
**Exploring Religion, Nature, and Culture (continued):
The Growing Field, Society, and Journal**

This volume marks the passage of some important milestones for the *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* (the JSRNC) and the scholarly association affiliated with it, the International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture (the ISSRNC). Emerging from organizational meetings held in 2005, which led to its first International Meeting in April 2006 and the publication of the first issue of this journal in early 2007, this young, democratically governed society has already established an impressive record. It has now hosted four international conferences (in the USA, Mexico, the Netherlands, and Australia), and our journal continues to publish cutting-edge, field-building work, involving interdisciplinary analysis of the complex relationships between the affective, religious, and spiritual aspects of human experience within the diverse environments they inhabit. In the years since its founding in 2006, the ISSRNC has welcomed new elected officials and the JSRNC has significantly expanded its volunteer staff. In the midst of this growth it is important to take time to reflect upon our history, to give credit to at least some of those who have worked to make this journal and society a success, and to consider our goals as we progress into this second decade of the twenty-first century.

We begin this issue, therefore, with a brief summary of our fourth conference for those who may not have been able to attend. We then provide a history of the ISSRNC and its affiliated journal, all of which may be especially interesting for those who are new to our scholarly endeavors.

*'Living on the Edge':
The Fourth International Conference of the ISSRNC*

On December 19, 2010, the International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture concluded its Fourth International Conference at the University of Western Australia. Set in the dynamic, multi-cultural city of Perth, with the theme 'Living on the Edge', conference

participants examined 'the edge', in physical, cognitive, symbolic, and concrete terms, 'as a place of transition and transformation, a launching place for change and action to counter ecological degradation and regenerate communities and ecosystems'.¹ The conference brought together international scholars and indigenous representatives from Australia. Keeping with traditions set in previous conferences, the Fourth International Conference offered intriguing keynote addresses from a diverse group of scholars, including from Australia David Tacey and Freya Mathews (La Trobe University), Clive Hamilton (Australian National University), Anne Boyd (University of Sydney), and Robert Reece (Murdoch University), as well as Mary Zeiss Stange (Skidmore College, USA), and Jan Boersema (Free University of Amsterdam). (*JSRNC* readers can expect many of these and other fascinating presentations from the conference to appear in future issues.)

Of course, the society has always depended upon the excellent, and even heroic, leadership and commitment of our volunteers, and our Australian conference would not have been possible without the tireless work of Conference Director Yamini Narayanan (La Trobe University). As Sylvie Shaw explained in her initial report to society members on the meeting, Dr Narayanan's work

was the heart of the conference. Her organization and care enabled a harmonious melding of delegates' ideas, discussions and workshops, at once congenial and relaxed, but also at the cutting edge of scholarly and transdisciplinary discourse. She orchestrated a stimulating range of thought, theory, practical endeavour and social connections which resonated among all participants.²

We congratulate Dr Narayanan for the major accomplishment this fourth conference represented, introducing many new scholars from Oceania and Asia to the society, and significantly increasing the ISSRNC's international representation. We also thank all who participated in the conference. As did our earlier conferences, 'Living on the Edge' blurred disciplinary boundaries and inspired the formation of new international scholarly networks that will continue to generate novel, critical analysis of the religion/nature/culture nexus.

1. This quotation is from the final conference program, which is available online: http://www.religionandnature.com/society/pdf/ISSRNC_conference_programme_Australia2010.pdf.

2. Sylvie Shaw, 'Initial Report: "Living on the Edge" the Fourth International Conference of the ISSRNC'. Online: <http://www.religionandnature.com/society/conferences.htm>.

The Genesis and Development of the ISSRNC and the JSRNC

While the idea of a scholarly association devoted to the critical study of affective and spiritual dimensions of nature–human relations had been discussed in the late 1990s during the brainstorming that led to the publication of *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature* (Taylor 2005b), the need for such a society was all the more clear by the time this international encyclopedia project was moving into production.³ Clearly, there was a scholarly community emerging that wanted to deepen this field, and a habitat and regular publishing venue were needed to continue the conversations.

Fortuitously, a graduate program had recently formed at the University of Florida with an emphasis in religion and nature, and soon afterward Bron Taylor and the graduate students drawn to this program (especially Gavin Van Horn, Samuel Snyder, Lucas Johnston, Bridgette O'Brien, Joseph Witt, Eleanor Finnegan, Amanda Holmes, and Michael Lemons) had the critical mass needed to facilitate the vision. Also centrally involved in shaping the vision from the first planning meetings were anthropologist Kristina Tiedje (Université Lyon 2, France), scholar of religion Kocku von Stuckrad (at that time at the University of Amsterdam), and ethnobiologist J. Richard 'Rick' Stepp (University of Florida, USA). The watershed meeting in the formation of the society occurred in September 2005 at Cocoa Beach, Florida. With Hurricane Ophelia spinning 80 miles offshore, long discussions, interspersed with adventures along the beach and, for some, in the turbulent ocean, led to important decisions that would soon bring the society to life. Attendees refined a draft of society by-laws prepared by Taylor and Laura Hobgood-Oster (Southwestern University, USA), agreed on a mission statement, worked up an administrative structure, and empowered Taylor and the religion and nature graduate students at the University of Florida to explore the feasibility of holding an inaugural conference for the society.⁴ Though much progress was made at this initial meeting, the

