



A Conference at the Leibniz-Institute of European History
Mainz, Germany 25-27 April 2024
co-organized by Bernhard Gissibl (IEG Mainz),
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& Bron Taylor (University of Florida)

The conference seeks to convene scholars interested in the emergence, spread, dangers, and future prospects of green spiritualities in European societies since the 18th century, in which nature is considered sacred and the living world due reverent care.

Interested scholars are invited to submit, by **15 October 2023**, abstracts of between 500 and 800 words, a list of key, relevant references, and a short CV, to gissibl@ieg-mainz.de and bron@ufl.edu. Authors of accepted papers will be informed by 1 November 2023. We anticipate being able to cover on-site expenses as well as modest funds toward travel expenses for those invited to participate. We expect participants to subsequently develop their papers into full-length articles with the goal of contributing to a special issue of a scholarly journal and/or edited book arising from the conference.

Précis

Many cultures across the world inherit religious traditions according to which nature is considered in some sense holy or sacred. With the rise of industrialization from the late 18th century, and especially in the face of its adverse impacts, such traditions of earth-honoring have been recuperated and re-imagined, whilst new forms of ecospirituality, often informed by the natural sciences, have been emerging. In *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future* (University of California Press 2010), US-American religious studies scholar Bron Taylor provocatively dubbed certain nature-based spiritualities “dark green religion.” Those who have affinity with such spiritualities typically stress ecological interdependence, have deep feelings of belonging and connection to nature, and share beliefs that the biosphere is a sacred, Gaia-like superorganism. Those with such worldviews generally draw on evolutionary and ecological understandings, and stress kinship with non-

human organisms. These spiritualities also often have animistic dimensions, in which communication with non-human organisms is thought possible. Consequently, these 'otherkind' are considered to have intrinsic value and they should be accorded respect, if not also reverence.

As Taylor has shown, such spiritualities have been spreading globally during the twentieth century, and they are exercising increasing political and cultural influence, as evidenced, for example, in a wealth of films, art and science museums and exhibitions, popular culture productions, as well as in the motivations of social movements actors, and the quest for laws that attribute legal rights to nature. Notwithstanding the actual or purported 'greening' of the major world religions over recent decades, significant environmental mobilization might, therefore, arise from those who are finding meaningful worldviews and spiritual inspiration in practices or attitudes that cohere with or are directly rooted in the sciences.

Through this work, Taylor made visible some of the most important trajectories and the pervasiveness of dark green thinking and spiritualities, thereby opening up a vast field of analysis that has the potential to transform the ways in which we understand both environmentalism and religion. Asking how the scientific engagement with nature has evoked feelings of awe, connectedness, wonder, and reverence, examining the ways that environmentalists, consciously and unconsciously, have appropriated elements of Christian and other religions, and exploring the religious dimensions of environmentalism, allows us to question inherited understandings of 'science' and 'belief', as well as the supposed boundary between the 'religious' and the 'secular'. The conference deliberately centres on European societies, along with the complicated transnational entanglements and colonial inheritances entailed in the emergence of such spiritualities.

Specifically and especially (but not exclusively) we seek presentations that illuminate:

- The historical role of institutionalized religions, particularly the Christian confessions, upon the forms, varieties, the cultural purchase of nature spiritualities that emerged at different times in different European societies. For example, did nature spiritualities and notions of a sacralized nature emerge differently in societies imprinted historically by Catholicism, Protestantism or Orthodox Christianity? To what extent have European Christian and other institutionalized religious communities (e.g. Jewish and Islamic), or individuals or fractions within them, been incorporating 'dark green' spiritualities and values into their worldviews and practices?
- The ways European thinkers and movements have influenced, and been influenced by, dark green thinkers and movements from other regions; the ways competing and changing perceptions about indigenous peoples, such as from regarding such societies negatively as "primitive", to positively as authentic and "closer to nature," shaped European perceptions of dark green spiritualities. Yet more specifically, how have indigenous cosmologies and ontologies been perceived, and how have they rivalled or merged with ideas of nature derived from Western sciences? How far have such encounters stimulated the quest for European indigeneity and forms of neo-paganism that themselves have served as sources for nature spiritualities?

- Contestations over, if not ambivalence and hostility toward, nature spiritualities that critics argue are politically or spiritually dangerous. Some critics, e.g., aver that nature spiritualities lead their devotees to reject true religion while some also fear they intend to establish a leftist, authoritarian world government; still others contend that they have originated in and promote right-wing authoritarianism, including nationalist, and racialized ideologies of rootedness and belonging (“blood and soil”). Where, and in what form, are earlier forms of far-right nature spirituality re-emerging in the face of ecological crisis in Europe?
- Dark green religion in the environmental milieu, including in environmental movements (e.g. Extinction Rebellion, climate action, bioregional, permaculture, and regenerative agriculture movements); in European conservationist practices, such as those that take place at National Parks, Biosphere Reserves, World Heritage sites, and through ‘rewilding’ initiatives in Europe and beyond (e.g., the colonial echoes in global conservation initiatives); and those taking place under the auspices of the European Union or United Nations and their environment-focused branches.
- Analyses of nature spiritualities in practice, as expressed, evoked or reinforced e.g. in gardening, hiking, mountaineering or surfing, or in explicitly meditative and ritual practices, such as those taking place during wilderness education seminars, activist trainings, or forest bathing (shinrin yoku), a practice that originated in Japan and is spreading in Europe. How are such ecospiritual practices being taken up, and commercialized, within the growing ‘nature and wellbeing’ movement?
- The diverse ways museum curators, artists, documentary and cinematic filmmakers, poets and writers, and those who produce sermons, travelogues, treatises, leaflets, pamphlets, and other forms movement literature, express and promote dark green spiritualities.
- Quantitative (survey-based) and/or qualitative research, exploring the proportions of Europeans whose worldviews, values, and practices have affinity with dark green spiritualities, or are repelled by them.