

Bron Taylor, Scholar of Dark Green Nature Religion

Peter Shea & Bron Taylor

Aug 7, 2015

Bron Taylor is Professor of Religion, Nature, and Environmental Ethics at the University of Florida, and a Carson Fellow of the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society in Munich Germany. His research involves both ethnographic and historical methods, and much of it focuses on grassroots environmental movements, their emotional, spiritual, and moral spiritual dimensions, and their environmental, cultural, and political impacts. He has been involved in a variety of international initiatives promoting the conservation of biological and cultural diversity.

His books include *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future* (2010), the award winning *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature* (2005), *Civil Society in the Age of Monitory Democracy* (2013) and *Ecological Resistance Movements: the Global Emergence of Radical and Popular Environmentalism* (1995), and *Avatar and Nature Spirituality* (2013). He is also the founder of the International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture, and editor of its affiliated *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture*.

The Bat of Minerva is a regional cable interview show produced and directed by Peter Shea, who received his Ph.D. in Philosophy from the University of Minnesota and has worked as an instructor at Gustavus Adolphus College and Minnesota State University in Mankato.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2UtmRLL5e8A>

Bron Taylor: Well. When I was in college at Chico State University in California. I began taking courses in my double major psychology and religious study. And at the time, I was a devout evangelical Christian, and I began to. Read about the Hebrew prophets in the Hebrew Bible. What Christians refer to as the. Old Testament and. They were often speaking out strongly about social injustice, about the lack of care for the disadvantaged and the poor. And that raised a question for me. Why is it that I've been involved in this evangelical Christian subculture and have never heard anything? About that. In another course I learned about a movement. Known as liberation theology, in which? Christians, mostly Catholic, but some Protestants had become involved in social struggles for. Social justice to overturn oligarchies, sometimes even. Rising up in. Revolutions to overturn regimes that they considered. To be despotic. From there, I became interested in the power of religion for. Both good and ill. Some of those revolutionary movements were not ones that we would. Considered to be positive some. Took on slogans. Like. The nature of a revolutionary is love and tried to foment a revolution that would lead to both peace and social justice, even after the turmoil. But I became very interested in the religion variable in social movements and the possibility of social change. This drew me to pursuing a PhD in social ethics at the University of Southern California. UM and. Partway through that. PhD program I

began to wonder, why is this kind of liberationist motif this kind of? Struggle for liberation that many people around the world were advancing. Why did it have nothing to do with? The sharp decline in biological diversity around the world. Why was there almost no? Environmental dimension to it. And so in the mid 80s, I began to notice living in Southern California, efforts to sabotage the Barstow to Las Vegas desert race and activists out there in the desert were arguing that the desert is not just a waste land, the desert is a biological. Community with many. Plants and animals that have value, whether or not we even know they're there because they only come out at night, whether or not. They're valuable to us in some way. And that for some reason made sense to me that. All life has. A right to be here and that humans were not the only organisms on the planet that. Had any value. Well, those activists were operating under a banner of a new group that began in 1980, known as Earth 1st. And this was the first movement I encountered that was expressing. A kind of liberationist motif for nature itself. It's represented even in its own title, and given my interest in religion and politics and the possibility of religion playing into social change. My attention perked up when I discerned that there was. A. A spiritual dimension to what was animating these activists, activists who were willing to break the law and risks their freedom. In the interests of these species that they knew to be endangered. So I began to think more and more about the religion variable in environmental mobilization, and I had the opportunity. Right after getting my PhD and assuming my first academic position at the University of Wisconsin, Oshkosh, to see the most charismatic figure of that movement, a guy named David Foreman give a talk on my campus. And a wide variety of people came from around the area. Many of whom were a part of that movement, some of whom were just, as in any university, talk, little or unacquainted with it, but had been intrigued by the promotional efforts on campus. And he gave really quite the spellbinding. Talk and it reminded me in many ways of experiences that I had in those evangelical churches, even with a certain kind of an altar call. In this case, it wasn't that people would come to the front and kneel at the altar. But. Rather. He asked. Those who had attended. To howl like a wolf with him to feel their animal self with him, to find the wildness within and. He was arguing that if we would recognize our own wild animal cells like the wolf, then we would stand up and fight for the planet. Well, I was immediately hooked as a scholar interested in social movements and arranged to. Show up in. A small clearing. In the Shawanga National Forest in Northern Wisconsin to meet these groups with their next outdoor gathering and before long some 30. Of these activists showed up in this clear cut forest and the very first songs that they that they sang kind of reinforced. Both the ethical themes they were promoting. The notion that the natural world is valuable apart from its usefulness to human beings, we today in environmental ethics, we call this intrinsic value theory, or biocentrism or ecocentrism life centered, ethics or ecosystem centered ethics, so they were being animated by this kind of spiritual biocentrism. And they also had a critique of human behavior, suggesting that human beings were driving many species to extinction. And they had a political strategy. AP Political analysis combined with

