
**Editor's Introduction: Contesting Consecrated Scientific
Narratives in Religion and Environmental Ethics**

In my sometimes foggy memory bank I recall hearing that Ninian Smart (1927–2001), one of the most influential comparative religions scholars of the twentieth century, claimed that when the world religions came into dialogue, facilitated in part by the secular comparative study of religion, many involved in these religious traditions changed and did so dramatically. Some of this was because of the contention and mutual criticism this encounter involved. Smart asserted, for example, that some Buddhists established orphanages when those from Abrahamic religions (with their prophetic traditions) criticized them and ideas common in their tradition for indifference to poverty and human suffering; while some Christians began to develop greater concern for the environment and non-human organisms when charged with limiting their empathy to human beings. Smart believed that no culture or tradition had a monopoly on truth and that authentic cross-cultural encounter could yield hybrids that would lead us closer to it.

In my twenties I was deeply involved in social justice and anti-war causes. I read widely religious and ethical approaches to such issues and was especially moved by Mahatma Gandhi and his philosophy of conflict, especially as interpreted by Joan Bondurant in *Conquest of Violence* (1958). According to Bondurant, Gandhi believed that if any party remained both non-violent and true to its convictions during a conflict, while also always being willing to reconsider and change its followers' views and behavior, the truth of the matter would emerge.

Although I never thought this sort of idea was true in some inevitable, metaphysical sense, I liked it. I considered it alongside Gandhi's humble assertion in his autobiography that he was merely *experimenting* with truth (Gandhi 1949). I came to believe, in part through such influences, that conflict is not to be avoided but welcomed—at least when not accompanied by violence. This conviction has been reinforced by a

variety of personal experiences and historical events in which I have seen that standing up for what one believes without rancor can lead to more positive outcomes than would have otherwise been the case.

This is part of the backdrop that led me to call for a ‘taboo-free enquiry’ upon founding this journal (2007). More specifically, I had seen too many examples in the study of religion and ecology of scholars—often those affiliated with or otherwise sympathetic to some particular religious traditions—of cherry picking putatively positive aspects of these traditions and their sacred texts in an effort to promote their supposed ecological or social wisdom without forthrightly spotlighting equally or more powerful dynamics within them that seemed to work in the opposite direction. I provided one example with regard to readings of the Noah story in the Hebrew Bible in the immediately preceding issue of the *JSRNC* (Taylor 2015). Countervailing this sort of overly sanguine happy talk was part of what motivated me to produce *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, as I discussed in one my contributions to it (Taylor 2005).

What we need if we are to get closer to constructing environmentally adaptive and equitable societies is authentic, cross-cultural, cross-disciplinary, taboo-free disputation on a host of pertinent issues, in which those expressing deeply held ideas can be challenged without censorship or fear of reprisal. Only with such an approach, it seems to me, can we grapple our way toward modes of thinking, feeling, and acting compatible with the flourishing of all environmental systems and species on the tiny place in space we call Earth.

Not long ago I heard from Lisa Sideris, one of the associate editors of this journal and a scholar I greatly respect, that an article she wrote had been met with what she considered to be strong ideological resistance and controversy. She told me that she had been surprised by this backlash and, in particular, by an effort to have it pulled from an edited book for which she had prepared it. She told me she was advancing a critique of efforts to consecrate scientific understandings considered by their proponents to be new, ecologically salutatory, sacred narratives. I was keenly interested in her argument because I had written about such efforts in *Dark Green Religion* (2010) and considered them to be, in general, positive developments. But I also remained on the alert for the shadow side of religion, including these new, scientific forms.

Allow me to explain. Epistemologically, I knew I needed to consider Professor Sideris’s contentions. I was especially disturbed that her arguments might be suppressed. So I read her article, which was eventually published in the aforementioned volume (Sideris 2013). As expected, I found it to be provocative and was sure it would trigger a debate fitting

for the pages of the *JSRNC*; thus, I invited a number of scholars whom I knew or expected would be both sympathetic and critical of her arguments.

In this special issue of the *JSRNC* entitled 'Contesting Consecrated Scientific Narratives in Religion and Environmental Ethics', therefore, readers will find Sideris's original paper along with these responses and her subsequent reflections on them. It is, to put it mildly, a lively discussion.

In the light of the following debates, I hope we will all take the opportunity to consider afresh our views regarding which sacred stories, or amalgamations of them, make the most sense. Maybe then we can better craft a path toward a better future for religion, nature, and culture than currently is appearing on the horizon.

Finally, dear readers, please note that references to Sideris's original paper will be to the reprinted version in this issue of the *JSRNC*.

Bron Taylor
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References

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