The rise of a green spiritual movement

A conversation with Bron Taylor

Sara Jolena Wolcott

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Is there a new-ancient ecologically-centered spirituality erupting into different spheres of life around the world? Professor Bron Taylor's decades of research suggest that, yes, a diverse spiritual movement that values and experiences a spiritually informed and often infused connection with nature is rapidly growing. In this conversation, we look at many dynamics of this movement, from the global environmental milieu to surfers to scientists to indigenous activists and intellectuals.

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About Bron Taylor:

Dr. Bron Taylor is one of the leading voices and academics tracking the intersections of religion/spirituality and nature. For several decades, he has been tracking the rise of what he sees as an international spiritual/religious movement, arising in many different places and across multiple traditions and positions. His book Dark Green Religion has been translated into multiple languages, often serving to help the eco-spiritual communities see themselves and each other in a broader perspective. He currently is the Samuel S Hill Ethics Chair at the University of Florida, where he anchors the world's first graduate pram focusing on religion and nature. He founded the Journal

for the study of Religion, Ecology, and Nature edited the Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature, and helped found the International Society for Religion, Nature, and Culture.

Taylor's youth was spent on and in the ocean in southern California. While simultaneously working in the park system, he earned his academic degrees, including his Ph.D. in Social Ethics from the University of Southern California (in 1988). His contributions to writing about the spiritual dynamics of surfer culture have been much appreciated. Along the way, he engaged in social and environmental activism and took on his most important role as a husband and father.

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Books:

Dark Green Religion

Avatar and Nature Spirituality

Affirmative Action at Work: Law, Politics, and Ethics

Ecological Resistance Mov

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Getting to know Bron

Sara: Hello and welcome to the remembering and re enchanting podcast. My name is Sarah Jolina Walcott and I am your Hostess on this sacred learning journey of unraveling, unveiling and becoming more fully alive at the end of the world as. We know it. Hello and welcome to the remembering and re enchanting podcast with your Hostess, Sarah Juliana Wolcott. That is myself. I am delighted to be joined today with one of the foremost thinkers. And leading scholars on the intercessions of religion and nature, brown. Taylor, who is joining us from his office in Florida.

Bron: Nice to be with you.

Sara: I was actually just going to ask, do you prefer being called Braun or Doctor Taylor?

Bron: Just bron.

Sara: Ron, it's fine. OK, great. It's really a pleasure having you here. I've. I've known about your work for such a long times. Influenced many of my colleagues, both

academic and practitioners. And you've really kind of in some ways set the field for the rest of us to understand where we are in it. I am wondering if we can. Start. This conversation with understanding a bit more about where you come from. I we can ask the question, how did you get into what we are calling dark green religion, but it seems like it might also be. Makes sense to start a little bit further back and say how did you get into this field to begin with?

Bron: Sure. Well, there's a I'll try to abbreviate a long pilgrimage story. I am a Californian. I grew up in Southern California at the age of 13. I moved to Ventura, CA within walking distance to the beach and fell for. The natural systems there and I was at the time in a family that was really quite broken. And. In some ways, at least emotionally abusive, and I found myself on a number of occasions just kind of gravitating down toward the beach in the middle of the night. And looking out over the ocean and seeing the anchovies jumping out there in the moonlight and just realizing that despite the crazy in my own family there was, there was just something marvelous in the in the world and in the universe. So I always had this from those sorts of experiences. I always had this felt connection or from then any way deeply felt connection to. Our natural surrounds. But I also didn't have much adult supervision and I ended up gravitating as many young people did at that time toward the the Jesus movement. They were good and caring people in that movement that kind of took me under their wings and provided some guidance that and important points. And so I had a number of years as a teenager, and until about 20 where I was involved in that. Movement and eventually I managed to after a Community College, get to Cal State Chico, where I began taking religious studies class. This. And I soon realized that the the form of Christianity that I was familiar with evangelical Christianity, which is religiously and politically conservative in the main. Was far from the only form of Christianity, so I began to learn about. Liberation theology, the efforts to fuse kind of leftist political analysis with the. Prophetic tradition in Judaism and Christianity, which led to priests and laypeople getting uppity and Latin America, South Africa and Southeast Asia promoting social justice causes. And I was moved by those movements and drawn to them. And I began to realize that religion can be a tremendous catalyst for social change, even while at the same time, quite obviously, as Mark suggested, religion is often. The opiate of the people and. Dulles, people to the pain of their suffering, and obscures the ways in which they are being oppressed. So eventually I went to seminary, an evangelical seminary. I studied liberation theology there, and from there went to. Get a PhD in social ethics at the University of Southern California, and I was moving out of the Christian tradition at that time. But I remain very interested in the the power of religion, both for good and ill. And I thought that I would go to Latin America somewhere to study those liberation movements, but I couldn't afford to as many graduate students will relate to how what they choose for their graduate work is can be shaped by economics. And I happen to be fortunate. I moved to the beach to develop some. Marine skills and became an ocean lifeguard for California

State parks. And before long, I was drafted into the participate and help with the Equal Employment Opportunity Committee within my department.

Bron's early work with the park service and thinking about organizational change and organizational development

Sara: Within the state. So this. Was within the state parks.

Bron: That's right, that's right. And they asked me to help them develop curricula for their affirmative action and anti discrimination programs. And to teach those programs to Rangers, lifeguards and. Other State Park personnel, which I did and that provided access to. Leadership of the department and I was able to. Get them to agree to let me talk on the clock to many. Departmental employees and from that I developed some survey research which helped me to wrestle with those policies, those affirmative action and anti discrimination policies, and that became the eventually emerged as my first book affirmative action at work law politics. Ethics. So I was deeply engaged in. Kind of social justice activism, both as a. As an activist and also as an intellectual trying to push forward policies that as difficult and as ambivalent as we might be about them, I thought were ethically permissible, especially at that time.

Sara: And that gave you a really, I think I imagine it gave you a really kind of powerful window and of understanding organizations and organizational development and how organizations and structures can change or or not change.

