

Dark Green Religion: An Introduction

By Dave Dunn

“Respect for the interdependent web of all existence, of which we are a part.”

You should all recognize this as our 7th UU principle. When these words are spoken, the casual listener might, for a moment, join the final two words together and believe that we are “apart from” this interdependent web; that we, as humans, are somehow outside of this interdependent web.

To this casual listener, to someone new to UUism or to someone possibly raised in a mainstream religious community, this misinterpretation may occur more often than we realize. And this might make perfect sense in light of mainstream humanity’s (or our) perceived, or learned, relationship with the interdependent web. All of us have heard the passage from Genesis that says “...fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.” (Genesis 1:28;NIV)

I’ve asked myself, and now, I’ll ask you to ask yourself how you feel about your personal relationship to the interdependent web. Are you in relationship to it? Are you in relationship with it?

Sadly, I’ve found that my answers, and more importantly my actions, show that, despite being a UU and loving our 7th principle, I may actually be more “apart from” the interdependent web than “a part of” it; that despite my knowledge and understanding of our 7th principle, my actions may actually be more consistent with those of the casual listener who misinterprets the principle.

After thinking deeply upon this for some time, you may come to the same conclusion about yourself.

This may be a reasonable conclusion and a familiar occurrence. All of us have likely been raised in an anthropocentric environment; one where humanity is regarded as the most

significant, most important being of the universe.

Let's think about how this anthropocentric, human-centered, viewpoint taints our lives. Let's ask ourselves: Are we concerned when the air is polluted, the water fouled, the land stripped of its trees and natural vegetation? Why? Why are we concerned?

Let's think about this. Is it because we cannot breathe polluted air; that the mercury emitted from coal-fired power plants end up poisoning us? Is it because tainted water makes us sick and that access to clean water should be a human right? Is it because the beauty of the mountains is forever damaged and permanently scarred as a result of our temporal needs?

Maybe I'm not being fair here. These are leading questions. All of my follow-up questions here pertain as to how all these environmental problems affect us – how the devastation that results from air, water and land pollution affects our lives. There is nothing wrong with this concern for our well-being – we all want clean air, water and land. But the point I'm trying to make is this: That this perspective of environmentalism is anthropocentric. It is human centered. It's about me. It's about us. It's about us being more "apart from" the interdependent web than being "a part" of it. There's a difference.

British environmental scientist James Lovelock states, "Environmentalism has rarely been concerned with [the] natural proletariat, the underworld of nature; mostly it has been a radical political activity, and, not surprisingly, Rachel Carson's message [from her literary environmental wake-up call "Silent Spring"] was soon translated, at the dinner tables of the affluent suburbs and universities, from a threat to birds into a threat to people." (Bron Taylor, "Dark Green Religion", 37)

He also writes, "The humanist concept of sustainable development and the Christian concept of [environmental] stewardship are flawed by unconscious hubris. We have neither the knowledge nor the capacity to achieve them. We are no more qualified to be the stewards or developers of the Earth than are goats to be gardeners (Bron Taylor, "Dark Green Religion", 36)

To put things in perspective, allow me to introduce what is called the toilet paper timeline. For this illustration, the length of a typical 400 sheet toilet paper roll (approx. 150 ft. (144 sheets)) will represent the approximate 5 billion years of earth's history. When unwound, this roll will extend from this pulpit into the woods across the street. With this, each sheet represents 12.5 million years.

Let me list some significant events in the earth's history and where they take place in the timeline:

- 5 billion years ago: earth is formed, along with the other planets (square 1)
- 0.5 billion years ago: first land plants with inner vessels (square 359)
- 245 million years ago: Age of Dinosaurs begins (square 380)
- 65 million years ago: Age of Dinosaurs ends, with mass extinction of 70% of all living things (square 394)
- 3.5 million years ago: First proto-humans appear, in what is now Africa (last square, 3.1 cm from end)
- 100,000 years ago: First Homo sapiens appears (last square, 1 mm from end)
- 10,000 years ago: Recorded human history begins (last square, 0.1 mm from end)

By ripping off an entire sheet, we would be throwing away all recorded human history; all human history in fact...and then some....but it's all about us right? Naturalist John Muir satirically pokes fun at our human-centeredness when he writes, "Why does water drown its lord? Why do so many minerals poison her?"

Bron Taylor is a professor of Religion & Nature at the University of Florida. He states that the distinction between the viewpoint that humans need to be the stewards of the environment and the viewpoint that nature, in and of itself, is inherently sacred and valuable is the distinction between what is typically called Green Religion and what he calls Dark Green Religion.

Now there's nothing wrong with Green Religion. Environmentally, it's likely where I'm at. It may be where you're at as well. By understanding this however, we need to realize that this may be

a very human-centered approach to “going green;” an approach that may ultimately be ineffective and insignificant.

