

Spiritual movement finds God in nature

Former Venturan explores the ties

Tom Jacobs

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“Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future,” by Bron Taylor (published Oct. 26 by University of California Press; 360 pages; \$24.95) is available through all major booksellers and on amazon.com.

At first glance, ecology and religion have little in common. One concentrates on the Earth and the species it sustains; the other aims its attention on the afterlife. One spotlights our interaction with the natural world; the other focuses on our relationships with our fellow man. One is based solidly in science; the other, not so much.

But this split did not always exist. In the centuries before the Judeo-Christian tradition was born, much of mankind engaged in some form of nature worship. And since the blossoming of the ecological movement in the 1960s, the belief that spiritual sustenance can be found in the natural world has attracted a large and growing number of adherents.

Bron Taylor, a graduate of Ventura High School and Ventura College, charts the birth and growth of this movement in his book “Dark Green Religion,” recently published by the University of California Press.

A professor of ethics and religion at the University of Florida and editor of the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, Taylor is one of the nation’s leading scholars on the intersection of the scenic and the sacred.

“Based on my empirical work, I believe new spiritualities of belonging and connection to the Earth’s living systems are rapidly emerging,” Taylor said in a recent interview. “This worldview, compatible with if not directly grounded in an evolutionary/ecological worldview, teaches the mutual dependence and relatedness of all life.

“It promotes a corresponding ethics of kinship, wherein our minimal duty is to prevent human-caused extinctions of our earthly cousins, other species. It teaches that we, like all other organisms, are subject to nature’s laws.”

Taylor finds evidence of this emergence in all sorts of places, from surfing culture to Disney movies (especially “The Lion King,” with its overt message of the importance of sustaining “the circle of life”).

An origin in Darwin’s work

Taylor traces the modern movement back to seminal 19th-century scientist Charles Darwin, whose theory of evolution describes a world in which all life forms share common ancestors and are dependent on one another for survival.

While the idea of nature as sacred can be found in the writings of Henry David Thoreau and John Muir, it didn’t coalesce into an informal movement until the ecological disasters of the 1960s including the Santa Barbara oil spill — produced an awakening of environmental consciousness. A large number of people who found themselves disillusioned with traditional faiths discovered a sense of awe and inspiration in the natural world.

In recent years, many mainstream religions have scurried to catch up with this way of thinking, with Pope Benedict declaring it sinful to despoil the natural environment.

For Taylor, the jury is out on whether the traditional faiths (Eastern as well as Western — he calls Buddhism no more “green” than Christianity or Islam) can play a significant role in changing attitudes.

“There are minorities within religious traditions that have reverence for nature and act accordingly,” he said, noting the writings of St. Francis of Assisi, “but hostility and indifference to nature are more prevalent among the world’s major religious traditions. This is because, in one way or another, they are about divine rescue from this world. A religious worldview in which the most sacred place is otherworldly rather than earthly fundamentally devalues, if implicitly, the biosphere.”

Coming of age in Ventura

Taylor’s intense relationship with the natural environment can be traced back to his 13th birthday, which happened to be the day his family moved to Ventura.

“I did not have much adult supervision at that point, and started spending pretty much every morning with a few other beach rats during the summers at the ‘school-house’ beach off of New Bedford Court, if memory serves,” he said. “We bodysurfed and rafted. Boogies had not been invented yet.”

During his Ventura High School years, he worked as a lifeguard at the state beach and got serious about both varieties of surfing, board and body.

“As for most guys, the surfing was mostly for fun and thrills and the adrenaline rush,” he recalled. “But there were also times as a teenager when I escaped my dysfunctional family in the middle of the night and just hung out on the beach — fish jumping, waves rolling in, stars overhead. This made my personal, problematic situation seem pretty small and unimportant. It made me think that even if humans were pretty much all screwed up, there was something just fine in the universe.”

Now living in Gainesville, Fla., “I still surf whenever I can, although I’m a bit of a Pacific Ocean chauvinist,” he said.

“I’ve been lucky enough to have had experiences some surfers report when engaged in their pastime: perceptions related to the relativity of time — ‘time stands still in the tube’ is the way many describe that experience — but more importantly and regularly, the simple joys of feeling a part of the wider community of life while surfing.

“I would not say I experience ‘oneness’ (while surfing) in what some might take to be a mystical sense,” he added, “but the experience can and does remind me that I belong to the world and am not, ultimately, superior to or separate from it. So there is a spiritual payoff, if by that we mean a deep sense of humility and a concomitant gratitude for being here, able to experience this mysterious and wonderful place.”

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