The image is a composite. On the left, a large tree trunk is shown in profile, with a human face superimposed on it. The face has a beard and is looking towards the right. The tree's roots are visible at the bottom left. The background on the right is a landscape with a green field and a small stream or path leading into the distance under a clear sky.

Gaian Earth Religion and the Modern God of Nature

By Bron Taylor

Profound changes are under way in religion and ethics. Scientific understanding regarding the evolution of the universe and the biosphere is competing with and in some cases supplanting ancient worldviews based on beliefs in invisible divine beings. Evolutionary theory even offers plausible explanations for traditional religious beliefs; typical among these are that: (1) survival favors precautionary alertness to predatory agents in nature and does not penalize the perception of danger when it does not exist, eventually leading to the perception of (divine) beings who are not, in fact, visible; (2) religion is a group adaptation that promotes solidarity and cooperation, and, thereby, survival.¹

Naturalistic understandings of the cosmos, biosphere, and earlier forms of religious belief do not, however, defeat the human quest for a meaningful and moral existence. For many, they provide both ethical guidance and spiritual meaning. Indeed, as I argue in my book *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future* (University of California Press, 2010), nature-based spiritualities are becoming an increasingly important global social force. Since some will consider this a controversial thesis, for in many regions religious fundamentalism and conventional religions appear to be strong, let me briefly explain my path to this perspective.

For more than two decades I have studied environmental mobilization around the world, focusing on the perceptual, affective, ethical, and religious variables contributing to it. My earliest case studies explored radical environmental movements birthed in North America, such as Greenpeace and Earth First!, both of which deployed civil disobedience, with Earth First! even engaging in sabotage, in order to halt practices considered environmentally destructive. During this research, I drew on my own ethnographic fieldwork as well as on historical research and learned

that these activists generally perceived nature as sacred and imbued with intrinsic value (namely, value regardless of whether humans found a species or ecosystem useful to them) and that these movements were significantly influencing environmental politics and growing globally.

From there I branched out and looked at environmental movements around the world, such as Kenya's Green Belt "tree planting" Movement (which eventually led to its founder, Wangari Maathai, winning the Nobel Peace Prize), indigenous peoples in the Amazon resisting deforestation, and peasant fishers fighting to protect their marine ecosystems and livelihoods from huge, corporate owned, fishing fleets. Through this research, I discovered and published articles and books documenting interesting continuities within a broad and increasingly global environmental milieu, where diverse individuals and groups encounter and influence one another as they struggle to understand and respond to an increasingly alarming and obvious global environmental crisis.

Participants in this milieu include environmentalists and scientists, politicians and diplomats, artists, writers, and filmmakers, business people, professors, and museum curators, as well as mountaineers, surfers (aquatic, not cyber), gardeners, and many others. Among these far-flung individuals and groups I continued to see, despite significant differences, sufficient continuities to group them under the label "dark green religion." And not only do they share an affinity for dark green religion, they also effectively promote it within their own spheres of influence. There is even tantalizing evidence that such spiritualities might "go viral," which in contemporary parlance means spreading so rapidly that they could become a social contagion, leading to a fundamental shift in human perception and behavior.

Dark green religion

Dark green religion (which some call dark green spirituality) involves perceptions that nature is sacred and has intrinsic value; beliefs that everything is interconnected and mutually dependent; and deep feelings of belonging to nature. Dark green religion is usually rooted in, or at least coheres with, an evolutionary understanding that all life shares a common ancestor, and it generally leads to kinship ethics because all life is, therefore, literally related. Participants in dark green religion feel ethical responsibilities to, and empathy for, all living things, and this is often linked to an understanding that like us, all other life forms evolved through what Darwin aptly called the struggle for existence. Such perceptions generally lead people to see more continuities than differences between their own species and other ones, and this in turn tends to evoke humility about one's place in the grand scheme of things.

In *Dark Green Religion* I explore two main forms of dark green spirituality, animistic and Gaian, both of which can have two main types: conventionally religious forms that posit the concept of nonmaterial divine beings, and naturalistic forms that privilege scientific understandings and include no such otherworldly beliefs.