the strategy and the analysis went something like either democracy has become so corrupt that the corporations and politicians are just bent on destruction, bent on extracting everything they possibly can from the natural world, regardless of its consequences. For non human life. Or there were even more radical perspectives in the group that we needed to bring down industrial civilization itself because industrial civilization, whether capitalist or socialist, is intrinsically destructive. So as a person trained at that point in social ethics, you always want to understand what the facts are on the ground and what the moral values are that are relevant to? Then to figure out what sorts of prescriptions and diagnosis you might advocate. And they were certainly proposing very provocative ideas. This notion of intrinsic, the intrinsic value of nature, that human beings were precipitating a massive extinction event, that our political process had broken down so badly, that extra legal tactics were not only permissible, but morally obligatory if we were to reverse the wholesale assault on nature. That was occurring. So I didn't take any of that at face value. Nor did I buy it on priori, but I just set out to work out really my own environmental ethics, which I did not have an opportunity to do it even in Graduate School because they weren't teaching environmental ethics in Graduate School. So I I took the opportunity to immerse myself in that movement, studying it both through field work. And historically, looking at all the documentary evidence from their own writings to writings about them. To figure out whether I thought they in any of these areas made sense, or whether they whether they did. They also had a very interesting perspective on global social movements around the world and they were arguing that oftentimes indigenous cultures and peasant cultures around the world had spiritual connections to nature. That were very different with that of kind of Western industrial societies and that they were fighting to protect their lands and their waters against the voracious appetite of global market capitalism. And I was interested to find out whether in fact, their perceptions of what was happening in the global environmental milieu were accurate. So in the early 90s, after encountering these groups, I began, I began writing about them in North America. But I also began to study grassroots environmental movements around the world to determine if the perceptions of the North Americans involved in the Earth, 1st and radical environmental movement, were accurate with regard to them, and that led to a book called Ecological Resistance Movements, the global emergence of radical and popular environmentalism. So I began to notice within the global environmental milieu, by which I mean the places where a wide variety of social actors who are deeply engaged with environmental issues, from politicians and non governmental organization activists. Scientists, UN officials and so forth. I began to notice the same sorts of patterns emerge again and again and again. Same sorts of thoughts emerge, at least within a significant number of those people. Uh. And ideas that that really were in significant ways in sync with ideas that I first encountered within the radical environmental milieu? And so the radical environmental movement became something of a muse for me in thinking about the global environmental movement. And in noticing these patterns after I had traveled

