

## **Green Heathenry: An Interview With Bron Taylor<sup>1</sup>**

Bron Taylor is presently a Professor of Religion and Nature at the University of Florida and an Affiliated Scholar with Oslo University's Center for Environment and Development.<sup>2</sup> His work has been published in numerous journal articles, books and the multi-volume *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*. His most recent book, *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future* (hereafter DGR), represents Taylor's position as an interdisciplinary scholar whose research interests span the fields of environmentalism, religious studies, ethics and sociology. As such, his work primarily addresses the questions revolving around the "conservation of the Earth's biological diversity and how human culture might evolve rapidly enough to arrest and reverse today's intensifying environmental and social crises, and all the suffering, that flows from these trends."<sup>3</sup> This interview is an attempt to bridge the gap between modern Heathenry and Taylor's work—to uncover what connections exist between the two's differing understandings of the sacrality of nature.

**In your book *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future*, you go to great lengths to establish Henry David Thoreau's corpus of work in its rightful place as the earliest of American expressions of Dark Green Religion (hereafter DGR). In your summary you even offer readers a provocative question to ponder: "To which social groups would Thoreau have been drawn had he been living and writing around and after the first Earth Day in 1970?"<sup>4</sup> Given that Thoreau is very much a philosopher and naturalist that is highly regarded in most (if not all) corners of the Heathen community, given your deep knowledge of this author and his works, in your estimation would he have been keen in identifying himself as a Pagan, perhaps even of the Heathen persuasion? Were he not interested in linking his admiration for nature directly with a religion *per se*, is there a particular group, off the top of your head, that you think he would have relished to have been part of, say the Sierra Club or Earth First! or some such? Do you**

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1 This interview was conducted by Jennifer Roberge-Toll via email between March and June of 2011.

2 Biographical details in the introduction are taken from Taylor's official biography on his website: <http://www.brontaylor.com/about/index.html> (accessed 1 November, 2011).

3 Ibid.

4 Bron Taylor, *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009), 56.

**think he would have followed a more John Burroughs bioregional impulse or a more John Muir activist impulse had he had the opportunity to do so?**

There were points where Thoreau explicitly expressed a certain affinity with Paganism, sometimes quoting literary exemplars of what he took it to mean. It was not really possible, it seems to me, for Thoreau declare himself to be a Heathen or Pagan when he was writing because there was no obvious above-ground social group identifying itself as such in mid-19<sup>th</sup> century America. Similarly, only the first hints of environmentalism had emerged by this time, so it's speculative to be sure to think about which religious, environmentalist, or other social groups he would identify with today. But, here are a few pertinent thoughts: As I consider Thoreau's life-direction, I see him as leaving behind Transcendentalism, namely, ancient Platonic metaphysics where this world supposedly reflects some deeper, ultimate, invisible, but real spiritual realm. He had become a naturalist with a worldview unconcerned with such metaphysical speculation, happy to live in this worldly world, which he was entranced by and became sufficient for him. That he immediately saw the explanatory power of Darwin's theory suggests that he would only have moved further in this direction had he more time to assimilate and write about it. So, I think the answer to whether he would identify as some sort of Pagan would depend on whether that Paganism was avowedly supernaturalistic. Those who know Pagan subcultures well, know that some in them are polytheists who we might call religious in a traditional religious sense: they believe that there are non-human spirits or divinities with whom human beings can and should be in some sort of "proper" relation. But, there are also Pagans who value the idea that the natural world is full of spiritual intelligences, but who view such ideas as metaphors for creativity and intelligence in nature, and do not take the gods or goddesses or spirits literally. As you know, contemporary Paganism provides a big umbrella covering many beliefs, experiences and practices...and I would not be surprised were Thoreau alive today that he would spend some time under it, engaged with those who in their various ways consider nature to be sacred and enchanting.

As for what environmental groups Thoreau might be engaged with, I would imagine certainly he would have be involved in the bioregional movement (indeed, he inspired much of it), and would also take up environmentalist causes through mainstream environmental organizations such as the Sierra Club. But, he was also someone who stood up against what he perceived to be great injustices, such as slavery and America's imperial wars, even writing one of the most important essays defending civil disobedience in American letters. If you take the way he felt and thought about things, and add to his data set the escalating extinction crisis and the closely related problems of overpopulation, overconsumption and increasing violence in the struggle for existence among human beings, I would



*Figure 1: Bron Taylor*

expect he would be a trenchant critic of environmental destruction and social injustice, and would find appropriate modes of resistance to them, including through strategic civil disobedience.

