

Bron Taylor, *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), xiv + 338 pp., \$24.95 (pbk), ISBN: 978-0-520-26100-6. Review doi: 10.1558/jsrnc.v5i2.244.*

In the opening pages of *Dark Green Religion*, Bron Taylor quickly establishes the distinction that characterizes the rest of his work between 'green religion (which posits that environmentally friendly behavior is a religious obligation) and dark green religion (in which nature is sacred, has intrinsic value, and is therefore due reverent care)' (p. 10). 'These two forms are often in tension and sometimes in direct conflict', he continues (p. 10). Dark green religion (DGR) is not only darker because it is more intense; it is dark in that it is somewhat covert, that it is threatening to some, and that it has an uncompromising side that could seem 'dark' to those holding 'lighter' green views. Though any work covering such a wide scope inevitably leaves out some relevant information, *Dark Green Religion* is a valuable contribution to modern scholarship on human interactions with the natural world and should be read by academics and nature lovers alike.

Taylor defines religion very broadly, following those who deal with 'the widest possible variety of beliefs, behaviors, and functions that are typically associated with the term' (p. 2). This enables him to talk about a rather strikingly wide range of people who can fit within his DGR schema, from Thoreau and Muir to the Walt Disney Studios, makers of *Pocahontas* and other nature-oriented films. Based on this wide definition of religion, Taylor identifies four subtypes of DGR: spiritual animism (belief in nature spirits), naturalistic animism (nature as sacred, but not necessarily inhabited by supramundane beings), Gaian spirituality, and Gaian naturalism. The reference to Gaia is, of course, to James Lovelock's concept of a single organism-like world. The 'naturalistic' pair must be at least somewhat grounded in spiritual, mystical, or intensely meaningful personal experiences to qualify as religious.

The majority of Taylor's work provides a survey of DGR in American thought. Inevitably, the founder and greatest exemplar is Henry David Thoreau, whose writings are excerpted in a 20-page appendix. Indeed, Thoreau remains an incredible voice, as timely (or timeless?) and worth hearing as ever. The narrative thread then runs through John Burroughs, John Muir, and Aldo Leopold to a range of moderns: surfers, poets like Gary Snyder, nature writers, ethnobiologists (Gary Nabhan), filmmakers from David Suzuki to the abovementioned Disney Studios, biologists like Jane Goodall, novelists like Edward Abbey, and many more. The 'usual suspects' are thus well represented, but, from the surfers to modern political voices, plenty of less well-known figures are also discussed in useful detail. Extensive quotes and biographical material make this book an invaluable reference and sourcebook as well as an important personal essay.

In his conclusion, Taylor defends DGR against some criticisms (including atheistic ones, as from Richard Dawkins) and argues for its role in saving the planet. He hopes for a change of consciousness that will make it more acceptable. Taylor acknowledges that there is a strain of anti-humanism playing around the edges of some dark green writers. He notes that Muir has been criticized for some comments that now appear racist. It might be better to say that Muir was not particularly fond of humanity in general; I do not feel he singled out the peoples of color. Taylor also honestly includes

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some similarly less-than-enlightened comments by Thoreau. Of course most recent dark greens are more tolerant, and some are major civil libertarians as well as environmental activists.

Though Taylor's survey of DGR is extensive, those individuals left out of his work are noteworthy as well. Most people quoted in this book are professional writers, philosophers, or academics. Most are urban. Exceptions include Muir the shepherd and Leopold the forester and wildlife manager; few others actually had experience making a living from or on the land. One may wonder about the absence of the voices of small farmers (such as Wendell Berry), ecologically aware ranchers (such as Duncan Hyde and Tom Lasater), and others. Were they deemed too pale a green to count?

This book focuses primarily on the Western tradition (though, of course, Taylor is quite aware of the value of other traditions). Of course, it would be fruitful to test the concept of DGR in the contexts of non-Western traditions as well. The Indigenous and Asian traditions I study, for example, are very different in basic conception from Western DGR writers. Making their livings from direct labor in and with the non-human world, they see it as their total life. They range from taking a people-in-nature view to a completely holistic vision. The Maya I have lived and worked with in Mexico recognize their entire forest world as heavily influenced by their activities, and recognize that they cannot exist without the forest and its full range of products and environments. They have no words for 'wild', 'nature', or 'wilderness'. They are puzzled by the Hispanic Mexican tendency to destroy the forest utterly (for urbanization or plantation agriculture), and also by the tendency to 'save' large tracts as 'wilderness' by forcing the Maya off of it; they point out correctly that the forest quickly deteriorates without care. Biodiversity, tree health, and regrowth all decline. The Abrahamic religions are often seen by DGR thinkers (past and present) as rather lacking in nature mysticism. However, the Song of Songs, the book of Isaiah, and the Psalms, especially Psalm 104, might be considered to count against that charge. A religious soul could even suggest Psalm 104 as a weekly reading for a dark green congregation.

Traditional religions thus range from pale to dark green. Applying their lessons in the modern world probably means working with the 'stewardship' tradition in all existing religions, as well as with science, education, and the daily life of rural areas of the planet. Conversely, some might wonder if the Walt Disney Studios and the 'New Age' gurus are really on the side of DGR, or are they simply exploiting it—making a quick buck by huckstering a popular theme? Are they trivializing a great cause? Is the gap from Thoreau to *Pocahontas* bridgeable? Taylor notes some of the debates about this. There has been further debate recently, especially around the recent movie *Avatar*. I merely note the question here; I am in no position to resolve it.

Bron Taylor's book is a very important contribution to environmental writing and documentation. Dark green religion, in whatever form, provides positions that make all readers and viewers think seriously about deep and important issues. At its best, in the writings of Thoreau, Leopold, and Snyder, it provides soaring, powerful, liberating visions of humanity. These writers see humans as capable of living lives of beauty, passion, and nobility of spirit, if they fuse with the other-than-human world and forget the barriers and self-imposed limits of modern life. Few dark green writers reach such heights, but we need those few desperately.

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