widely around the world in a wide variety of contexts, I produced a book called *Dark Green, Religion, Nature, Spirituality, and the Planetary Future* in which I argued. In the last 150 years or so, roughly the 150 years since Darwin published on the origin of species, a new sort of Cosmo vision, a new worldview was emerging that was grounded in the evolutionary and ecological sciences that displaces. Human beings from the top of some. Great chain of being. And promotes A kinship ethics in which. All life is understood to be related. And. That ethical obligations are. Owed to all life forms because we all got here through the same way, through the struggle for existence and through our empathetic capacities, we ought to be able to. Have a live and let live ethics, in other words, to the greatest extent possible, we ought to allow other organisms to live and flourish. This sort of idea was also tethered often to religious terminology, in which people would talk about the Earth as sacred and the biosphere as sacred. Even the universe is sacred. And. And so, after noticing these these patterns that this kind of. Intrinsic value theory emerging and being proposed as guideposts for ethical behavior and producing this book. I also noticed that it wasn't just people who were most obviously involved in environmental causes. This sort of the sorts of feelings. I'm talking about. Here the sorts of cognitive or conceptual ideas that are being that were being articulated and that I've put under this dark green religion umbrella. We're being expressed and promoted in a host of other ways by scholar scholars writing and environmental history, and environmental philosophy. And conservation biology, just for a few examples to documentary film makers, including, but certainly not only, the Great British documentarian David Attenborough to. The anthropologist Jane Goodall, who I sometimes refer to as the Energizer Bunny of Neo animism as she tours around the world almost 300 days a year urging people to. To help protect. Wild animal species around the world and also in a wide variety of the arts, music, theatrical films. Animated films such as *Lion King*, theatrical films such as *Avatar* and I eventually did a book I thought *Avatar* was such a good expression of these sorts of dark green spiritualities that I orchestrated a book about it that's just called *Avatar and Nature Spirituality*. So the animating question for my academic path has been. To put it a little flippantly, you know what is it? With the human animal. Why is it that? We are so dramatically degrading the habitats upon which we depend and. To whom we belong. And. Aren't taking dramatic action to reverse that pattern. And why is it that some people are working ardently to do that in a wide variety of ways, while other people seem indifferent? So in addition to trying to understand. The people that are the most passionate advocates. For the conservation of. Biocultural diversity around the world. I have sought through other research projects to understand. What cultural hindrances there are? Among those who are in different or even hostile to such conservation efforts. So there's a little bit of a primer on how I ended up doing the somewhat strange things I do.

Peter Shea: Splendidly broad career anybody's envy. Sense that you got three things going at least. Probably a 33 came out. As I heard it. One is the base level you care about. The planets you care about biodiversity. These new religious impulses are

impulses. You find congenial second thing I hear is. You're an ethicist. And you asked the question, is the critique that is being levelled at practices, you know, contemporary practices that legitimate critique and does it? Is it overstated or fundamentally? Accurate are the remedies. Draconian, extreme or simply what's needed, and that's of course, what any ethicist would have to ask about an extreme opposition that would require. A fairly substantial modification of standing practice and then finally your scholar of religion wants to see. How do I understand the patterns that are emerging here as religious patterns as? Similar to. To. Things like altar calls and evangelical Christianity, or the striving for salvation and redemption by putting on the new man or the new person that is central to a certain strain of Christian religiosity, let's say. And then I guess. What I I I'd like to ask is this general thing well? How do you see these ideas? If I got the identity sort of right? And how do they? How do they interact for you?

Bron Taylor: You have done a nice synthesis of some of the layers of my work. I mean, I consider myself first and foremost. An interdisciplinary environmental studies scholar, which in some ways just means that I'm all mixed up. I mean, I'm I'm interested in all the things you're you're just very well articulated. So let's let's look at these for a second, OK. The fundamental motivation for people deeply engaged in environmental issues is it isn't. Is an emotional connection to nature. I have long written about what I call spirituality as a belonging and connection to nature. This sort of language is all over, and that is often tethered to what we could call it a deeply spiritual biocentrism or ecocentrism. You know, a life centered or ecosystem centered value. System. Now that effectively derived. Or grounded? Ethical premise is not something that is easy to convince someone of simply on rational grounds. And so we're we're at least in the realm of kind of implicit spirituality, if not over religion. And so as an ethicist, you know, you're always looking for what are the? Ultimate roots of. A person's moral perception, and that's a difficult one to to convince someone of. It's usually based in some kinds of experiences that people have. Some people in the radical environmental movement call the destruction of some place. That they cared about as children by bulldozers for logging or for some commercial or industrial development. Some of them have joked that that's the gateway drug of radical environmentalism, the kind of outrage that comes when places you care about get destroyed. But there was always something in in me. When. When I see a large clear cut and the mud flowing into the river, burying the sands and gravels that the that the fish depend on to spawn. That just seems so obviously. Out of sync and wrong. So I sometimes talk about the three pillars of of of radical environmental ethics. You know, there's so the first is this deeply spiritual biocentrism. The second is an analysis of an anthropogenic or human caused extinction crisis, and when I first encountered these folks, I was working for the California State parks and and had a career as an ocean lifeguard and a peace officer within. That resource agency. So I certainly knew a good deal about environmental issues from from that perspective. But I hadn't really. Been confronted with claims that human beings were precipitating what's now being called the 6th great extinction,