**When you refer to certain figures as being “Pagan,” for instance on page 62,**

**you refer to Muir as “more pagan than theistic” or on page 57 of Thoreau, “I would not be surprised to hear Thoreau call himself a pagan,” what do you understand by the term “Pagan” exactly? Other than cursorily being non-Abrahamic and non-salvationist in focus to mention but a couple of notions, what are some of Paganism’s distinguishing features which meet at the nexus of religion, politics and culture which mark it as a *viable expression of spirituality of some import* in today’s Western world? Do you believe that Paganism might one day achieve enough of a critical mass in order to render it no longer a fringe religious element but a force to be reckoned with on the world stage?**

I think we can think about Paganism in at least two major ways: either as a broad term for what I call “spiritualities of belonging and connection to nature,” wherein nature is considered sacred in some way, and all other forms of life are viewed as our kin; or, it can be seen as a polytheistic religion involving deities of one sort or another, which are usually understood in supernaturalistic or otherworldly ways. With both types, there are ethical responsibilities to be in right relation with these divinities or beings, whether in nature or beyond it or both in and beyond it. I think that for some small but rapidly multiplying segment of the population, Paganism (understood in these ways) is already a viable expression of spirituality. A major point in *Dark Green Religion* is that Paganism can be understood to be a much broader and diverse phenomenon than it typically is understood to be, and that when we understand this breadth, we will apprehend that it is already much more influential than is commonly recognized. This is especially obvious when we consider its naturalistic forms, and the way it is expressed and promoted in the arts, popular culture, museums, academic institutions, and so forth. Because what I was trying to write about was broader than what would come into view if we only look at people who already consider themselves to be Pagan, I did not include Paganism in the title of my book, and only wrestled with whether Paganism is a good trope for the diversity of social phenomena that I discussed the book in a short afterword. Paganism might prove to be the trope that becomes associated with what I have called “dark green religion,” but I think it is too early to tell, and other terms may supersede it, such as “nature religion.” There is still a lot of antipathy toward what people understand Paganism to be in Western culture that would have to be overcome for the diverse expressions of connection to nature I discussed in my book to congeal under this term. But, as you know, the term is being rehabilitated, and it will be interesting to see how much the more so this occurs in the coming decades.

**Somewhat related to the above, in your work, you bring together issues not only of religion and environmentalism and politics but you situate these squarely in a milieu which highlights the importance of an element which**

seems often forgotten and shamefully so—culture. Are enough actors on the world stage taking culture’s importance seriously in the debate about our planetary future? More specifically it appears that indigenous culture is key in getting heard on the world stage. Do you believe that indigenous European nature religions and therefore their cultures could one day have as powerful a voice with respect to issues affecting our planetary future as other non-European indigenous cultures seem to have now? I’m thinking specifically of future world summits on sustainable development here and more specifically future refinements to the Earth Charter.

I’m not sure, to be honest. I think it will depend on how successful European nature religions are at developing their nature-revering themes. It will also take hard work and political astuteness for folks representing such religions to develop relationships with the gatekeepers in these venues, and thus a place at the table. This is not easy, and moreover, many obstacles to collaborative inter-faith engagement remain (not the least of which is the historical antipathy between monotheistic traditions and religious traditions that are not). But, I think the effort is important, especially if the possibility of what I write in the book is to unfold, namely, a global civil Earth religion.

One of the many striking concepts in your work is that of the *bricolage*: as defined, “an amalgamation of bits and pieces of a wide array of ideas and practices, drawn from diverse cultural systems, religious traditions, and political ideologies.”<sup>5</sup> In effect, I believe that this concept in and of itself offers a brilliant manner in which to methodologize the more creative process of lateral thinking and making the necessary connections between certain elements that heretofore might not have been considered pertinent to a study of religious trends or religious studies as a whole. To wit, in the sections dealing with the “messy impulse to connect with nature,” your pleasantly surprising description of rituals of inclusion in your Disney Park examples<sup>6</sup> very much reinforced the notion that religion can indeed be found, but more so, practiced anywhere. I think that many Heathens would very much be in agreement with such a notion of being able to cull expressions of religion or even religiosity, especially rituals of inclusion, from the wider experience of every day life. Can you provide our readers with a bit of background as to how you came to develop this idea of the bricolage; that is to say, what mostly inspired you to make that kind of meta-connection of utilising the bricolage to elucidate new religious currents in the field of religious studies?

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5 Ibid., 14.

6 Ibid., 134.

I'm glad to hear you think the term opens up explanatory and political possibilities. I've done a lot of fieldwork within radical environmental subcultures and early on I was struck with the creative ways in which people drew on all sorts of things while constructing their understandings of the world and ways to relate to it. I expect that many of your readers, a certain age, for example, were moved by J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* novels, and no small number radical environmentalists identified with its characters and their efforts to thwart the destruction of their world. These works, written by a devout Christian, were being appropriated for an entirely different purpose, including by those who understood themselves to be Pagan environmentalists. I wrote about these dynamics beginning in 1990, thinking about them as forms of syncretism, which was the commonly used expression at the time. But syncretism evokes in the mind the idea of blending two things and what I was seeing was far more eclectic, so when I first heard of the anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss using the term bricolage, I appropriated it for my own analytic purposes. I do hear, quite often, that people find the notion good to think.

