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Exploring Religion, Nature and Culture—
Introducing the *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture*

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Abstract

A wide-ranging, interdisciplinary, taboo-free inquiry is essential to engage the central question animating this new journal: *What are the relationships among human beings, their diverse religions, and the earth’s living systems?* Likewise, it is critical that we wrestle with the terms that constitute the journal’s title—religion, nature and culture—given their diverse and contested meanings. I argue that the proper approach for this new journal is to provide habitat for all reasoned scholarly debate surrounding these terms and the relationships among them. Illustrating this argument by focusing especially on the term religion, I maintain that it is much more important for this journal to entertain interesting hypotheses about people and their environments than it is to resolve disagreements about the precise meaning, analytical value, or boundaries of phenomena that would be understood as religion by some but not all observers.

*What are the Relationships among Human Beings, their Diverse Religions and the Earth’s Living Systems?*

This is the question that introduced the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature* (Taylor 2005). The *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* will be a venue for the kind of critical, interdisciplinary inquiry that was previously engaged in that encyclopedia. This kind of inquiry has also helped to spark the founding of the International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture which has agreed to take on the *JSRNC* as its official journal.¹

¹. See www.religionandnature.com for more details about the encyclopedia, society and journal.
KEYNOTE ADDRESS


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This paper is based on a keynote presentation at the inaugural conference of the International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture, held at the University of Florida, Gainesville, 6–9 April 2006.

Abstract

This paper argues for the existence of a universal and genetically-encoded human yearning to connect and unite with nature or, writ large, creation. In human society, this yearning is often revealed through the vehicles of science and religion. This is a weak genetic tendency, however, that through the human genius of culture and free will produces widely different versions of science and religion. Nevertheless, this yearning being an expression of biology and the product of human evolution is ultimately bound by its functional and adaptive expression. This perspective implies that not all individual and cultural constructions of science and religion are equally legitimate, some proving dysfunctional and destructive over time. This perspective also advances an ethic for the care and conservation of nature based on a broad understanding of human self-interest.

This paper proceeds in four stages. The first part asserts a basic, universal, and genetically-encoded yearning of humanity through the vehicles of science and religion to connect and unite with nature or, writ large, creation. The second part addresses the reality of varying individual and cultural constructions of this yearning, the genius of humanity being our ability to exercise free will in response to weak genetic tendencies that permit the construction of widely different versions of science and religion. Still, I will argue this yearning is a universal expression of our biology, the product of human evolution and, thus, this variability is ultimately bound by its functional expression. By implication, this
Finding Data:
Some Reflections on Ontologies and Normativities

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Abstract
The very name of the new International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture is a programmatic challenge. It brings together three concepts that are notoriously difficult to grasp. Instead of providing ultimate definitions for these concepts, this article argues that the object of scrutiny in academic research is not nature as such, but the cultural processes that produce certain ideas about nature as nature. Thus, ontological statements are our data; they are not part of our argument. The article argues for a contextualization and historicization of concepts of nature and exemplifies this with reference to a selection of topics that lend themselves to critical analysis. Ontologies and normativities, implicitly or explicitly, are powerful elements of any nature discourse. They constitute conflicting mindsets that determine the way people respond to their environment. In academic analysis, these mindsets are helpful tools for structuring historical processes and discursive formations, the latter including human action and societal realities. Mindsets are not only ways of thinking; they are inextricably bound to the ‘appropriation of nature’ that scholarly analysis has to decode and contextualize. Two culturally influential concepts of nature are used as an example of these processes.

Religion, Nature and Culture

The very name of the new International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture is a programmatic challenge. It brings together three concepts that are notoriously difficult to grasp. In the case of ‘religion’ one can say that we will never arrive at a commonly accepted definition; because the constructive element is an inherent part of any definition, any categorization of religion has to reflect on its underlying bias. ‘Culture’, then, is just as difficult to conceptualize. Often, the idea of culture
Religion, Nature and Culture: Theorizing the Field

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Abstract

The inaugural conference of the International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture demonstrated several tensions at play within the emerging field of ‘religion, nature and culture’. Each of these three terms is a modern western folk construct, not a universal category. The place of ‘culture’ within this trinity is especially unclear, and its use risks essentializing a category that cultural anthropologists have themselves begun to question. With a nod to the burgeoning literature on ‘social nature’, this article thinks through the relationship between these three terms. It argues that their combination be thought of not as an object or field of study for the Society, but as an ‘invocation’ by which the Society can cultivate international and interdisciplinary discussion on a confluence of timely concerns.