so I didn't really know when I set out to study them, whether their claims that were pretty apocalyptic about the human impact on nature were accurate. And now I've studied that a great deal for almost 30 years and became convinced that on the facts they were right, not only were they right. Not only were they accurate, they were among the first activists on Earth to make that their highest priority. So then we get to the question of politics. If obviously, if your value system is that all life has value and has the right to be here, all life forms. But there's this huge gap we're driving many species off the planet. There's obviously a huge gap between what ought to be the flourishing of all life forms and what is this massive human caused extinction event. So politics is the bridge between the gap between what ought to be. And what is? So they had a very radical critique. I mean, were they? So as an ethicist, at least, a social and environmental ethicists, you have to deal with what the facts are part of the facts we're trying to figure out whether they were right about the extinction crisis. Another part of the facts. That. Have to be analyzed is, are they right politically? Are there diagnosis of what's going on politically accurate? And are the prescriptions they offer to ameliorate. Those wrongs to to bridge that gap between what ought what is and what ought to be, are those prescriptions warranted? Will they get us in the direction that we might want to go if we have these values, and we know this gap between what's happening and those values? Now so I set out to understand what was going on on the ground in especially North American environmental politics, in, in the campaigns that the radical environmentalists were promoting. And a part of what they were arguing is that resource regimes in North America were corrupt, that the United States Interior Department agencies such as the Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management were basically Co opted and subsidiaries of the great corporations and. There was a kind of revolving door between. Uh. The resource agencies and the corporations, and that they were in fact, being lawless with regard to. Their own statutory obligations to protect the ecosystems that they were responsible for. Now, as an agency person, I'm not the first one. I'm far from the first one to assume conspiracy theories about. Resource agency people I've worked in those agencies. I know those people, many of them I respect and like them. But when I began to look at what was going on, for example, on US Forest Service lands and I realized that many of the logging programs were going on, were actually losing money while corporations. Walked away with large amounts of of profits, so the taxpayers were subsidizing at \$1.1 billion a year. To the. To these timber corporations. And when you see. Judges appointed by conservative Republicans repeatedly finding that the government was breaking the laws and the corporations the logging corporations were, were breaking the laws, arguing that they were acting arbitrarily and capriciously with regard to those laws, which basically means illegally and sleazily. With regard to those laws, you could see that the grievances, at least in no small number of cases, that these activists were articulating, had merit. Now, that really isn't all that surprising when we look at. When we look at the profits involved, we know that human beings are quite capable of corrupt behavior. Indeed, as we look around the world, corruption, bad government and corruption is is rampant, and it's