**On a more substantive note with respect to the above example of rituals of inclusion as found in the Disney Park example. Do you feel that such rituals of inclusion are effective in bringing home the point that we, as humans, need to better recognize our animality? If you could act as a freelance adviser for a year at Disney, what are some other rituals of inclusion you would like to see developed by this corporation?**

I do think that artistic productions do important cultural work, including rituals of inclusion—working against the typical attitude of human exceptionalism, which makes us think that we are somehow exempt from nature's laws—and by talking with people widely, from those who understand themselves to be involved in nature religion as well as those who do not but are avid environmentalists, that these sorts of cultural works are very evocative for some people, both spiritually and ethically. As you know, in the book I mention the television show *Captain Planet*, which was developed by cable television mogul Ted Turner. No small number of young people today trace at least some of their environmental awakening to that cartoon. As for what I would recommend to Disney, well, at least at the Wild Animal Kingdom they are doing a number of things very well. The environmental messages are consistent and strong, and I think most of us can recognize the value of some anthropomorphism in kindling felt empathy for other organisms. But, I think that if those working for Disney were more self-conscious about the relationship between spirituality and practice, they could develop ways of involving people more directly in the protection of non-human organisms and their habitats, some of whom they introduce at their theme parks and in their

cinematic productions. Imagine if, after a child goes to the Pocahontas site at the Wild Animal Kingdom, instead of just being asked—“will you be a friend of the forest?”—they were given an opportunity to join Jane Goodall’s “roots & shoots” program, or take home and plant a tree or shrub selected for being native to their own home, and designed to be easily planted in one’s yard. There are all sorts of things that could be done if the vision for it did not run afoul of the overarching profit-maximization agenda that dominates corporations such as Disney. As I have written, Disney worlds are at war. By this I mean there’s a struggle under the Disney umbrella between those who hope they can foster social and environmental progress through their artistic and entertaining works and the nationalistic and capitalistic impulses that arguably have been much stronger than Disney’s nature-revering ones.

**In the conclusion of your book, more specifically on page 213, you, in good company with Worster, Callicott and Cronon, indicate without hesitation or question that all signs point to a phenomenon that can be called Dark Green Religion. You further assert, however: “Like them, I will not predict how this phenomenon will spread. I would be surprised to see it break out like some new ecotopian contagion, however, in part because *I think there are countertrends that may prevent such a development,*” [interviewer’s italics]. Although countertrends can be gleaned from reading your work, one such being the unabating debate between Creationists and Darwinians, from the micro level in American schools to the macro in ironing out the final draft of the Earth Charter, could you list and describe some other countertrend levels that you have noticed thus far? How might we best be able to counter these?**

Let me give you a flippant but perfectly serious answer: I think it’s critical that we teach evolution. For if we do not, then we will never evolve in a healthy direction. To embellish: We need to teach an ecological and evolutionary worldview, because it compellingly demonstrates interdependence, and thus mutual dependence, as well as deep kinship, for all species share a common ancestor and are therefore, quite literally, related.

And until we understand ourselves as creatures who came to be who we are through evolution, which for us and at least some other creatures, is a process influenced by our social and cultural relations, we will not understand ourselves to be agents involved in a complex, long-term process of biocultural evolution. And until we understand ourselves in this way, it is unlikely that we will figure out how to participate creatively and humanely, in a way that values all life forms, in this beautiful (and sometimes tragic) process.

## *Green Heathenry*

This means as well, of course, that people with such a worldview must stand up for it and challenge, amiably and with the strong available evidence, those who resist it.

**As a final statement, in your personal coda, you make the following statement: “What I have been long looking for is a sensible religion, one that is rationally defensible as well as socially powerful enough to save us from our least-sensible selves. If there is a *sensible* post-Darwinian religion, then, there must be a *sensory* post-Darwinian religion. For this, dark green religion is a reasonable candidate.” Again, from what you know of Heathenry, does it as well make for a reasonable candidate?**

Well, I mean no disrespect to those who represent supernaturalistic forms of Paganism, but I think the naturalistic forms are the ones that will have the greatest long-term cultural traction, for they are based on ordinary, everyday senses (as enhanced sometimes by our clever gadgets) and they do not depend on experiences that not everyone has or will have. My hunch is that our species is at the beginning of a long transition toward such naturalistic, sensory, sensual and sensitive (as in empathic) spiritualities. Indeed, I think this is inevitable if we are ever to well adapt to and flourish within the environmental systems we belong to and depend on.

**As a final and lighter question, has Mr. Dawkins read your book yet and if so, has he offered you a response?**

To my knowledge, he has not, but I hope he will!