3. The idea for the encyclopedia came from Jeffrey Kaplan (University of Wisconsin, Oshkosh, USA), who suggested to Taylor that he do something like it, and then became deeply involved in the project himself, contributing significantly to its quality, reading the majority of the submissions to it, and providing critically important ideas for entries and leads to scholars. Kaplan, a historian of religion, was credited as its Consulting Editor.

4. The society's by-laws, mission statement, and Boards of Directors and Advisors are available at the society's website: <http://www.religionandnature.com/society/index.htm>. For more information on the Cocoa Beach meeting, including the

ISSRNC did not, like Aphrodite, spring fully grown from Ophelia-spun sea foam. The discussions continued during additional meetings held that fall at the American Anthropological Association (organized by Tiedje) and at Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania (orchestrated by theologian Mark Wallace), which was scheduled immediately before the nearby annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion. Within a few short months, this exciting, interdisciplinary project was fully underway.⁵

As Taylor put it in his introduction to the first issue of this journal, the shared vision was to create 'scholarly habitat for the widest possible range of scholarly approaches to understanding the relationships among what we variously understand to be the natural and religious dimensions of human life and culture' (2007: 6). While the ISSRNC was not the only scholarly initiative focusing on the religion and nature intersection, it was unprecedented in its vision of creating an international, interdisciplinary, and democratically governed scholarly association. The new association would not only draw on the humanities but also on the natural and social sciences, while nurturing 'taboo-free inquiry zones, where no question is illicit and no approach or argument is precluded by facile hopes or *a priori* assumptions' (Taylor 2007: 7-8). While many of the scholars drawn to the society have been and are personally and politically engaged in environmental matters, a decision was made during the planning meetings that the society itself would not be involved in political or environmental advocacy; rather, the aim was to ensure that the society would be welcoming to scholars with all points of view: good scholarship depends on good contrarians! The society has also been careful to be welcoming to individuals who consider themselves to be religious in some way as well as those who do not. This commitment is even integrated into the JSRNC's writer's guidelines.⁶ In short, without an *officially* non-partisan approach to political and religious matters, we could not promise the fullest range of debate about either. This commitment distinguishes the ISSRNC from many organizations that

names of all in attendance, see online: <http://www.religionandnature.com/society/news/newsletter1-1.pdf>.

5. See the report written by two of the scholars who attended the Cocoa Beach meeting and who have been actively involved subsequently, Whitney Bauman and Richard Bohannon, in *Religion and Nature News*, online: <http://www.religionandnature.com/society/news/newsletter1-1.pdf>.

6. For these guidelines and other journal information, including how to submit scholarly work or special issue proposals, see online: <http://www.religionandnature.com/society/index.htm>.

are interested in religion and nature in some way, including some scholarly ones.⁷

With this international and interdisciplinary vision in mind, the ISSRNC's inaugural conference followed shortly thereafter, in April 2006. With 'Exploring Religion, Nature and Culture' as a theme, conference participants questioned and refined the methodologies and approaches related to the interdisciplinary study of religion, nature, and culture.⁸ Held at the University of Florida in Gainesville, the inaugural conference drew nearly 200 individuals from over two dozen countries around the world. Highlights included a panel of distinguished scholars addressing the emerging religion and nature field, focusing both on its insights to date and unexplored terrain. These reflections were published in the first two issues of the *JSRNC*. These issues included the keynote addresses by biologist Stephen Kellert from Yale University (who with E.O. Wilson advanced the biophilia hypothesis), environmental historian Carolyn Merchant from the University of California (well known for her critiques of reductionistic science and the role of religion in it), ethologist Marc Bekoff (who has explored the affective and moral dimensions of animal consciousness), and Kocku von Stuckrad (a prominent religion scholar whose work intersects regularly with religion and nature themes, and who was to become the second ISSRNC President).⁹ In addition to the University of Florida students already mentioned who put in untold hours to make this conference possible, Lucas Johnston (who became the Interim Executive Director of the ISSRNC during the ramp up to the inaugural event), Conference Chair Laura Hobgood-Oster, and Taylor (who raised funds that enabled many international scholars to attend), deserve special recognition.¹⁰ In September 2006, with elections and a vote approving its bylaws, the society was officially established, with Taylor assuming a three year term as President, von Stuckrad being elected as President-Elect (his term as President began in 2009), Tiedje becoming Secretary, and Hobgood-Oster taking on the Treasurer responsibilities. They and the rest of the Board of Directors appointed Terry Terhaar, another scholar who contributed significantly to the conference planning but who also had long-term experience working in non-governmental organizations, as Executive Director. Shortly thereafter,

7. Bron Taylor addressed the issues of interdisciplinarity and objectivity in the study of religion and nature relationships in 'Religious Studies and Environmental Concern' (2005a).