Bron: Well, absolutely. And in fact, I had been. I had a a long pacifist phase and I had turned from that based on the. What I had read from the liberation theologians who talked about how that was often a very privileged position compared to those who are struggling for basic survival against plutocracies and violent authoritarian regimes. And because I was very interested in the question of violence and how to promote more peaceful societies, I actually when I became a permanent employee with the state parks, I was also. I also became a State Park peace officer and I did that because I thought that if I'm going to be an ethicist, which is my training. It's best not to do that from an ivory tower, but on the ground where you're wrestling with the very real struggles. To that that we're engaged in in urban parks in Southern California, along the beaches, trying to protect people and the and the park itself. So that was a really valuable experience. I'm not a very naive person as I think many academicians are as a result of of doing that work. But I also had this feeling when doing the affirmative action work and looking at. Philosophical and religious. Ethics as they promoted social justice. I had a deep sense that there was something missing given the earlier experiences of connection with the natural world. And a growing awareness that it was under severe assault by our own species. So I I started to wonder about, well, where's the the liberation of nature?

Unknown Speaker: Hmm.

Bron: And then I began to discover, oh, well, there are a few Christians that are writing about this. John Cobb wrote a book on the Liberation of life. Rosemary Ruther wrote woman. Women. Oh gosh, I'm forgetting the exact name. New woman, new earth.

Sara: That's.

How Earth First inspired him to think about religion and the climate crisis differently

Bron: Right. I think in 1975 and so. I began to gravitate toward to try to. Figure out well. What's the role? What's the possibility that religion might inspire pro environmental behavior as well as pro social justice behavior? And then in the late 80s, as I was wrapping up my. PH. D work. I began to notice efforts to sabotage the Barstow, the Las Vegas Desert race, and to protect endangered bighorn sheep on the east side of of California in the mountains. And I learned that the activists doing that called themselves Earth 1st, and I learned that they had been around since 1980. And I began to get their tabloids because I was intrigued by this. And I discovered that there was a lot of spiritual stuff going on under that umbrella that was entirely new to me. I mean, I had been more in this kind of. Abrahamic religion milieu, not the kind of nature spirituality, let alone Pagan milieu.

Sara: And it wasn't something you were seeing in state parks. Like their their ethos and the ethics that they were ascribing to, it wasn't something you would have seen in the State Park.

Unknown Speaker: Well.

Bron: We see a lot in the state parks, so we do see, we see some people coming in to engage in ritualizing in, in the parks like the the Hari Krishnas and so forth. But nothing that and and I was aware that some of my park colleagues. In the in the very interviews that I was doing about affirmative action, you know, we would talk about not just those policies. But that some of those folks were saying, you know, if I saw some of those eco radicals. Challenging the extractive industries. I'd look the other way, and these are these are law enforcement officers because they have sympathies. They they, you know, the a lot of the folks that are drawn to the parks even if they end up as Leos law enforcement officers they. They have pro natures sentiments that they often also understand as spiritual. Now, as it happened, I, to my shock, got an academic job in Wisconsin right after getting my PhD and Dave Foreman. Who had recently been arrested? The most charismatic of the of the founders of Earth first showed up at my campus, invited by others. But I by that time. In in the spring of 1990. No spring of 1989 I had already been bird docking. The movement reading their tabloids and knew a good bit about them just from the articles they produced and articles about these.

Wild people. So I arranged to meet with him, interview him? I I introduced him. I had him and what I called the feral ones over to my house afterward, who had come from the neighboring regions, to hear him speak. And I was from that experience. I just knew that there was something really profound. Really. Spiritual going on in those movements that I needed to know more about.

Unknown Speaker: Hmm.

Bron: And I I could tell and I wrote an article I think was published in 91 in what was then the most widely published, distributed and translated. Journal in the world, the ecologist and I published an article called the Religion and Politics of Earth first. And that was my first effort to wrestle with the. The movement, which is based largely on my my reading of their of their documentary materials.

How looking at social and ecological activists were working with and cultivating an eco-spiritual lens

Bron: I realized there was kind of three major pillars to their ethics, and the first was a deeply spiritual biocentrism the the perception that all life has value apart from its usefulness to human beings. The second pillar was that human beings are precipitating. An egregiously wrong extinction crisis. And the third was that politics as usual was not up to the task of ameliorating that crisis and therefore extra legal tactics. Are warranted. Including civil disobedience, but not just civil disobedience, also including sabotage when strategically employed to thwart. Human extractive and other behaviors that. Are driving other species off the planet now? Obviously given my background, I was neither an anarchist nor a hippie, but. So I wanted and I've used the movement as kind of a muse to think about. Environmental ethics and environmental social movements. I didn't. For example, when I first was reading their material, I didn't know whether to believe that humans were. Creating a massive extinction episode, so I became engrossed with reading far more from the environmental sciences than I had previously, and I also wasn't convinced that extra legal tactics were morally justified or effective. And so I began to study particular cases where these folks were making those claims and engaging in activism to try to reverse and or prevent environmental harms. And kind of grudgingly, I came to understand that they were right. They were making accurate statements about the anthropogenic the human caused extinction crisis. And that indeed resource regimes in North America and certainly elsewhere in the world were also profoundly corrupt. That really the lawlessness had been going on for a long time and the best of the people in this movement were. Getting out on the land, well aware of what the laws were documenting how the government was looking the other way as many corporations logging companies, mining companies were were egregiously violating the law and imperiling species. So I found myself. Sympathetic to the overall arguments, even though I think at times they're. There were many problems internally

within these movement. Which I've written about and there were. As with any kind of extremism, there's there are times when people are going too far and they lose nuance in their own judgments and so forth. So I've tried to. Find a way to incorporate in my own thinking. The value, the values and the insights of the movement while issuing criticisms and cautions about the excesses that sometimes, in here to them. Now the the other things, that's that I'll say one more thing about how this movement.

Sara: So you're yeah.

Global patterns of spiritualities of belonging and connecting with nature

Bron: Turned out to be amused for me, and that was they had a particular perception of what was going on beyond the borders of the USA. And I wanted to test that. Perception. And that's what led to the ecological resistance movements book where. With others we looked at green social movements, especially radical ones around the world, and. At their spiritual dimensions. And ultimately that work kept growing into what became the dark green religion book and argument.

Sara: Oh, interesting. So it so it started from looking at the social and at these social activism, ecological activism movements globally. And you began to see. OK. That makes sense. Because in the beginning of you're talking a lot about some of those Earth activism spaces, but you're talking about the spiritual movements within them, the way in which they're describing it. Not in a secular context, but in a profoundly spiritual context.