often related to extractive industries that don't really care about. What they leave after they. Take their oil, their minerals or their timber. So. When I looked at. How bad was it? Was democracy in place and being effective? Were there patterns of corporate accountability in place? Well. In many cases, there were not. So in the grand tradition of at least the grand tradition of civil disobedience. I concluded was ethically justifiable. And indeed, if done carefully and nonviolently, and if well publicized, and if done with articulate spokesmen and spokeswomen who would explain to the public what was going on, these movements could be not only warranted, but effective in. Ameliorating reducing some of the destruction that they were. Protesting and indeed. If we look at the history over the last quarter century. There are many examples in which some combination of protest activity and legal and lawsuits litigation appeals have been effective in reducing destruction. So. Somewhat reluctantly, I given my own background as an agency person, I concluded that indeed there was a great deal of corruption in these resource regimes that the protesters were ethically warranted to resist in the ways that in at least non violent ways. Umm. But of course, some of the activists were even more extreme and argued that were they were advancing what are essentially anarchist. Primitivist positions this this is a perspective known in shorthand as anarcho primitivism. That suggested we should really go back to foraging lifeways before industrial civilization itself. Well, that kind. Of perspective in many ways has struck me as fanciful, especially as our numbers virgin to over 7.2 billion. Even if that were a laudable goal, it's certainly not something that's going to happen. Near term and it's hard to get much. Of a political program. Out of that. So. As we think about the biological diversity crisis, which of course is also deeply connected to the cultural diversity crisis, because wherever mass culture takes over places where indigenous people are. Those cultures get eroded, so there's a close connection between biological and cultural diversity. The conservation of 1 is often deeply tethered to the conservation of the other. I concluded that. the sort of anarchist branch of. These environmental movements really didn't have adequate prescriptions because they really had no way to bridle. The big power agents on Earth, they had really no way to protect the global Commons, the atmosphere. The oceans and for that you need in an era of nation states, which is basically what most of the world has right now, you need international treaties and enforcement mechanisms if you're really going to address the extinction crisis so. This movement that I first began to study in depth has been a great use for thinking about what are the fundamental moral values that ought to Orient us to the natural world. What, in fact, are the human impacts on nature? And. What are the? What are the causes of this destructive impulse by our species, and what prescriptions might help to ameliorate it? So anyway, that kind of tripartite. Overview of ethical values, what's happening ecologically, and what's happening politically. Provides A framework for me, thinking ethically about the issues in general and also about the social movements around the world that are trying to address these things.

Peter Shea: The prophets you started with. Tried to make as much of a mess as they could. In the countries about whose actions they disapproved of. Famous.

Performance art pieces of the prophets marrying the prostitute. That's what you've done. Running around in the shirt saying you'll lose your shirts. If you pursue this policy. UM and throw in. His place. Certainly got all the neighbors talking. By going to jail. Then he had the Chautauqua speech. About that. But he didn't have the Internet. He didn't have hacking. Ah, you didn't have flash mobs. New to the prophets. So. The problem of an individual being able to throw a significant sized wooden shoe in the mechanisms of contemporary anything good is a problem. Well, it was started with the anarchists. I mean the anarchists, assassins and bombers of the early 20th century maybe knew about that. A little bit. To some extent, it's Snowden, it's Manning. It's it's it's cyber warfare. I mean, now, gradually, all sorts of of people who would have been prophets doing performance art, saying you won't cut down this tree unless you're going to kill me when you do it. Uh. Now realize that for perhaps a brief time. They can throw shoes in mechanisms they can't, presumably. Shut the mechanism down permanently. But they can make an enormous mess. And that fact. Is. Is one that was every everybody who sees an something of absolute value being destroyed. This take has to take account of. I guess I'm interested. Yeah. And I mean you must have met these people or correspond the more known about them. The folks who have shoes to throw. And the desire. To throw something, sure, yeah, absolutely. And I'm curious. About what? What? Given the time you've spent here? And the variety of experiences you've had. How you think about the dialogue with these folks well.

Bron Taylor: Yeah. First of all the I mean just a little bit more on their strategies or at least some of their strategies. What are you trying to accomplish? What are they trying to accomplish with sabotage? Well, it depends on of course, on the type of sabotage that they might be engaged in, so. As I suggested earlier. There. More often than not, these protesters are using. Politics as usual, electoral politics, and so forth. The next step is they try to mount mass movements of of civil disobedience. Sometimes this kind of civil disobedience becomes performance art, as you suggest. People photogenic people and blocking. Logging roads sitting in tripods that they construct to prevent the logging trucks from going in or sitting in trees so they can't get cut down. But some activists have also. Especially before 911, and they strengthened the anti terrorism law to include almost anything these activists were doing and creating very, very long sentences for anybody engaged in anything resembling sabotage. They would on a in some campaigns they would disable heavy machinery. Logging equipment, for example. Or they would drive metal or ceramic spikes into trees to make the timber less profitable in a in a way waging economic warfare against the. The timber companies that we're going to take out trees in areas that they consider to be critical habitat for various species. There are examples on the ground where these sorts of tactics. Dramatically slowed down. The timber company and the Forest Services plans which gave. The political avenues or the lawsuits time to halt the practice that they were trying to prevent in the 1st place. Now more often than not, they lose. But there's been quite a number of successful campaigns, so you could you could say that if you share that their view that the entire natural world is. Intrinsically valuable? You could