Spiritual Animism involves perceptions that there are divine intelligences in nature. The most obvious examples are from certain aboriginal peoples, whose religious beliefs and practices can be oriented to creating proper relationships with such intelligences, whether to avoid danger or receive blessings, or otherwise to maintain harmony with the natural world they depend upon. But such perception is not limited to them; such beliefs and practices are a common



aspect of folk religions around the world and an explicit aspect of some forms of contemporary Paganism. Naturalistic Animism, in contrast, draws more on the personal experiences that some humans have with animals as well as on scientific explorations of animal consciousness and behavior. Naturalistic animists (such as evolutionist Charles Darwin and primatologist Jane Goodall) perceive that trans-species communication, if not communion, is possible, or at least aver that we can develop empathic relationships with animals by studying their behavior and consciousness.

The Gaian forms include Pantheistic and Panentheistic spiritualities, which understand nature to be divine in some way. (With Pantheism, the world or universe is conceived of as divine but there is no personal, superordinate intelligence involved, as there is in Panentheism.) They also, generally, embrace organicist understandings of the biosphere. (Organicism historically refers to notions that the universe and biosphere function in ways that resemble the interrelated functions in an organism's body.) Naturalistic Gaian worldviews do not involve beliefs that the world or universe is divine, so some would say they are religion-resembling, quasi-religious, or even secular.

Gaia as modern nature god

Although I cannot repeat the evidence provided in my book, or at my website, brontaylor.com, which supplies additional evidence including in music, art, and movies, I will provide a few exemplary stories.

In April 2008, I attended a conference on global environmental governance at University of Freiburg, Germany, in a town in the Black Forest known worldwide for its avid support of what today we might call the sustainability revolution. While enjoying a walkabout I noticed the April 28, 2008, *Time* magazine cover entitled, in both English and German editions, "How to Win the War on Global Warming." On the inside front cover was an advertisement by a Japanese electronics company, proclaiming:

For more on "going green," see pages 25, 26, and 27.

SANYO is at the forefront of making clean energy an everyday reality. Rare is the corporation that devotes its resources to making the world — and the future — a better place. But, with its Think Gaia corporate philosophy, SANYO leads the way with a unique vision for dealing with energy and environmental issues.

The ad then referenced a "think Gaia" website (since discontinued) with links to a more detailed text, translated into dozens of languages. The ad provocatively continued:

'GAIA' is a term that encompasses the Blue Planet, 'Earth,' and the infinite

varieties of 'life' that live and breathe on it. SANYO sees the earth as a single living organism, where all life and nature co-exist interdependently, and is striving to create the products needed to help us live in harmony with the planet.

This was a clear expression of Organicism. SANYO even proclaimed that humankind must learn to "symbiotically co-evolve with all life," pursuing environmentally sustainable solutions to ensure "positive co-existence with Gaia."

SANYO drew on the "Gaia hypothesis," a controversial but increasingly well-regarded scientific theory about the biosphere's environmental systems articulated in the early 1970s by the atmospheric scientist James Lovelock.² Lovelock contended that the biosphere should be understood as a self-regulating organism that maintains the conditions necessary for the planet's diverse species. SANYO's website reference in the ad was hyperlinked to an explanation that Lovelock named this living organism, the Earth, after the Earth goddess in Greek mythology. To be clear, Lovelock's writings maintain that he chose the word Gaia as an evocative metaphor for the biosphere's self-regulating systems, not as an expression of pantheistic faith, or of any other conventionally religious belief in divine beings or forces.

SANYO's Gaia website sounded as though it were making the very argument I was then working up in my book manuscript: "'Gaia' is a word rapidly taking hold in the 21st century, which describes the world as a single living organism, where all life and nature co-exist interdependently." Shortly after this came a firm commitment, "from now on, SANYO will view the Earth as an interdependent organic body and refer to it as Gaia." This, it seemed to me, was an exceptionally clear confession of Gaian Earth religion.