"Dark Green Religion"/Spiritual-ecology through the lens of science, popular media, and art

Bron: Yeah. I mean, the North American activist, not just North American but Australian and and activists all other Earth first activists who joined the cause, so to speak in the 80s and 90s. They had a view of green social movements abroad and they viewed them as kindred spirits and I wasn't sure that was the case where people are getting uppity and South America, for example, on these issues, were they motivated in the same sorts of eco spiritual ways that many of the North America and Australian and Western European activists were. And we found on the one hand that there were that a lot of times, these movements in the South. We're driven as much. If not more in defense of livelihoods, then. Being based in kind of deep ecological intrinsic value of nature theories but there. But over time I also began to see that many of them were indeed. Did have this have similar kind of spiritual what I've sometimes called spiritualities of belonging and connection to nature were also a part

of many of those movements and their most. Ardent activists and I was I've been privileged over a number of decades now to travel to, you know, really many places in the world, including under United Nations venues where people are engaged with trying to address our environmental predicaments. And I began to notice some of the same patterns widely scattered around the world that I first really encountered under the radical environmental umbrella. So just.

Sara: Can you spell out what some of those patterns were?

Bron: Yeah, sure. Well, for example, in the dark green religion. Book I I. Say that there's a number of characteristics that are typical in in what I construct as dark green religion. The perception that nature is sacred, its value is not only indirect by virtue of having been divinely. And thus all living things have value and deserve respect and reverence. Another common idea is that all life forms share a common ancestor and and therefore all organisms are kin. We are biologically related, which leads to moral and ethical responsibilities toward them. Also common is an ecology based understanding that all life is interconnected and mutually depend. And then as I indicated a minute ago, these spiritualities are typically characterized by deep feelings of belonging and connection to nature, but also. They tend to involve a corresponding humility about the the human place in the world. And then, of course, these things are these kinds of folks or have often often traced the. There green perceptions to experiences of awe and wonder at the terror. Beauties and wonders of the world and the universe in a way that's not uncommon to my own early experiences that helped me cope with my family. Dysfunction.

Sara: Yeah, there's a there's a strong sense of a direct experience with. So awe and the wonder and this and the kinship. But that's a really critical piece of it.

Bron: Yeah, absolutely. And many of these things basically. Can. Can be understood to fall under the idea of of a love of a love of and for nature and all living things. So these are experiences, and these are the core attributes. That we find in what I've called Dark green spirituality around the world and and I've I argued in the book, that such spiritualities have been growing rapidly around the world. That for many people, everything began to change when Darwin published on the origin of species in 1859.

Sara: Hmm.

Bron: And then as. The power of that explanation for the world's diversity. Was. Buttressed by what we now know based on DNA analysis, which reinforces the idea that we all share a common ancestor, these kinds of kinship spiritualities have gained even more traction. Wherever people are relative. You. Well educated. So this is what I've talked about in the book and and part of what's been interesting has been the reception of the book. It's now been translated into German. It's in process in Mandarin and Italian, and parts have been translated into Spanish and it it was going to be translated into Russian until. My Russian translator got driven out of Kiev. Maybe that will still happen, but what that indicates to. Me is that. What I identified in the book strikes a chord with many people from around the world, and indeed part of what I said in the book is that if I'm not crazy. Readers will. Be able to identify in their own contexts

examples of what I'm talking about. Often, if not usually, phenomena that I know nothing about and that is also been the case people writing to me and saying, you know, giving me examples of things I don't know about that fit this kind of analysis.

Sara: Hmm.

Bron: And people also writing and saying. Basically saying thanks for putting this together because now I don't. Feel so alone. I kind of thought that me and my few friends like who have these kinds of feelings, perceptions and values were. You know really outliers, but now I can see. I'm part of a. Global upswelling of kind of eco spiritual moral concern.

Sara: And and you really do. I mean, I really like like those folks. I feel a tremendous appreciation for the extent. To which you are. Looking at a very wide spectrum of people, so most you know, you're not trying to define it by who? You're using a different analytical lens than is often used in terms of by tracking identity formations. You, as you mentioned, are talking about radical environmentalists. But you're also talking about scientists and physicists, to biologists, to anthropologists, you're looking at cinema and popular nature movies, avatar being a particularly famous one. But you're also looking at. The the powerful documentaries of at. And you're looking at wildlife encounters that are been subsequently depicted in film and art and video at Gaia theory systems, theories at arts and photography, and the ways in which people are connecting through museums, aquariums and other forms of spaces, protected spaces that enable some sort of direct. Encounter with. Nature as well as with international NGO's and such as United Nations and even some corporations. So it's a very it's a very wide, it's a very like, you know, wide angle lens that you're taking in that.

Bron: Yeah.

Sara: And I'm like, I'm like, as you. Yeah, go ahead.

Bron: Yeah. Well, I was just gonna say I'm glad you you mentioned that. That's a nice kind of overview of the kinds of phenomena that I analyzed in the book. It's it's far. It's far from only the so-called eco radicals who have these kinds of feelings and perceptions and values indeed. There's a host of ways in which people are experiencing evoking. Expressing and promoting these kinds of spiritualities and. Much of this is taking place in the Arts and Sciences, as you suggest.

Sara: Arts and Sciences and and also within the context of organizations which I think is quite fascinating because it's a place that people often find themselves and don't think of that as a place. To look for. Spiritual dynamics, but I think it absolutely is a place where many people who are embedded in in. Solutions are like taking this and trying to play with it and trying to work with it. And then you also give like a historical, some historic like you're you're not putting this in a historical context, you're looking at like the kind of very real ways in which people are drawing upon different historical thinkers, especially Thoreau and Emerson. John Muir, Thomas.

Unknown Speaker: Right.

Sara: Very elderly Leopold. So and these are often associated as great environmental thinkers. But you kind of reread their texts and find the spiritual and animist and

religious qualities in those texts and how they have informed this soulful approach as well as in and kind of more classically assumed to be secular. Approach to environmentalism.

Bron: That's right. And it's good that you mentioned the animistic dimension of these perceptions and feelings. One of the things I work with a good bit is animist perception and also what's increasingly called Gyan spirituality or gain. Worldviews, which is another way to talk about an ancient perception that's. Until recently, has been usually called organicism. The idea that the world is a is a interconnected, mutually dependent.