say that those tactics were justified because they were successful. They helped to prevent the extinction of species that. For all we know, once they're gone, we can't bring back. Despite some talk these days about de extinction of, for example, the woolly mammoth from DNA and so forth, this is another area we will probably won't get into today, but. These. While we find examples where some of the more radical tactics have been effective. Ultimately, in the long term, the growing human numbers, the material wants and needs of those numbers and the aspirations of those who are poor but aspire to greater levels of material comfort, if not wealth and consumption. Leads to immense pressures on these. Ecosystems that. They're not going away, so in some ways the tactics deployed by. The radical environmentalists to just halt destruction at the at the point in which it is occurring. It's a stopgap measure. It's no solution. There has to be broader cultural transformation. There needs to be. Both domestically and internationally, as I mentioned before, there needs to be. Uh. Laws and or treaties that are respected, and if not enforced to prevent the erosion of the further erosion of of biological diversity. So now some of these folks are going, as I suggested, we have folks who think that it might somehow be possible to bring down industrial civilization, or they say industrial civilization is unsustainable and it will collapse of its own unsustainable weight. And maybe we can nudge it toward that. Event a little bit sooner. But the folks who are taking that sort of most route of position are. Are not numerous although. They're also not insignificant because, as you suggested earlier, it doesn't take a whole lot of people to make a big mess. So you know, if we care about these things if. We care about the biological diversity on the planet. If we if we value cultural diversity in the main, I don't think everybody likes all forms of cultural diversity, especially those who have concerns about gender equality and. Equality among different ethnic groups, but generally speaking. It. Speaking in general terms, I think everybody can agree that we want the fullest, that that that, that there's beauty in the cultural diversity, to plan it, and if if these things are closely linked to biological diversity, we would want to work in concert to prevent the destruction of either.

Peter Shea: What does one do with the fact that this is the 6th great extinction? If it is a very extinguishing. The natural world produced five more before it. The world we live in, which is to be. Celebrated and preserved. By political action of the kind you're suggesting. Arose because of would be unthinkable without. The other five great extinctions. Nature there seems to be a pattern of comets, asteroids, things like that. I think they're talking 26,000,000 years as the pattern for these events, the planet itself. Produces volcanic events like Krakatoa. You know, with some regularity not. And it's not in in human history terms, they're very, very rare. In geological terms, they're like mosquitoes. So, how does that fact that the natural world is not just a garden that's disrupted. It's a garden that gets clear burned in a fairly regular way. How does that play in to the religious and ethical thinking. About care of the earth. Respect for the Earth's respect for biodiversity. Those sorts of things?

Bron Taylor: We are in something of a cosmic shooting gallery, aren't we? Where any moment, well maybe not at any moment, but it's certainly possible. Without much