One of the virtues of being trained as an interdisciplinarian is that rather than simply waking up one day and realizing I had fallen off the map of whatever discipline I had started in, interdisciplinary training required developing the skill of working with and understanding the limitations of maps. That is, it made it necessary, for survival’s sake, to learn how to examine disciplinary maps closely, comparing them and working one’s way between them, and exploring the disjunctions between one map and another and between the maps and the territories they ostensibly referred to.

To give some personal grounding to these comments, both of my graduate degrees came from an Environmental Studies program that had been formed by a quirky assemblage of geographers, urban planners, environmental philosophers, organizational managers, and natural scientists back in 1970, during the heyday of the first environmental revolution (at York University in Toronto). My master’s and doctoral
Opportunity, Challenge and a Definition of Religion

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Abstract

In assembling an array of disciplines to study religion, nature and culture, the International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture presents an opportunity for progress through cross-fertilization and synthesis. In so doing, the Society also challenges us to communicate with each other despite our differing assumptions. Such communication requires, first, that we explicitly define our terms, not least the three terms central to the society’s name. Ideally, our definitions will be at once substantive, applicable cross-culturally, and explicitly embedded in theory. Fortunately, current scholarship makes such definitions appear possible. In the case of the term religion, for example, cognitive science supports defining it, broadly yet substantively, as a system of thought and action for interpreting and influencing the world, built on anthropomorphic premises. Anthropomorphism, in turn, may be theorized as the inevitable consequence of a strategy of perception for an ambiguous world: namely, guess first at what matters most. Similarly broad, substantive definitions appear possible for nature and culture as well.

Both the opportunity and the challenge of the ISSRNC stem largely from the breadth of our enterprise. We represent diverse disciplines, assembled to consider the relations among three important and general terms—nature, culture, religion—each of which is contested. Our opportunity is to achieve vigor through cross-fertilization, and our challenge is not to talk past each other.

The challenge is especially sharp because each of the three terms in question, though deceptively familiar, is controversial. Despite knowing of the controversies, we assume that the meanings of these terms are clearer than they really are. Hence if we do not address terminology early and often, then the very outlines of our enterprise will remain unclear. While explicit consideration of our terms may not produce agreement on
Reflections on Animal Emotions and Beastly Virtues: 
Appreciating, Honoring and Respecting 
the Public Passions of Animals

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Abstract
Interdisciplinary research into animal behavior, cognition, and emotions can illuminate important questions of meaning, including those that are often discussed in religious works. Such questions include who we are in the grand scheme of things, the role science plays in our understanding of the world, and what it means to ‘know’ something. I argue that cognitive ethology (the study of animal minds), properly understood and carefully applied, can integrate both anecdotes and anthropomorphism, and reliably inform studies of animal behavior. Moreover, cognitive ethology can be viewed as the unifying science for understanding the subjective, emotional, empathic, and moral lives of animals, because it is essential to know what animals do, think, and feel as they go about their daily routines in relationship to the others with whom they interact. The more we come to understand other animals the more we will appreciate them and ourselves.

A Brief Overview

Interdisciplinary collaboration is essential for coming to terms with various aspects of animal behavior, animal cognition, and the nature of animal emotions. We have much to learn from other animals concerning a set of ‘big’ questions, including who we are in the grand scheme of things, the role science (‘science sense’) plays in our understanding of the world in which we live, what it means to ‘know’ something, what the variety of ways of knowing are and how they compare to what we call ‘science’, the use of anecdotes and anthropomorphism to inform studies of animal behavior, whether other minds are really all that private and inaccessible, whether a nonhuman animal can be called a person, and
Religious Environmentalism:
What it is, Where it’s Heading and
Why We Should be Going in the Same Direction*

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Abstract
My topic is the important and unprecedented phenomenon of religious environmentalism. In its most compressed form my message is simple: religious environmentalism is good for environmentalism, good for religion, and good for the earth community. I will also hazard a few thoughts on the role scholars can play in this movement.

I
To begin, religious environmentalism offers the broader, secular environmental community a language in which to express the depth of our relationship to the rest of the natural world and the gravity of the disastrous policies and misguided values which have led to damage already done. When we read, for instance, that the placental blood of newborns contains 287 toxic chemicals, it will not do simply to say that this is unhealthy, inconvenient, or a damn shame (see Environmental Working Group 2005). The magnitude of the violation of what should be a human being’s safest place calls forth a more powerful, more visceral, response. We want, I believe, to make it clear that this kind of desecration is absolutely intolerable. In this context most people would find even a language of rights inadequate to the severity of the problem, and one of ‘consumer preferences’ patently absurd. Thus we might turn to Bartholomew, head