Unknown Speaker: Whole.

How terms and definitions are changing

Bron: And. Those perceptions are increasingly buttressed by the sciences. So you know, through time, people have arrived at those kinds of perceptions without modern science. But now they're buttressed in many ways by the sciences, the discipline of ethology, the study of animal consciousness and behavior reinforces the fact that of evolutionary. Continuity between our own species and all other species, so we know that there's a lot more going on in the cognitive and emotional lives of of animals. For example, in many animals that has. That resembles our own cognitive, emotional lives, even if we can't, we shouldn't be arrogant about the extent to. Which that's the case. The barrier to that that has long prevented us in the West from thinking about these things of, you know, the cardinal sin of anthropomorphism is eroding in the face of these sciences. And then with regard to to Gaia theory. Even though the. The theory itself. Is not widely accepted by. Environmental scientist, in the form that it was articulated by James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis as a metaphor for ecological interdependency, which is widely acceptable, accepted by science. It's a it's a it's a brilliant one, because it's it's like George Lockoff says, you know it, it's it's sticky in the mind. And the the the trope animism is sticky in the mind, even though it has a colonial history. That some has led some scholars to say we shouldn't even use the term. Yeah, has gone native and people use it and apply it to their own sense of the personhood value and exotic intelligences of other species.

Unknown Speaker: Kathy. It.

Sara: I'm seeing more and more people self identify as animist just in the last I feel like last five or ten years, which I think is quite. Interesting I haven't, I recall.

Bron: It is indeed.

Sara: Seeing that as like identification marker earlier and I'm kind of actually curious about how you so you distinguish in your book between? The greening of religions. So, for example, the the sense of that in any world religion such as Islam or Christianity, the sense of an obligation to ethos towards environmental care and sustainable sustainability within that religious tradition and dark green. In which is

not necessarily attached to a global religion and has a sort of a set of assumptions behind it, particularly political assumptions behind it. This that often can jive with global the greening of global religions, but is also distinct from and. And then you also talk about Animism and paganism. As aspects and I mean, I'm kind of curious about how like currently and your current thinking as you've been thinking about some of these definitions and how terms are evolving. How are you like just to like distinguish between green religions? The greening of religious like global religions and this sort of dark green religion ecosphere, actuality, and animism a little bit like how are these terms and understandings? How do you see them evolving?

Can global religious traditions become 'green' (as many people want them to be?)

Bron: Sure, sure. Well, one reason that I got drawn to this what was then a nascent field of religion and nature or religion and ecology was because I knew that sometimes religions can lead to dramatic mobilization to face the great challenges of the day. As they did in the civil rights movement. So I was kind. Of. Hopeful about that. Over the decades, however, when I look at the world's predominant religions and look at them in a hard headed way, empirically. Although we see ardent environmentalists emerge in all of these traditions, some more than others, but folks clearly trying to move their own traditions in a much more dramatic green direction. We see that they're having a really hard time doing. That. And some of those folks would have affinity with, yeah, sure. Well, some of those folks, by the way, would have.

Sara: Can you can you give an example? Of that, please.

Bron: Affinity with many of those basic ideas that are articulated in dark green religion. But some of those would be viewed as spiritual, spiritually, or politically dangerous to some Orthodox religionists in these traditions. So your question again was.

Sara: So it's.

Bron: An example.

Unknown Speaker: Well.

Sara: Yeah, an example of like because I I totally resonate with that. But just to kind of help help the listener like hear a bit more clearly. And this has been my experience as well. The extent to which it has been a very significant struggle for for those environment, religious environments within. A global religious tradition to push that religious tradition to to become more ecologically sensitive.

Bron: Right. Your listeners who might want to get introduced to the empirical research that that I and others have done to review a wide range of scholarly work in this area. They could Google the ecological citizen. There's kind of popular versions of longer scholarly articles that. That I and others have produced, and they could just

search my name under this, the ecological citizen, or they can go to my website and. Find the long versions of what I call the greening of religion hypothesis, and there's two parts to that study 1 is looking at the historical emergence of the ferment over religion and ecology relationships, and the second is a comprehensive review of research. So here's just a few ideas why it's hard. Kind of like Kermit the frog talking about how hard it is to be green. It's hard for the world's predominant religions to be green, and there's a number of reasons for that that are completely understandable on a human level. Well, one is that all these religions emerged in the context of agricultures. And agricultures depend on protecting their domesticated plants and animals from predators of all sorts. So these religions typically don't have fond attitudes toward. Organisms that compete with them in some way for their food. If you look at the Abrahamic religions, for example, they don't even in. Some of these beautiful passages in the Hebrew Bible about the lion lying down with the lamb. Well, they don't want the lion to to be a lion. They want the lion to be OK with not eating the lamb. When Saint Francis, who is viewed as the in the in the Christian tradition, is. Viewed by some Christians as kind of the Paragon ecological St. and indeed he's. After Lynn White suggested he'd become the patron St. of ecology, Pope John Paul the second if memory serves, made him the patron St. for ecologist. Well, one of the great legends about Francis is that he converted the wolf Gubbio into basically a domesticated dog that took food from. From humans, rather than which basically reversed his own. Ontology his own beingness as a social hunter with other wolves. So that's not a that's not a perspective that respects the wolf as wolf. The same thing is the case in. Religions that originated in the Indian subcontinent, Great Saints were are said to have tamed tigers so that they would not predate on human food sources or humans. And that's just a couple of examples. I just read a great book that goes into that in in great depth and looking at tigers and snakes and so forth and how negatively they were viewed. So that's part of it. But there are other ideas.

Sara: And and just so that like in your book dark green religion, like you go into like actually how understand a human as prey.

Bron: Yeah, go ahead.

Sara: Is actually a critical part of a lot of peoples spiritual, revelatory experience that they see themselves as part of the natural world, not only as friend to the tiger or the bear, but as a being that can potentially be eaten, and that and that actually reconceptualize is where the human is in the larger cosmos. Vision. So like what you're just describing here is like a very important part of like, what is our place in the world? It's not simply like.

Unknown Speaker: Yeah.