warning to be hit by a another asteroid that would end life on Earth as we know it. And really, what folks in the environmental movement are trying to do is to protect life on Earth as we know. So if the universe itself or earthly forces themselves are capable of producing great extinctions, why are we so upset about the possibility or the unfolding one right now? Well great question, right? We have in our genome, the capacity for empathy and ethics. And this one for the first time. At least in terms of a great and massive extinction. This one is the first one that not only are we precipitating. But we're precipitating in a way in which those of us who are paying attention know that we're precipitating it. When humans began to spread around the world. As exceptionally clever hunters. They drove quite a number of species to extinction. But you could say to be charitable, they. To use a biblical references. Back to Christ. They knew not what they did. Uh. But it's also the case that in a lot of places where humans spread after a while, they began to realize that if they didn't, we might say, learn their manners in those places. Their ecological matters there, they would. Over hunt certain species to extinction, and many of these cultures developed mores and taboos. To prevent just that. So we're learning creatures and a lot of times that. Those constraints on behavior that emerge in a culture. Were consecrated or made sacred by. The religious beliefs and perceptions of a of a particular culture. So we have, through our empathetic capacities and our ethical sensitivities, we've. Become increasingly aware of the destructive acts that we take, that it's possible to. Be too greedy to take too much and too dramatically erode the. The world's diverse habitats. Now we can say we should not do that for purely human self interested reasons for purely prudential reasons. Akin to, well, we net as the ecologist elder Leopold put it, the first first step of intelligent tinkering is is to save all the parts. The principle here being that. You never know when you might need something. You never know what Organism actually holds the genes that can prevent the next disease or an existing disease, plague or blight. So on a purely prudential level, I think there's a very strong argument that can be made that we ought not to be allowing the extinction of any other organisms, but I think there's other arguments there that at least to me, and I think many others, are compelling and that is. We all got here in exactly the same way through a long process of biological evolution. That. Process involves. Pain. And what Darwin once called the struggle for existence. And we know life is difficult because we're in the midst of it. We're living it. And. Those of us who have developed. An empathetic capacity. Don't want to get in the way of others that are striving to survive and flourish, just as we are, so it's possible purely from an understanding of of ecological and evolutionary science to. Surmise what good ethical behavior is? And I think a lot of people around the world are developing such sensibilities in the in this age that is increasingly informed by ecological and evolutionary worldviews. And so while we can say, sure there could be some natural calamity that we have nothing to do with. That will dramatically alter the biota on the planet. Uh. This time is on our watch and we are ethical creatures. And so, at least on our watch. We ought not to be the ones that precipitate this sort of destruction. This sort of extinction. And I could also add

as. Dave Foreman, the most charismatic of these earth firsters in the early years. Said when sort of posed a similar question, he said. Well, I'm a chauvinist for this. For this epoch, I like the life here now and. I'm not so sure I'm. Going to like. The life that will come in the niches that we create through our destructive practices. That's not a bad answer either.

Peter Shea: The ultimate conservative.

Bron Taylor: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, there's a very conservative nature to conservation. You know, it used to be that this was that conservation in America and beyond was not so divided along partisan lines. I mean, some of our our greatest environmentalists in the US and. Environmental history were republicans such as well, Teddy Roosevelt, such as Richard Nixon. Interestingly enough, we got a whole host of exceptionally valuable environmental laws under his signature.

Peter Shea: The slowest comic strip in in the paper I read is Mark Trail. Recently there's an issue coming up where a tree farmer finds a pest infestation. In his in his struggling Grove, and at the same time, some Beavers who've been kicked out of their Beaver clan move in and begin building. In this, they're both trying to make it. And in the in the episode this morning, the tree farmer had just decided that the Beavers were the enemy. Now Mark Trail is very predictable and one knows that he's going to end up with empathy for those Beavers or mother also struggling to, especially since the thing that's that's trouble for him is that until his farm works, he can't marry the first and so he can't raise, raise a family and the Beavers, of course, want to raise a family. Really. And they're all struggling. And the question is, and of course, it's going to turn out very neatly that the Beavers are a solution to the guys problem because this is Mark Trail. This is Sunday. This is the weekly dose of environmentalism on the comic page. Now. This is a spirituality one might call. It a Buddhist. Spirituality in some ways, because empathy and compassion are so real. Might also say that it's the sort of thing that grow the sort of attitude that grows out of a lifetime of scientific advice, you know, observation, what do, what does it feel like to be a Beaver? You can answer that if you're watching every day. So. There's this whole. Strain and there are a few people. In this. City, State nation. Substantial number taken together, who think that. They probably are seriously outnumbered by the evangelicals and Roman Catholics and Jews who don't think that way, although there's certainly Catholics and evangelicals and Jews who do think that way.