* This essay is based on a panel presentation from the first meeting of the International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture. It benefited from criticism and encouragement from Bron Taylor and anonymous reviewers.
1. For an elaboration of the ideas presented here, see Gottlieb 2006. For excerpts from a wide range of source material, see Gottlieb (ed.) 2004, 2006.
Indigenous Moral Philosophies and Ontologies and their Implications for Sustainable Development*

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Abstract

This paper draws on the theoretical reflections of two well-known ethnologists on indigenous Amazonian ontologies and moral philosophies, as well as my own field experience among an Amazonian native people, the Baniwa, in order to pose critical questions regarding the process of implementing ‘sustainable development’ projects. New ethnological perspectives challenge modernist thinking to de-colonize the ways in which scholars conceive of indigenous Amazonian cosmologies particularly with regard to such notions as ‘spirit’, ‘egalitarianism’, and ‘power’. The dramatic case of a Baniwa leader illustrates the heuristic value of taking Baniwa moral philosophy and cosmological framework seriously prior to and during the implementation of a recent artwork development project. The reflections of a Baniwa intellectual reinforce the pressing need to rethink current developmentalist thinking that ignores these frameworks.

In these reflections, I would like to emphasize the importance of taking seriously indigenous moral philosophies, ontologies of spirit, and spirit-human relations in the process of conceptualizing and implementing what have been called sustainable development projects. I shall focus specifically on the Amazon, where I have done most of my research over

* My work on issues of ‘development’ and indigenous rights, indigenous cosmologies, moral philosophies, and religious traditions spans the past three decades. I have included a few of my publications in the bibliography. As an anthropologist with years of experience in the Amazon region of Brazil, I realize that many of the concepts and debates with which ethnologists are so familiar may not be to other audiences. Thus, I have sought in the course of this article to justify my claims to the extent possible given space restrictions, in the hopes that further dialogues can be constructed.
Abstract

This paper considers the need for interdisciplinary study in the fields of religion, nature and culture, and the role of western scholarship in contributing to the current crises facing human/nature relations. In identifying the common fundamental theme that pervades much of the literature on the current environmental crisis, that of our mental separation from the kosmos (as in the ancient Greek sense) I consider the need to explore the role of scholars in being able to lead us back into a sense of unity with it. In suggesting ways through which this could come about, I explore my own research experiences and how they changed my basic worldview. I then consider how some of these experiences have challenged my understanding of the relationship between humans, nature and spirit.

Introduction—The Need for Interdisciplinary Enquiry

The International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture, launched at the inaugural conference held in Gainesville, Florida, in April 2006, is commendably seeking a platform for interdisciplinary discussion on ideas concerning the relationship between religion, nature and culture. The naming of the Society and Journal requires some consideration. The sequence in the title: ‘religion, nature and culture’, is instructive as it suggests a priority in our need to understand the role that religion in particular, and culture more generally, has had in shaping human/nature relations. A corollary concern is how nature/environment has shaped or influenced religion and culture, notwithstanding the failure of various environmental deterministic models to establish a direct causal relation (Ellen 1982; Herzfeld 2001; Milton 1996, 1997). The definitional problems that beset all these terms, and the related critique on the prevailing assumptions of nature/culture dualism (Descola and Pálsson 1996; Milton 1997) must be acknowledged, and no doubt will be
What if Religions had Ecologies?
The Case for Reinhabiting Religious Studies

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Abstract

Meaningful connections need to be forged between the literary realm of ecocriticism and religious studies, and more attention needs to be paid to the natural history of the physical environments that religious communities inhabit and to how those communities shape and are in turn shaped by those environments. When physical environments are considered as integral parts of academic religious inquiry and no longer rendered invisible or relegated to mere ‘backdrops’ for the larger human drama, scholars will be able to provide a more nuanced sense of religion as it is truly lived in context.

In her frequently quoted Presidential Address to the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, Meredith McGuire asked an obvious, and yet not-so-obvious, question that spurred new critical directions in research within the field of religious studies. She asked, ‘What if people—the subjects of our research and theorizing—had material bodies?’ McGuire identified the social scientific conceptions of research subjects in the study of religion as being ‘particularly disembodied’. Whether analyzing individual believers or religious organizers or religious ideas, McGuire argued that ‘the relationship of humans to their own bodies and to the bodies of others is remote or altogether absent from most of our work’. ‘How might our understanding of religion be different’, she wondered out loud to an audience of several hundred scholars, ‘if we proceeded as though the people involved had bodies?’ (McGuire 1990: 283).

Almost two decades later, scholars of religion need to be asking themselves another obvious, but not-so-obvious, question. A key question for those who explore the religious dimensions of human behavior and experience must be: ‘What if people—the subjects of our research and