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## On Mother Earth: Introducing a JSRNC Special Issue Forum

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When introducing the *JSRNC* I declared our intention to create a venue for ‘taboo-free and interdisciplinary inquiry’ into the role of religion in Earth’s socioecological systems (Taylor 2007). I argued that only in this way can we illuminate these complex and dynamic relationships and correct misperceptions that may already exist or that will likely emerge as our investigation continues.

This is easier said than done.

Like all humans, scholars have perceptual blinders rooted in personal experiences, chronological and cultural contexts, and concomitant expectations and hopes. Specifically, we are subject to both confirmation and selection biases. To mitigate these human tendencies, we must be scrupulously self-reflexive, striving to understand how our backgrounds and contexts might predispose us to fail to observe, or fail to seek evidence, that might qualify or disconfirm pre-existing perceptions.

I am keenly aware, for example, that my decision to study the religious dimensions of grassroots environmental movements is because religions sometimes promote causes I support; I hoped these movements would prove to be effective in protecting biodiversity conservation and promoting socially equitable societies. I have sought, nevertheless, to not let my hopes and foci mislead me into holding unduly sanguine views about the positive trends I have documented. To evaluate how significant such trends might be, working with and drawing on many others, I have sought out studies that might qualify or contradict perceptions I have been arriving at through my own research.<sup>1</sup> Orchestrating the *JSRNC* is a significant part of this ongoing effort.

1. See, for example, the comprehensive review I conducted with Gretel Van Wieren and Bernard Zaleha (Taylor et al. 2016), which is the second part of a study

I have observed another disturbing dynamic among scholars: sometimes an argument is advanced that gains significant scholarly attention, and deservedly so because it is full of nuanced insights, but over time, a vulgar version of the argument gets passed down through a scholarly echo chamber and this version is subsequently parroted without the nuances, likely by those who never read the original work. A good example of this is Bill Cronon's 'The Trouble with Wilderness' (1995). Those missing its nuances have included Cronon's critics as well as those who take their (mis)understandings of Cronon's arguments as a cudgel against those who support the existence of terrestrial and marine reserves, where human activities are significantly restricted, in order to conserve biodiversity.<sup>2</sup>

My point here is that judicious scholarship requires us to be scrupulously open minded to expectation-challenging arguments because, as Khun (1962) well demonstrated, received understandings can not only be incorrect but difficult to dislodge. This is why I have been so keen for this journal to remain wide open to diverse voices and perspectives. This is also why, when I heard that Sam Gill had given a lecture revisiting his evidence and the controversy over *Mother Earth: An American Myth* (1990), I was intrigued, and thought that after three decades, it would be valuable to revisit the controversy.<sup>3</sup>

In *Mother Earth*, drawing on extensive archival evidence, Gill challenged the idea that Native American cosmovisions have long been characterized by a profound reverence for Mother Earth, which is understood as a nurturing mother, often conceived of as a deity, and believed to promote ecologically beneficent values and behaviors (especially when compared to the recently arrived and typically

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exploring what I call the greening of religion hypothesis, which began with a history of such ferment (Taylor 2016). Research published subsequently, which I have also kept up with, reinforce the main findings of this comprehensive review.

2. See, e.g. Robert Fletcher's 'Against Wilderness' (2009). The editors of the inaugural issue of *Environmental History* republished Cronon's article (Cronon 1996a), and solicited responses to it, most of which were strongly critical of Cronon's article. See Cohen (1996), Dunlap (1996), Hays (1996). See Cronon (1996b) for his response, which area reserves never quote, seemingly unaware of its important clarifications, which include Cronon's strong support for nature conservation through protected area reserves. For key sources for the ongoing ferment, see Burks (1994), Butler (2002), Callicott and Nelson (1998), Crist (2008), Fletcher (2009), Foreman (2000), Marris (2011), Nelson and Callicott (2008), Snyder (2008), Sutter (2013a, b), Taylor (2012, 2013), Turner (1996), Wild Earth (1996), Willers (1996), Wuerthner et al. (2015).

3. For those unacquainted, Sam Gill is one of North America's most eminent religion scholars. Several of the respondents to this issue of the JSRNC will illustrate this, as does Jacob Barrett's (2023) review of Gill's *The Proper Study of Religion: Building on Jonathan Z. Smith* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), which was published in the JSRNC, see <https://doi.org/10.1558/jsrnc.24905>

rapacious Western, settler, colonial societies). Rather, Gill contended that such beliefs emerged during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, foremost due to increasingly romantic views about Native Americans among Western intellectuals, joined by environmentalists especially since the 1950s, and eventually constructed in concert with Native Americans who embraced the notion and increasingly incorporated Mother Earth as central to their own worldviews and values, in part as a way to construct positive identities and enhance their struggle for land, autonomy, and respect.