Peter Shea: So here's my question. Where have you come to be? To stand on the possibility? That. Documents. Like the Genesis creation story. Can get to the heart. Of important issues about human human. Human dominance over the natural world, right? Do you see? Are are you inclined to say we've got to replace Genesis with with essentially the Mark Trail story? They're just trying to make it. You're just trying to make it. Can't we get along or is there, is it. I mean, it would be really cute if there was something powerful in the judeo-christian tradition, something that didn't have to be made-up or hammered together. That would suddenly energize this vast quantity of evangelicals and Catholics and Jews, and for that matter, Muslims.

Bron Taylor: I've been involved in creating a society for the study of religion, nature and culture, and I did an encyclopedia for the study of Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature and part of what we were trying to do with my collaborators there was to figure out whether the world's predominant religions might be amenable to a much more dramatic environmental mission, you might say. And certainly there are those within those traditions that are ardently trying to turn them in more dramatically greener forms. Quite clearly, those who are more likely to do that within those traditions are on the liberal spectrum. And by that I mean they do not take. Wholesale or literally the sacred texts of their traditions, so conservative religionists of all these different traditions are far less likely, in my judgment, to turn dark green because these texts are exceptionally ambivalent with regard to perceptions about the natural world and our responsibilities to them. To turn those traditions green, the world's most predominant world religions, they need significant revisioning and reconstruction and you might put it this way, they need to cherry pick their own traditions. There's streams of human justification for human domination in them. Krishna, with the wrapped in the robes of dead tiger skins, for example. The famous passages in the Hebrew Bible, which of course is antecedent to Christianity and Islam as well in which human beings are given dominion over the earth. Of course, there are also passages there that can be read in ecologically friendly ways, such as God created the world and at each stage of the creation, he said it was good and some Jews and Christians and Muslims look at the story of Noah, which they share and argue that look, God wanted to make. Sure, that all the animals got on the Ark. But that's hardly an environmental fable, because God, apparently was unconcerned for the plants and was willing to destroy most of all other species because one particular species, namely human beings, had aggravated him a great. Deal. So we could go on and on about these sacred texts and pull out some of them that are amenable to environmentally friendly readings, and we can equally pull out texts that are indifferent, if not hostile to nature. Most of the world's predominant religions, let's be, let's be clear, involve some sort of hope for divine rescue from this world, or from its suffering, some kind of enlightened release from its sufferings. The perspective of dark green religion that I've. Well, the perspectives that I've captured under this umbrella of dark green religion are very plural, but they certainly involve more of a sense that even these processes of struggle, including predation, all of this is a sacred process and the biosphere is sacred and we don't need rescue from this place. This is a magical, sublime place. That is in which it is appropriate to talk about as a miracle. This is the only place in the universe we know for sure. That life exists. It's the only place it may be the only place in the universe where life exists. This is the only place in the universe where complex multicellular organisms exist that think about the meaning of life and that as best they can explore the biosphere, their planet, and the universe. There's a very good chance this is the only place in the universe such complex multicellular organisms exist.

So, when you look at what's right here. It's hard to conclude otherwise then that this place is exceptionally special. And to use language that's typically associated with

religion, like this is a sacred place. This place is a miracle and we are privileged to be in the midst of it. This kind of rhetoric comes out, these kinds of terminologies, social feelings, emerge naturally simply from an understanding as the Monty Python film on the meaning of life once put it, amusingly; how incredibly unlikely is your birth? How incredibly unlikely is it that you are here, in this case, if you're watching this listening to me thinking about these kinds of things, thinking about what our ethical obligations are to each other. And to other kind, I mean that's an absolutely astounding. Phenomena.

So, I forget your excellent question that set off that riff, but I hope it was speaking to it.

The Ted K Archive

Peter Shea & Bron Taylor
Bron Taylor, Scholar of Dark Green Nature Religion
Aug 7, 2015

The Bat of Minerva, University of Minnesota, Institute for Advanced Study, Apr.
2015. <purl.umn.edu/246528>

Bron Taylor's website: <brontaylor.com>

Peter Shea's old website:

<web.archive.org/.../ias.umn.edu/outcomes/the-bat-of-minerva>

www.thetedkarchive.com