In his book, “Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future” Mr. Taylor defines Dark Green Religion as “religion that considers nature to be sacred, imbued with intrinsic value, and worthy of reverent care.... [and he uses the term] “dark” not only to emphasize the depth of its consideration for nature (a deep shade of green concern) but also to suggest that such religion may have a shadow side – it might mislead and deceive; it could even precipitate or exacerbate violence (Bron Taylor, “Dark Green Religion”, ix).”

In addition, Mr. Taylor describes some of the specific characteristics of Dark Green Religion which include (Bron Taylor, “Dark Green Religion”, 13):

- a deep sense of belonging to and connectedness in nature
- bio or ecocentric, rather than anthropocentric, view – focusing on the biosphere or ecosphere as a whole where all species have intrinsic value
- a feeling of kinship with the rest of life based on a Darwinian understanding that all forms of life have evolved from a common ancestor and are therefore related
- metaphysics of interconnectedness and interdependence often, but not always, based upon biological and physical sciences...and most importantly...
- feelings of humility and a corresponding critique of human moral superiority

Earlier I quoted a popular passage from Genesis. I would also like to present a viewpoint from the opposing side by citing some less well-known passages, also in the Bible, that might be interpreted as Green or even Dark Green:

“You shall not defile the land in which you live, in which I also dwell....(Numbers 35:34, NRSV).”

“But ask the animals, and they will teach you; the birds of the air, and they will tell you; ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you; and the fish of the sea will declare to you (Job 12:7-8, NRSV).”

Interestingly, this last passage reveals an animistic perspective toward the natural world that many proponents of Dark Green Religion relate to in one form or another. Animism can be basically described as an idea or way of perceiving other non-human beings or entities as having their own integrity, way of being; and possibly intelligence.

Julia Butterfly Hill states: “The first time I entered into a redwood forest...I dropped to my knees and began crying because the spirit of the forest just gripped me (Bron Taylor, “Dark Green Religion”, 94).”

These were the words of Julia Butterfly Hill, the activist who camped for over two years in a giant redwood to prevent it and its neighbors from being cut down and logged.

Paul Watson writes: “The whale wavered and towered motionless above us. I looked up...into a massive eye the size of my fist – an eye that reflected back intelligence, an eye that spoke wordlessly of compassion, an eye that communicated that this whale could discriminate and understand what we had tried to do.... Ever so slowly, the whale fell back into the sea. As I watched the massive head sink beneath the swells, the flicker of life extinguished in the whale’s eye....On that day, I knew emotionally and spiritually that my allegiance lay with the whales first and foremost over the interest of those humans who would kill them (Bron Taylor, “Dark Green Religion”, 98).”

These were the words Paul Watson used to describe his attempt to interfere with the activities of a Russian whaling vessel in 1975. He was an early member of Greenpeace and eventual Sierra Club board member. As a result of his environmental “monkeywrenching” and sabotage, where he actively participated efforts to board, scuttle and disable whaling ships, he is currently a wanted fugitive in Norway, Costa Rica and Japan.

These are some examples of Dark Green Religion’s animistic perspectives where characteristics of personhood or sense of being is attributed to non-human entities.

Dark Green Religion can take a wide variety of forms – from a peaceful relationship with the

natural surroundings to radical environmentalism, to pantheism and forms of paganism. (Remember, Paganism is a broad category of religious viewpoints that more often than not, deals with one's relationship to the natural world, rather than the supernatural world.)

I also believe that most UUs understand that we, as humans, are not the be all and end all. We can comprehend and appreciate bio or ecocentric philosophy but we may actually be anthropocentric in practice. Dark Green Religion demands humility; sometimes I think it requires more humility than we are capable of. Despite this, I believe we have seeds of Dark Green Religion are within us and in light of our activist callings, we also have within us the seeds of its shadow side.

This is merely an introduction to Dark Green Religion. I am only scratching the surface here and I may not be able to adequately describe the many forms and nuances of it. Most UUs "get" interconnectedness and interdependence; many of us approach nature with reverence. We appreciate the beauty of freshly fallen snow on a winter's evening or a glistening, dew-soaked field of green grass on a summer's morning, or perhaps the beauty of Venus and Jupiter at twilight.

I will leave you with two quotes, one by Emerson & one by naturalist John Burroughs, two prophetic voices to that which became Dark Green Religion.

Emerson writes, "In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall me in life, - no disgrace, no calamity... which nature cannot repair. Standing on the bare ground, my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space, all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God (Bron Taylor; Dark Green Religion, 49)."

Burroughs writes, "When we come to see that the celestial and the terrestrial are one, that time and eternity are one, that mind and matter are one, that death and life are one, that there is and can be nothing not inherent in Nature, then we no longer look for or expect a far-off, unknown God (Bron Taylor; Dark Green Religion, 59)."