But it was far from the only one I have found. A few years ago, in a presentation about the globalization of nature spirituality at Hamilton College in Upstate New York, I focused on how Gaian spirituality was expressed and promoted through some TV and film: the work of the marine explorer Jacques-Yves Cousteau in his *Undersea World of Jacques Cousteau* television series during the 1960s and '70s; David Attenborough's nature documentaries, including the landmark *Life on Earth* (1979), *The Living Planet* (1984), and *The Trials of Life* (1990); Walt Disney productions such as *True-Life Adventures* (1948), and *Bambi* (1942), *The Jungle Book* (1967), and *The Lion King* (1994). After my presentation, a young environmental studies major from Queens, N.Y., told me that the 1990s animated eco-television program *Captain Planet and the Planeteers* (which I had also mentioned in my talk)

had inspired his activism and education. Because he had grown up in a heavily urbanized and polluted environment, he added, he never would have found his environmentalist path without the show.

Environmentalist and media mogul Ted Turner, who founded Cable News Network, among other stations, created *Captain Planet*. Produced between 1990 and '96, the program seemed to draw from Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis, as explained in the "series mythology" on the program's website:

Gaia, the spirit of Earth, awakens from a century-long sleep to the pillaging of the planet by a largely oblivious humanity. Fearing for the future, she sends magic rings to five youngsters from around the globe. ... As the youngsters place the rings on their fingers, they are magically transported to Gaia's home, Hope Island, an uncharted, unpolluted tropical isle far from civilization. There, Gaia teaches them the secrets of nature. As they learn of their personal power, each identifies with one of the four ancient elements: Earth, Fire, Water, Wind and a very special new power, Heart, which symbolizes the compassion needed to save the Earth. Through the magic rings, the Planeteers learn to direct their powers in their mission to save Earth. ... When the Planeteers join their powers together, beams shoot from their rings ... and ... a new hero literally bursts from the earth ... Captain Planet! The environmental superhero ... demonstrates that the whole is, indeed, greater than the sum of its parts.

In each episode Gaia's allies overcome environmental threats and solve environmental problems. The message also is that the beneficent goddess of the Earth needs those who belong to her to unite to protect life from villains with names like Looten Plunder and Verminous Skumm.

The most powerful recent example of dark green spirituality is the 2009 film *Avatar*, the highest-grossing movie of all time. Writer/director James Cameron sets this environmentalist epic in a distant galaxy on the terrible (given its predatory creatures) but beautiful and awe-inspiring moon Pandora, where invading humans seeking resources they have depleted on Earth come in conflict with Na'vi, the blue colored, human-resembling, indigenous inhabitants.³

The Gaia-like metaphor for the sacred, interconnected, bio-neurological system on Pandora is the goddess Eywa, at least according to the Na'vi, whose spirituality has both animistic and Gaian dimensions in a way that resemble indigenous groups on planet Earth and that are characteristic of dark green religion. The Na'vi are in deep communicative relationship with other species on the planet and understand its

living systems as deeply interconnected and mutually dependent. The film's allegory of the interconnectedness of life within the earth's environmental systems is conveyed through the Na'vi understanding of Eywa's deep bond with all life. It's also conveyed through the human scientist Grace Augustine, who excitedly uses systems science to describe her own understanding of the Pandoran life network.

Whether Eywa is a personal and compassionate divine being, or more akin to the impersonal energetic interconnections in environmental systems, is in the eye of the beholders on Pandora as well as for film buffs.⁴ Augustine seems to reflect this ambiguity. For most of the film she views the life network on Pandora as an environmental system without taking seriously the Na'vi view of the same system as a kind of pantheistic goddess. But as she dies, and begins to experience her absorption into Eywa, she exclaims that Eywa is real. Perhaps this signifies that Eywa is a personal god, in a conventional way, but without a doubt, Eywa is a god all living things are part of and to whom all life belongs.

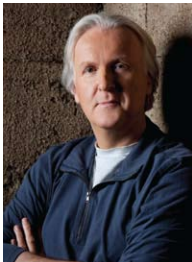
A dark green religious future?

I have only been able to provide a few examples of the evidence upon which I base my contention that dark green religion is gaining cultural traction and may profoundly influence the planetary and religious future. But my hypothesis is based on a great deal of evidence, including an analysis of historical sources and recent trends, including the rise of nature-related romanticism; the globalization of environmental protection movements and nature spiritualities; and the impact of, and on, educational institutions and cultural productions. It is also based on careful consideration of whether the world's traditional and predominant religions, with their beliefs in invisible divine forces, are likely to exercise more or less influence in coming decades or centuries.⁵

My conviction is that naturalistic, dark green spiritualities will continue their ascendancy, first and foremost, because they are sensory and thus sensible. By this I mean they are based on the senses and, thus, rely on experiences that people can have today, rather than on experiences, beliefs, and perceptions that emerged long ago. Dark green spiritualities also appeal to sensible, science-embracing modern people who understand that today we know many things about the universe and the biosphere that were unknown when most of the world's religions were born.