Sara: A question of defending, you know, an older agricultural settlement. But like, are we praying or is are we trying to move away from that kind of very ancient relationship with with predators?

Bron: Yes, excellent point. Are we fully part of it or are we somehow superior to it and are and are we all is our ultimate destiny, you know, does the religion ultimately promise divine rescue from this world or does a religion?

Unknown Speaker: Right. Oh.

Bron: Embrace the idea that the that the world as it is is miraculous and sacred, and we're a part of it, and we can revel in that. And even while there's sadness when. One of our loved ones passes on. We can accept that because that we know that is also the wellspring of new life as our. Being is recycled into into other forms. Of life eventually.

Sara: And that people, then you detail several of these different experiences that people have had and rich in, in movies about in which their experience as prey and their experience with predators is itself part of the spiritual milieu which shifts how they relate to themselves and to others, which is a really like, you know, in terms of the variety of religious experiences. To really what does it mean for a religious community to incorporate those experiences into its mystical tradition?

Bron: See religions. The world's predominant religions promise people that they're that they can live forever. Either in some place apart from the world, or through continued cycles of rebirth. Based on one's meritorious, whether one has lived in meritorious life and the existing. Uh. Cycle whereas these dark green spiritualities have a kind of a different view of the human in the cycles of life, not that they're going to somehow escape from the world, but they are so fully a part of it that they accept that and come to embrace it. And this, of course, is often reinforced. By the sciences and what happens to a body after death?

Sara: And it's also like as as you're describing that I'm thinking about many of the of the conversations I support people in. Working with mortality that the mortality of the individual, the mortality of an organization, and the potential mortality of the civilization as an antidote to a perpetual growth and a limitless growth paradigm like becomes a really important part of their of how people. And organizations, not just individuals, but of how organizations and and individuals like see their own role and their own place, their own Cosmo vision, like the role of mortality, becomes critical in the Cosmo vision that you're articulate. Any any cosmic vision, mortality is always like what is the? Role of death. But there's a. There's an antidote there to limitless growth on a material plane.

Bron: Yeah, that's a good point. As well. I mean, these sorts of things indicate why for someone who has a a modern under kind of modern. Ecological understanding why some of the the even even while you might value parts of the kind of. Even while you might appreciate the insights that are embedded in the world's predominant religions, and there are many. You might just say, well, they didn't get everything right and they certainly didn't know about. They didn't know Darwin's theory, they didn't know. And when they were originating, they didn't know about a host of ecological principles. And So what happens is that well educated people tend to find implausible the metaphysical truth claims whether. They emerged on the Indian St. Subcontinent

or in the in the ancient Near East. So what do you do then? It's not like the quest for meaning, purpose and. And existential comfort goes away, right. And I think that.

Sara: M.

Bron: People who have such under modern understandings, they are tending to gravitate toward those who are expressing such. Providing worldviews that are meat that provide meaning, purpose, existential comfort. And and some of the great purveyors of this we find in Carl Sagan and his protege, you know Neil deGrasse Tyson, we find in those who are producing all sorts of art forms. We see them expressed, as you mentioned, in museums and and aquariums. And so when it comes to turning to cycle back to the idea of of the greening of the world's predominant religions, there are also some beliefs that modern people tend to leave behind. So, for example, if. You have. Big and powerful God. Gods or a God? It's understandable why people with big gods. Wouldn't be that worried about environmental issues because God is in control of environmental systems? So nothing happens that God didn't either make happen or permit to happen, and so if God wants to ameliorate or change environments and make them more beneficent to us, God can do that. And people with such views for millennia have been sacrificing plants and animals. To appease or please those gods, why so that they can get environments that are favorable to them and so that they can avoid those gods, depriving them of favorable environments. So these are, you know, sacrifice is absolutely central in the history of religion. And it's understandable how it could emerge and evolve. People are trying to, you know, coincidences happen. People are trying to. Out. How to shape the world in ways that are congenial to human existence? And so these practices emerge and then they continue through time. But from a modern scientific perspective, these sacrifices that that humans have engaged in for millennia, they don't affect whether climate change changes that are negative. That negatively impact us and the rest of the living world are occurring. Those are.

Unknown Speaker: Hmm.

Bron: Unrelated to our religious practices, with the exception of those religious practices that lead to directly or indirectly to environmental harms, right. And many of them do. If you just think about something as basic as the religious obligation to travel using internal combustion engines to engage in religious ritualizing, you know that has a negative environmental impact and people travel all over the world to go to pilgrimages. Or they travel 123 or four times a week. To their local. Church, temple. Mosque. Synagogue. And so forth. So basic things. That that people. Do have lead to environmental injuries, you know, harvest.

Where do you see the ideas and actions around decolonization intersecting with the dark green religious movement? (Which gets us into a conversation about animism)

Sara: Well, especially using modern technology.

Bron: Homes. We're shipping palms from Mesoamerica.

Sara: Right.

Bron: To North America for Palm Sunday, I mean, there's interesting. Integrating fireworks into religious festivals putting toxic.

Sara: World over, yeah.

Bron: Statues of a sacred elephant ganash into rivers considered sacred, but that practice pollutes them on and on and on, doing merit releases of of doing merit releases of of organisms into environments where they did not.

Sara: Right. And a lot.

Unknown Speaker: Of that is.

Sara: Is a religious.

Bron: Where they become invasive species to accrue merit so you can have a better reincarnation. I mean, the list just is is very low. Long of religious ceremonies that lead to environmental injury.

Sara: And a lot of that is is religions attempt to adapt to modernity and and it's always struck me that often the challenge is not whether not religions care for the environment, but like, how is it that different religious groups. Are able to engage with economics and modernity as sort of being the critical, the critical question. Like not do they care, but how do they engage with the system that makes it much easier to to have a small plastic ganache than it is to do things in a more traditional fashion. And and and that leads to this I I think this other question that I that I have which is to reckon you know in recognizing the tremendous role of colonization in leading to industrialization and environmental destruction. Where do you see? Because I think, and I think the answer is questions like really shifted over time. But where do you see the group like ideas and actions around decolonization intersecting with the dark green religious movement?