In Gill's lecture, which he expanded to kickoff this *JSRNC* special forum and titled 'What is Mother Earth? A Name, A Meme, A Conspiracy', Gill borrowed the word conspiracy from 'The Mother Earth Conspiracy: An Australian Episode', by the Australian scholar Tony Swain (1991). Appearing a year after the publication of Gill's book, Swain's article buttressed Gill's contentions by arguing that a similar history had been unfolding in Australia. Swain traced the resulting misrepresentations largely to academicians:

Those academics advocating an Aboriginal Mother Earth have clearly taken this leap beyond the ethnographic evidence with a Classical [Gaia-influenced] image in mind, and with either theological or ecologist agendas influencing their thinking.... This scholarly construct has, in only the last decade or so, been internalised and accepted by Aboriginal people themselves. Far from being an ancient belief.... Mother Earth is a mythic being who has arisen out of a colonial context and who has been co-created by White Australians, academics and Aborigines. Her contours in fact only take shape against a colonial background, for she is a symbolic manifestation of an 'otherness' against which Westerners have defined themselves: the autochthonous and female deity of indigenous people against the allegedly world-defiling patriarchy of Western ideology. (Swain 1991: 3)

Herein Gill explains that he has found useful Swain's notion of conspiracy as a way to 'posit the common practice of a conspiracy of silence in which it is deemed insensitive or inappropriate to question the universality of Mother Earth'. Both Swain and Gill have found that many academicians uncritically echo essentialist understandings of an ancient, global, Mother Earth spirituality among indigenous peoples, and others dodge the issue for fear of giving offense, and possibly also, fearing being subject to harsh criticism (as Gill was) by believers in what Gill and Swain consider to be recently-constructed Mother Earth myths. The history of the controversy itself might well make one reluctant to acknowledge through one's writing and teaching the complicated story of the globalization of Mother Earth spirituality, even if one were convinced that Mother Earth is largely a 20<sup>th</sup> century innovation. Indeed, it might well require some courage to do so, given how

important such understandings have become to many people around the world.

Although Gill has challenged the idea that Mother Earth spirituality is an ancient indigenous form, he does not, it is important to note, claim that Mother Earth spirituality as extant today is inauthentic. Although, in his view, Mother Earth is a recently emerged religious form, he recognizes that for understandable reasons, it has become important for scores of people, indigenous and not. He also understands that Mother Earth is a culturally influential notion, which is in some but not all ways salutary.

In my view scholars should refuse to take sides in contentions about what religious forms, interpretations of sacred texts, and so on, are authentic and inauthentic. These are judgments best left to religious partisans.<sup>4</sup> Analyzing the tributaries and cultural impacts of world-views embracing Earth as mother, although not a normative endeavor, can, however, be accompanied by moral arguments regarding whether such spiritualities promote changes to sociological systems that one deems positive. Put simply, we ought not assume that challenging received wisdom about the reasons and ways religious phenomena have unfolded necessarily involves a negative moral judgment about such trends. Indeed, all too often, assumptions about and the quest for authenticity is entangled with notions of purity, which are typically socially divisive.<sup>5</sup> Such contention is apparent in much of the contemporary denunciations of cultural borrowing (aka appropriation and theft), which has also become entangled with the controversy over whether Mother Earth is authentic and positive, as well as with views about who ought to be able to voice an opinion. Such issues deserve a more judicious analysis than is often the case (Taylor 1997).<sup>6</sup>

I hope readers find intriguing this introduction, these cautions, and most of all, the following forum. It begins, of course, with Gill's new article, after which Greg Johnson, Matthey Glass, Olle Sundström, Bjørn Ola Tafjord, and Joseph A. P. Wilson (who was my collaborator in orchestrating and editing this issue) provide their responses. We asked others as well but, as is often the case, while hoping to pitch in,

4. As David Chidester (2005) has argued, even 'fake' religions do real religious work; I would simply replace 'fake' with 'recently invented' to put the idea less provocatively.

5. For a lucid analysis of the pernicious connection between authenticity claims and purity assumptions, see Stewart and Shaw (1994). For a study illustrating such contention, which provides a helpful review of related scholarly literature, see Mosley and Biernat (2021).

6. For a modestly updated version of this article, see (Taylor 2024). See also Stewart and Shaw (1994).

some scholars were unable to participate within our time frame for this forum. We welcome further interventions on Mother Earth, and similar phenomena, in the future.

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After our special forum on Mother Earth, we offer two additional, fascinating studies. Servando Z. Hinojosa examines ritual practices by devotees of the Native American Church at peyote shrines in Texas. Tiago Pinto then provides a comprehensive review of research illuminating the spiritualities typical of ecovillages around the world. Along with the forum, Hinojosa and Pinto underscore the ongoing, innovative nature and increasing salience of nature spiritualities around the world as global environmental alarm intensifies.

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