Indeed, for the first time in human history, there is a cosmogony, a story about

how the world came to be, that is convincing to the majority of scientifically-literate people: This is the evolutionary cosmogony and it is generally fused to earth system sciences and an ecological understanding of the interdependence of life. Contrary to the claims of religious figures and some philosophers that one cannot derive ethics from nature, many thinkers (including Harvard biologist E.O. Wilson, environmental historian Donald Worster, and philosopher and



The 2009 hit movie *Avatar*, written and directed by James Cameron (top), depicts an alien race called the Na'vi, who are spiritually and physically intertwined with their planet's life force.

neuroscientist Sam Harris) contend on the contrary that there is no place but nature to find our moral bearings.⁶ We who are empathetic and rational creatures can feel and think our way toward a respect for all living things, arrive at an ethics of biodiversity conservation, and build sustainable societies by recognizing in a rational way that only as we work with nature can we ensure that all forms of life will flourish. This is an entirely naturalistic way of grounding ethics.

It is also true that an evolutionary-ecological worldview, and corresponding conservationist ethics, can be, and sometimes are being, fused with longstanding religious worldviews. The Clergy Letters Project, for instance, promotes reconciliation between religion and science; the Forum on Religion and Ecology helps the world's predominant religions find in their own traditions, as well as the ecological sciences, a ground for environmental concern and action; and the Earth Charter Initiative brings people together as a global society to save the earth's precious ecosystems.⁷

Such a sensibility provides a strong basis for cooperation between people who want to protect evolutionary processes and the rich diversity of life they have produced. Yet it is also the case that for many, an evolutionary-ecological worldview provides a satisfying meaning system independent of supernatural beliefs. Indeed, there is considerable evidence that over time those who embrace such naturalistic worldviews and try to graft them onto the world's longstanding religious traditions find conventionally religious understandings less

plausible and drift away from them; this has certainly been my experience.⁸

What my book shows is that the global spread of naturalistic worldviews does not mean, however, that people will become entirely secular; many such people gravitate toward dark green and naturalistic nature spiritualities. This is, I contend, because the human quest for meaning will not abate, even when conventional religions retreat. Instead, new forms have been emerging and strengthening that reverence the sources of our existence, our planetary home, and the diverse forms of life with which we share the biosphere. Since the reasons for these developments are not going away, neither will this process, which I think will prove to be a long-term trend.

Personally, I do not think this is something to fear. A worldview that is rooted in an ecological understanding of interconnectedness, that underscores our deep kinship with other organisms and the mutual dependence of all life, and that provides a sense of belonging to the biosphere could erode the ideologies and religions that divide us. With such a worldview, we might just figure out

how to create human social and economic systems that do not degrade the ecosystems upon which they depend and in which they are enmeshed. When such a worldview is in place, we might just begin to learn our earthly manners.⁹ ■



Bron Taylor, Professor of Religion and Nature at University of Florida, specializes in environmental and social ethics/religion. His most recent book is *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary*

Future (University of California Press, 2010). Taylor also edited the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature* (Continuum, 2005) and *Ecological Resistance Movements: The Global Emergence of Radical and Popular Environmentalism* (SUNY Press, 1995). He is the founding editor of the *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* and an affiliated scholar with the Center for Development and the Environment at University of Oslo. In addition to publishing scholarly articles, book chapters, and encyclopedia entries, Taylor writes opinion pieces for newspapers and blogs for *The Huffington Post*. He earned degrees from California State University-Chico (B.A. in psychology, B.A. in religious studies), Fuller Theological Seminary (M.A. in religious studies), and University of Southern California (Ph.D. in social ethics/religion). Taylor is represented by Ovation Agency, Inc.: Speakers on Issues That Matter. Go online to www.brontaylor.com or ovationagency.com or email him at bron@brontaylor.com.



For footnotes, go online to www.phikappaphi.org/forum/summer2011.