Earth First! Fights Back,” *Terra Nova* 2, no. 2 (Spring 1997): 29–43, and the publication archive of the Center for Biological Diversity, which documents the lawsuits it has won that evidence this claim: <https://www.biologicaldiversity.org/publications>.

<sup>14</sup> Bron Taylor, “Resistance: Do the Means Justify the Ends?,” in *Worldwatch Institute’s State of the World 2013* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2013), 304–16, 421–23; and Bron Taylor, “Resistance: Do the Ends Justify the Means?,” *Adbusters* 23, no. 3 (2015): 91–99.

through legislation or litigation that draws on extant statutes and scientific facts. No secure victory occurs that is not backed up by laws, regulatory agencies, and properly administered enforcement mechanisms.

Given the kleptocratic and authoritarian political systems that are all too common around the world, I understand and value the decentralist impulse that is common among environmentalists, and especially among its radical fronts. There are good reasons to fear and criticize centralized political power, as well as to devolve some political decision making to within specific watersheds and ecoregions, the long-standing goal of bioregionalists. But environmental historians have well documented that it is often people further away from the sites of the resource-rich habitats coveted by industrial elites who advocate for these habitats. In this light, it is clear not only that a fetish on the local can play into the hands of global capital but also that it can distract us from recognizing that the most important commons we share is the biosphere. The accelerating climate crisis should be making this all the more obvious. Protecting the climate system from further anthropogenic disruption, which really threatens all who dwell therein, depends on good governance, laws, and law enforcement officials— both within nation-states and internationally. The desperately needed international treaties require dramatic reform and transformation within some very problematic international institutions, including the United Nations. A significant proportion of radical environmental energy ought to take up this challenge, however daunting it may be.

Few within radical movements seem to understand this, or have a vision for contributing to these sorts of transformations. This is in no small measure due to the prevalence of anarchistic ideologies within these movements. There is, moreover, too much facile sloganeering against capitalism within these movements— too little thought about humans as creative, entrepreneurial, productive, and incentive-driven creatures, who, like it or not, have drawn and will continue to draw from nature's capital to produce things and engage in trade, first to sustain and then to enhance their lives.

The typical denunciations of capitalism are rarely followed by clearly stated and plausible alternatives. Between the understandable critiques of corrupt, growth-obsessed business and governmental actors, there is too little focus on developing the democratic structures, laws, regulations, enforcement mechanisms, and judicial institutions that are capable of curtailing corporate and plutocratic power. In my view, and speaking generally, most of those in these movements need a more sophisticated and internationalist social philosophy.<sup>15</sup>

These qualifications and concerns expressed, I want to make clear that there is much to praise and appreciate in these movements. At their best, they express this exceptionally important fact: Everything earthly that anyone cares about depends on the fecundity, health, and resilience of Earth's living systems. Therefore, whatever we

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<sup>15</sup> Bron Taylor, "Deep Ecology and Its Social Philosophy: A Critique," in Eric Katz, Andrew Light, and David Rothenberg, eds., *Beneath the Surface: Critical Essays on Deep Ecology* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 269– 99.

care about depends on learning to put Earth First! To do this effectively, in my view, requires more thoughtful and sophisticated forms of radical environmentalism than have, to date, characterized much of it.



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