Bron: In many ways, if we look back, for example at the. The Earth Summit in 1990 in Rio de Janeiro. That was an early, profoundly influential moment where civil society came together, including many of the indigenous nations from the Amazon and elsewhere. They were kind of clamoring at the gates of these nation states who were meeting on environmental issues, demanding a seat at the table. It began earlier than that, but. Especially since then there is what I have taken to call the the global environmental milieu. And those are the spaces where people with very diverse

backgrounds come together and wrestle with our environmental predicaments. Civil society, including religious actors, have been increasingly involved.

Sara: Those are places like.

Bron: And that.

Sara: And that includes those those examples of those spaces are with the the United Nations, you know, environmental program conferences, conferences for the Earth Summit, the guy in Foundation, the Earth Charter. Like, there's there's many examples of organizations and civil society coming together.

Bron: I'm sorry, go ahead.

Sara: Two in the spaces that you're describing, and they're actually, I feel like they're happening all the time.

Bron: They are happening all the time and. Part of what's happening is that people who are encountering one another, who previously had very little, if any, contact at all with one another and some of the actors who have become increasingly influential. There are those who have been the most colonized on Earth, and those we call indigenous peoples. And many of those societies, as you know, have spiritual beliefs and practices that the term animism is an apt description for. And so. These indigenous voices have helped to. Make it. More credible, more acceptable. For people to acknowledge their deep connections to non human organisms and environmental systems, as you indicated a few minutes ago, you're hearing more often that people are self identifying as animists. That's inconceivable without these decades. Of engagement of indigenous peoples and intellectuals with within these sectors, and now we see people like Robin Wall Kimmerer, whose brilliant book braiding Sweet Grass has become an international bestseller, and she just got that so-called MacArthur Fellowship. AKA Genius award. And she's exceptionally influential. And you have someone like Richard Powers who wrote the over story and won a Pulitzer Prize for it, really writing an animist book. And this is on the back of previous animist bestsellers like Daniel Quinn's.

Sara: Yeah, absolutely.

Bron: Ishmael.

Sara: And the work of someone like David Abraham and.

Bron: And David Abram, who is, you know, an anthropologist and philosopher well known for promoting animistic perceptions and and worldviews.

Sara: As you're describing that I'm I'm thinking of how many people I know who are trying to to. I mean, people from settler backgrounds are trying to find language to describe their own journey away from a colonial mindset and towards greater indigenous city and the the incredible challenge of actually. Naming that as indigenous city as they themselves are not indigenous. And looking for language and looking for like practices that will connect them to their own non Christian non colonial ancestral roots or just different practices that will take them out of. That position of the colonizer, both spiritually and practically, and I'm wondering if that's actually part of why animism as a container has grown, and because there's folks who I would have

thought of, you know, more might have, might have used Pagan terminology and are not because they don't want to associate themselves with a particular European religious. System, but they do want to associate themselves with this. With the the life force of all beings and their connectivity to it.

Bron: Sure. Paganism continues to be a fraught term in the West after millennia of suppressing and viewing Pagan spiritualities as spiritually and politically dangerous. I remember Gary Snyder, the poet, the Pulitzer Prize winning poet who wrote this stunningly remarkable book, told him. Turtle Turtle island. In I think 1969 won the Pulitzer Prize for it, and he expressed, and I've written about. I've interviewed him decades ago and he. Is one of the foremost proponents of. Two things, one, an animus spirituality, but also. In a way, becoming indigenous, he and others were pioneering this term about Reinhabit station about. About and, which is really about coming to see yourself as part of this place and those of us who are more recent immigrants to North America in, in some ways that could be seen as akin to becoming indigenous again. Now this is, of course, in the contemporary politics and even back then. Controversial in some ways, but but nonetheless. US. It expresses a longing of people who are are recent arrivals in North America, not just along, but also a perception. You know that they have a spirituality of belonging to this place that they do belong to this place and they want. To. Respect this place and that in a. In a way that's different than the way we use the term indigenous today, but nonetheless the the there's a feeling of indigeneity that they themselves have. I call myself a native California. Well, that's. And and and my felt identity is very much rooted in in California. And. Indeed, right now, Jace Weaver, the Native American, the wonderful Native American scholar. He he wrote a he. Did a an excellent book on Mother Earth. And he's got. This fabulous study of Red Atlantic he's got he's just one of the most erudite people I know. And he's written an essay on indigeneity for the inaugural issue of a new journal. I think it's just called indigenous, and I'm going to be responding to that also, just kind of for this first issue and and just kind of wrestling with what's it like for people of European heritage to wrestle with this. Term indigenous. When, for many of us we have developed deep respect for Native American traditions, indigenous traditions elsewhere. But. We've also been. For quite some time, many of us, far from where many of our ancestors lived for many generations. Right. So. So this the the human longing for belonging is a part of this struggle. To understand how it is and where we where we fit in and where we belong. And it's not an easy given this.

What does it mean to go deeper and learn the spiritual path of 'Dark Green Religion

Unknown Speaker: The the the.

Bron: Pernicious colonial history that has transpired. It's really hard to sort this out. In a way that brings people together rather than divides them.

Sara: It is really hard and I I see people struggling greatly with language. For a good reason. And and. And I think that perhaps this leads to the well can be a good segue too, to acknowledge it in the in the many different places that you are looking at as the many different spaces that people are experiencing and expressing. Eco spirituality in various forms, sometimes with language they like and sometimes not. With language they like. UM. What you know in in so many religious traditions, there is a sense of ordination. There's a sense of baptism. There is a sense of inquiry into and training within a religious tradition, that thing that you were mentioning at the very beginning about, you know, the the Christian folks in Southern California are actually quite good at bringing people into the fold. And giving them a sense of belonging. And I'm wondering like what I I hear this question and many, many of the folks who I have. Have the privilege of working with of. What does it mean to go deeper into learning how to be learning the eco spiritual path and right? And I'm kind of curious like. What have you noticed in terms of people's process of of of entering into and developing leadership within a space that has so many different outlets and so many different aspects of so many different types of performance?