8. The conference program and abstract booklet is available online: <http://www.religionandnature.com/society/pdf/Program.pdf>.

9. Many of these presentations were published in issues 1.1 and 1.3 of the *JSRNC*.

10. See Wright and Gottlieb 2006.

the society received its official notification that it had been approved as a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization, exempting donations to it from taxation under U.S. tax laws.

The excitement and momentum of this first conference was carried rapidly forward through the hard work of conference co-directors Kristina Tiedje and Anuschka van't Hooft (Universidad Autónoma de San Luis Potosi, Mexico), who with the support of numerous volunteers from the National Autonomous University of Mexico, organized the society's Second International Conference in Morelia, Mexico, in January 2008.¹¹ Titled 'The Re-Enchantment of Nature across Disciplines: Critical Intersections of Science, Ethics, and Metaphysics', this conference continued the broadly interdisciplinary inquiry defined by the ISSRNC's mission statement. Over 150 people from around the world attended the conference, making it another resounding success. Along with numerous paper presentations and an awe-inspiring excursion to the nearby Monarch Butterfly Biosphere Reserve, the Second International Conference featured talks from ethnoecologist Victor M. Toledo (National Autonomous University of Mexico), philosopher Holmes Rolston III (Colorado State University, USA), Kocku von Stuckrad (then at the University of Amsterdam), and Meso-American religion specialist David Carrasco (Harvard University, USA).

In July 2009, the Third International Conference convened at the University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands, led by conference director and President-Elect Kocku von Stuckrad, with Jan Boersema (Free University of Amsterdam), Albertina Nugteren (Tilburg University), and Cathrien de Pater (scholar and political advisor in the Dutch Ministry of Agriculture) working on the conference committee. Focused on 'Religion, Nature and Progress', conference participants critically examined the complex meanings of progress 'in order to give insight into the different positions of these subjects both in history and vis-à-vis the current debates on climate change, environmental policy, and cultural development'.¹² The conference was kicked off by the Presidential address by Bron Taylor, who considered whether a biocentric 'dark green religion' was a mark of progress or peril, and was followed by many other prominent scholars in plenary presentations, including from Odeh Rashid Al-Jayyousi (World Conservation Union, Amman, Jordan), Jonathan Benthall (University College, London), Jan Boersema (Free

11. See the conference program online: <http://www.religionandnature.com/society/> www.religionandnature.com/society/pdf/MoreliaProgram.pdf.

12. From the 'Introduction to Conference Theme', Conference Program. Online: <http://www.religionandnature.com/society/pdf/ProgramBook.pdf>.

University of Amsterdam), Colin Campbell (University of York, UK), David Haberman and William Newman (both of Indiana University, USA), John Barry (Queen's University, Belfast), and Eric M. Katz (New Jersey's Science and Technology University, USA). The presentation by the prominent environmental historian, Donald Worster, which addressed 'John Muir and the Religion of Nature', is available as a podcast on the society's website.¹³

Shortly after this, our third international conference, von Stuckrad assumed the Presidency and a new board was elected, including Hobgood-Oster as the President-Elect (whose term will begin in 2012), Sylvie Shaw (University of Queensland, Australia) as Secretary, and Mark Peterson (University of Wisconsin, USA) as Treasurer. The sustainability and development scholar, Yamini Narayanan, who attended her first ISSRNC meeting in Mexico, volunteered to orchestrate the next one in Australia, providing the next step toward the globalization of the society. In addition to the successful Australia conference, the ISSRNC became an affiliate member of the International Association for the History of Religions, and we expect this relationship to compliment our international endeavors in the coming years.¹⁴

As this brief history demonstrates, many have contributed to the success and growth of the ISSRNC through their scholarly contributions and organizational service.¹⁵ We regret that we cannot thank everyone by name. We nevertheless hope that past, present, and future members will continue their involvement as we begin planning our fifth international conference and other co-sponsored ones (including at the Vatican Museums, in the Vatican City and Rome, Italy, in October 2011). We encourage all of our readers to support the society by becoming members, all of whom receive a complimentary online and paper copy of the journal.¹⁶ We hope you will help us spread the word about this exciting organization to other scholars and organizations, and we call upon you to continue to make this the premiere and cutting-edge scholarly society devoted to the interdisciplinary examination of religion, nature, and culture.