Bron: What a great question that is now. People are blundering their way toward trying to figure out forms of. Common ceremony. That can provide rights of passage and felt community for people involved who feel have these kinds of perceptions and feelings and are. Trying to figure out how to work together. So. When you think about ritual as something that is that evolves over time. Sometimes ritual work, sometimes it doesn't, and traditions that are long standing. They overtime they develop forms that tend. To work for. People right, and these newer forms of nature spirituality. That are kind. Of. Pan that are very broad that aren't rooted. For example in a specific. Indigenous society there hasn't been much time to figure out or develop those things, and there's no priesthood. I mean, part of the dark green religion argument is there's all this stuff going on and it's little recognized as something that is a global movement, something of a global spiritual movement. And I'll give you, I'll give you. I'll go back to the radical environmental stuff. As an example of the how difficult this is. So in that movement, which is fairly anarchistic. The de facto priests. Of the movement were the musicians and poets and they. They were. They had, they were fabulous. Power. They had powerful presentations and poetry, and they definitely did. What religion, religion and religious ceremonies do you know they at their best, they. Uh. Help to to evoke or reinforce ecstatic experiences. The values of the tradition bring people together. Really help bond people together in loving kindness. And in addition to that, there was this process which I suspect you've heard about called the Council of all being.

Unknown Speaker: This.

Bron: This this was developed foremost by Joanna Macy, a Buddhist scholar and former Sarvodaya Gandhi and Sarvodaya worker, and John C of Buddhist Buddhist deep ecologist from Australia.

Sara: Right.

Bron: And this involved a number of different processes that we probably don't have time to talk about. But. It basically involves the act of moral imagination, imagining yourself in the live form of another species or another natural entity, and then talking. As a Council of all beings together about the way they're being treated by human beings and then sometimes directly to kind of symbolically to human beings, expressing both fondness for them and anger at them for the way they're being treated. On earth, right? But overall this process. Which is usually a two or three day process. Certainly at its in my judgment. In its most powerful. Reinforces the spiritual and ethical. Perceptions and commitments of the people there dramatically bonds the people who go through this because this is together, which is a very emotional process for most of those who go through it. And at a time in these radical environmental meetings at the annual meetings, there would be one of these every time it would be an abbreviated one like a one day one, but it functioned. To create bonds that are very difficult to to create in the kind of depth that. These things do.

Unknown Speaker: Well.

Bron: One of my theories about. The the fact that the movement has, despite the fact that it continues and continues to do its activism, but it for all sorts of reasons. It's it's a a shell of what it formerly was. But one of those reasons is in my judgment, that it didn't know what to do with the powerful spiritualities that were emerging organically within. And because of its kind of anarchistic dimension, the anyone who emerged with unusual kind of spiritual charisma was subject to having their legs cut off from under them. And I've talked to musicians within them. They have to kind of downplay. You know that. That they understand that their that their role is to do that and and the movement. Didn't. Because of its fear of hierarchy, didn't do anything to really make sure that the the organic power spiritual power that had emerged within it. Was going to be repeated, you know, make sure you're you know.

Unknown Speaker: Right.

Bron: Spiritual leaders are at the big events and that kind of thing, so. I mean, it's understandable that suspicion of hierarchy.

Sara: Well, and suspicion of what is what is what is different types of power too, right? There's a one can have charisma without without having, and one can.

Bron: Yeah. So.

Sara: Have spiritual leadership. Without moving into hierarchy, but that's that takes a very particular that takes.

Bron: That's right.

Sara: A lot of thought about how to do that well.

Bron: It does, and I mean those who study religion know that religions are being invented all the time, right? They've been invented for a long time, most of. Them die. Out sociologist Max Faber. Insightfully noted that those that. Survive. Do so because a a process is developed to pass down the charisma in some way. The the charisma of the original leaders, and that can either be through a hereditary lineage. Like this, like

Shia Muslims or it can be through a kind of a a priesthood like the the the Sunni. Or maybe I have that reversed. I'll have to double check my notes. I don't want to.

Unknown Speaker: I.

Bron: Just want to acknowledge I might have misremembered that but but in any case.

Sara: Well, processes are developed and they're passed down.

Bron: In these kinds of new movements, yeah. And these kinds of movements. There's no, there's no established process for passing down the charisma, but there's. All sorts of. Eco spiritual productivity that's going on, that works for people.

Unknown Speaker: What? What, what?

Bron: But understandably, these movements are concerned about, you know, so often hierarchy is involved in plutocracy and environmental degradation, right? So. I don't know whether it's possible for. There to be. Uh. More self-conscious development of things processes that really work for people and also at the scale. That a a. Profound religious movement needs to to move even more. Rapidly, right, like.

Sara: Or even just just at the at the at the at the at the. To process. Of of you know, raising children, for example. So you know if someone has a new child and they want to raise that child in an eco spiritual community like it's very hard to know where to go. Like they could sign up for local places to go walking, you know, like. But that's not necessarily gonna have a ritual format to it, like. Where where are they gonna? Who are they gonna? What are they gonna search on Google to find? Like, the local? Like, even as simple as something as simple as child as bearing children. Like within this, within this spiritual context.

Language, Identity, Appropriation, and Practice

Bron: There are some. That's right. And I I, I, I went. I wrote a A10 year retrospective on the dark Green Religion book and in it I mentioned 2. That was the forward to the German edition and I published it elsewhere. But I mentioned 2 newly formed religious organizations that are attempting to do this. One is called giantism.

Sara: Yeah.

Bron: Hmm. It was founded by a former senior researcher at the World Watch Institute. And another was formed by an Australian. It's called Vita for religion, and these can be people can Google these and they're trying to create a kind of collective, you know, group. Both are what what I would call religious naturalists. In other words, they they're not promoting. Belief in non material divine beings, but they view the Earth itself as sacred and that ethical behavior involves both personal. Efforts to reduce one's consumption so that the rest of the living world can can live, but also political action to address the systemic insults to the to the biosphere. So there are examples of that. There's a Church of deep ecology. I don't think much. Has really come of that. But this impulse to. Uh. Rationalize the charisma again, to borrow a phrase from the

sociologist Max Faber. Is out there, but we're only seeing it at its most early nascent stages, and who knows whether any of any of these recent efforts will catch on as they're currently being developed.

Sara: And it's also interesting this is happening at the same time that so many kind of like in parallel, but perhaps also in conversation. That so many indigenous folks here in the Americas are deepening their own, revitalizing their own spiritual Earth, honoring traditions and including, but most particularly, revitalizing their indigenous languages. And I'm I'm kind of curious, like, you know how. How language and identity is going to shape things and and how these cross cultural conversations and occasional clashes are going to to shape both spaces as as, as as both groups.