13. See online: <http://www.religionandnature.com/society/conferences.htm#description>.

14. For more information about the IAHR, see online: <http://www.iahr.dk/>.

15. For more details on the history of the society, see the narrative to the newsletters and updates online: <http://www.religionandnature.com/society/history.htm>.

16. Information on membership is available online: <http://www.religionandnature.com/society/membership.htm>.

The Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture

Of course, the society's list of accomplishments not only includes four international conferences, but the launch of its associated journal as well. Even before the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature* was published in 2005, Taylor was in discussion with Janet Joyce (of Equinox Publishing) about developing such an interdisciplinary journal. With the support of Joyce and in consultation with Celia Deane-Drummond, then the editor of *Ecotheology*, an impressive editorial board was established and plans were announced that a new, *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture*, would begin publishing, quarterly, in 2007. Continuing the interdisciplinary methods undergirding the encyclopedia and the society initiatives, the JSRNC called for submissions addressing the question, 'what are the relationships among human beings, their diverse religions, and the earth's living ecosystems?'¹⁷ Since its inception, the JSRNC has been committed to disciplinary border-crossing, theoretical rigor, and wide accessibility. In his introduction to the first issue, Taylor explained, 'I hope to make this journal *the place* for the presentation of diverse, transdisciplinary research, debate, and reflection—one that is accessible to a wide audience—regarding the relationships among religion, nature, and culture' (2007: 7 [italics original]). This has remained the driving impulse behind the six years of intellectual and administrative labor that is now well into the production of the journal's fifth volume.

Since we began soliciting articles in early 2006, our predominantly volunteer staff has more than doubled in size, allowing us to continue to refine and publish only the best scholarship related to this emerging field. Along with individual articles, the JSRNC offers regular special themed issues. These issues have included 'Astrology, Religion and Nature' (JSRNC 1.2, edited by Michael York); 'Indigenous Religions and Environments: Intersections of Animism and Nature Conservation' (JSRNC 2.1, edited by Kristina Tiedje and Jeffrey G. Snodgrass); 'African Sacred Ecologies' (JSRNC 2.3, edited by Celia Nyamweru and Michael Sheridan); 'The Religious Lives of Amazonian Plants' (JSRNC 3.1, edited by Robin M. Wright); "'Natural" Origins of Religion' (JSRNC 3.4, edited by Robert R. Sands and Lucas F. Johnston); 'Forests of Belonging: The Contested Meaning of Trees and Forests in Indian Hinduism' (JSRNC 4.2, edited by Eliza F. Kent); and 'Avatar and Nature Spirituality: Critical Perspectives on the Film and its Perception' (JSRNC 4.4, commissioned

17. From the JSRNC précis. Online: <http://www.religionandnature.com/journal/pdf/precis.pdf>.

and edited by Bron Taylor). More *Avatar* articles are also to come due to the number of excellent submissions to this special issue.

It is truly a delight to continue to provide such rich, field-building scholarship to our audience, but the editors were particularly honored to publish the final manuscript of the renowned theologian James A. Nash (2009). Sadly, Professor Nash passed away before his article was printed, but Bron Taylor was in close contact with him during his illness and Nash was heartened to know his last passionate argument would be advanced in the pages of the *JSRNC*. We devoted the majority of the issue in which his article appeared (*JSRNC* 3.2) to perspectives from scholars who knew Professor Nash and were eager to engage not only his latest intellectual salvo, but also to offer their appreciative reflections on his profound contributions to ecotheology and environmental ethics. The result was a touching tribute to Professor Nash, his life, work, and impact upon an entire generation of scholars. We would certainly welcome special issue proposals in the future that would focus on the work of the pioneers of our field.

Indeed, the *JSRNC* continues to consider manuscripts and special issue proposals of wildly divergent sorts, and we also welcome recommendations regarding relevant books to review. We encourage our readers to submit their work for consideration and to help spread the word about the *JSRNC* and *ISSRNC* to other related scholarly organizations. While it is true that the journal's quality is maintained by the hard work of the many editors and assistant editors involved in producing it, none of this would be possible without the contributions from first-rate scholars from around the world. With an energetic staff and a strong body of manuscript submissions, we will continue to publish exciting, ground-breaking research well into the future.

All of the journal's article titles, abstracts, and book reviews are available for free to non-members at our publisher's website.¹⁸ Of course, the easiest way to receive the journal is to be an *ISSRNC* member!

Joseph Witt, Senior Assistant Editor
Lucas Johnston, Book Reviews Editor
Bron Taylor, Editor

18. Equinox Publishing produces scholarly books and journals; see online: <http://www.equinoxpub.com/equinox/homemain.asp> and for a direct link to the *JSRNC* issues, see online: <http://www.equinoxjournals.com/JSRNC/login?source=%2FJSRNC%2Fuser>.

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