Unknown Speaker: Group.

Sara: Are some some who are very deeply embedded in their spirituality and some who are not, who have lost many of their traditional practices due to colonization. How all these different groups will be able to? What processes they may develop both separately and together because I'm hearing from you, there's a need for greater processes. People are sometimes finding each other and sometimes not, and there is a need for uh for at the local level for community. Gathering spaces in which. Practices can can solidify and develop and nurture at relatively local levels across these different spectrums. Whether someone be in organization like you know the UN or whether they be a surfer or whether they be a Mountaineer or like or whether they you know like the many different roles that people are playing and where they're expressing. They're where they're expressing their ethos, often at offices and workplaces and on the front lines of protests. The need for. That kind of next step in a religious development.

Bron: Yeah. I think one of the encouraging things is that. Overtime, I think activists with settler backgrounds have. Many of them have become better at kind of recognizing, listening to their indigenous colleagues in respectful ways and engaging with them as as partners. And that doesn't mean pandering and agreeing with them all the time. But when people are in relationship. Authentic. Respectful relationship. They don't have to agree all the time. And I've written about the the delicate nature of this stuff. For example, in an article called Earth and Spirituality or cultural genocide, radical environmentalism's appropriation of Native American spirituality. Well, some of these practice some of these efforts to draw on Native American spiritualities, as you well know, have been very controversial. But when people come together in common cause.

Unknown Speaker: Who?

Bron: Have a sense of the sacredness of. Planet earth. It is not uncommon, and maybe it's even inevitable. That they would end up in shared ceremony in shared prayer. However, that might be understood, and indeed that is quite common. So it's. It's impossible to at the grassroots. To avoid. Cross cultural ceremony when it comes to particular campaigns, as we see it, you know, places like Standing Rock and so forth. One example of this is that lawyers in the Mount Graham campaign, the effort to prevent telescopes being built on Mount Graham, which was considered a desecration. By a number of native nations as well as by environmentalist force overlapping ideas

well. The attorneys, some of the Native American folks, viewed that struggle as a spiritual battle and wanted to purify by smudging off the attorneys before they went into the courts because they considered that to be a place of spiritual warfare.

There is going to be awkwardness, and it's okay.

Bron: Well, I don't know all those attorneys, but I know some of them are not religious. I mean, don't share the metaphysical. Beliefs of the Native Americans. But it would have been bad manners. Uh. To. Decline that or feel you know, to express awkwardness about that. So so sometimes. That that's what I mean when I say say that that that when 1 is in these contexts of concrete struggle. Whether 1 shares the metaphysical. And spiritual beliefs of 1's allies 1 still stands respectfully when someone wants to bring such practices forward. So these are, you know, these relationships, these cross cultural. Relationships that are so fraught with colonial baggage, they're difficult. But I think they are. They are improving in my judgment over time through mutual learning.

Sara: And practice. More and more people having more and more conversations and talking about them and and learning, yeah.

Unknown Speaker: Yeah.

Sara: It's and. You know, and I, I I like your use of the phrase awkwardness. I feel like it is almost inevitable as we grow different spiritual practices and we seek eco spiritual forms that there's going to be a lot of awkwardness. But one of the things that your work really beautifully demonstrates.

Unknown Speaker: Yeah.

Sara: Because you're you just are cataloguing it. With such a wide perspective is the extent to which with all with all the many obstacles and and awkwardness it is, it is happening and people are not alone in this process and that there is something here that is far more than a small group of individuals or a small group of thinkers. Writers, writers or artists or surfers or people working in NGOs, or people walking in the woods, it is a much, much bigger phenomena that we are in the probably hopefully very early stages of. Of in which we will we have a lot of work to do in it and learning together in it, but to really just you know to for everyone to take a moment to acknowledge that this landscape is big and is vastly changing and is very dynamic.

Bron: Indeed, you know, I sometimes ask people to ask themselves if you had been around when the great Axial Age prophets were teaching Jesus and so forth, and you had listened to a sermon on the mount or sat at the foot of. The the person we now call the Buddha. Would you have thought at the time seeing the people there? What would you have thought about this person? Would you have thought that, you know, I think in? 2000 or more years, a very large proportion of the human population. Around this, you know on Earth would be followers of this guru. My hunch is you probably wouldn't think that even if you thought this is really interesting and I'm drawn to it, this is

very cool. Now you think about a movement like this that that, I mean, if you look at. You know the scientific revolution. Galileo, Copernicus. Alexander von Humboldt, Darwin. Mir Leopold and so forth. It's all. It's only. A few generations really, since this decentering of humans as the center of the universe and the center of the evolutionary process, you know. It's it's really recently that we have been displaced. If we're paying attention from the center of all value and life, we're just a speck in the the universe on the only planet we know for sure that complex multicellular.

Unknown Speaker: There.

Bron: Organisms exist. That's a tremendous privilege to be in that one place in space where that's happening. And. What is? Difficult to see now and to think about is what's going to be the prevailing worldview in 500 years, 1000 years, or 2000 or 5000 years in our species. And one thing I'm sure about an increasing proportion of the human community is going to have. Spiritual. And moral sentiments along the lines of what I've talked about in the dark green religion book and that. Of course, the the world's predominant religions are not going to weigh any time soon. But I think as a proportion, if you set aside birth rates as a variable, as a proportion, as more and more people. Become aware of what we can know for sure through our own. Ability to observe as that is enhanced by our clever gadgets that more and more people are going to have a more naturalistic understanding of the human place on Earth, its responsibilities to it, and maybe how exceptionally special it is. And to such an extent that it's understandable how even secular people cannot but call it sacred.

Unknown Speaker: Hmm.

Sara: Thank you for that. I feel like he just went on a little journey of remembering and reincarnating with us. UM, so thank you so much, Ron. This has been a really beautiful conversation and thank you for your for your work. You know, for the decades of work and scholarship and thinking and bringing ideas and people and resources together to help us all see, see these things better and see these things differently.

Bron: Well, I very much appreciate that. That's kind of you to say that. And I very much enjoyed talking with you and and being with your listeners.

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Sara Jolena Wolcott
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A conversation with Bron Taylor

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