“The Production of Post-Supernaturalistic Mythopoesis in Contemporary Nature Religion”

Todd LeVasseur
College of Charleston, Department of Religion,
66 George Street Charleston, SC 29424, USA
levasseurtj@cofc.edu

Abstract
Are there new, emerging forms of nature reverencing religion? If so, what might these look like? This paper seeks to answer this question by drawing on both Bron Taylor’s *Dark Green Religion* (and especially his nature religion schema found therein that includes the category of “Gaian Earth Religion”) and the work of environmental philosopher Donald Crosby (and his category of “religion of nature”). I argue that science writers like Edward Wilson and Carl Sagan, along with ecopoets like Mary Oliver, are creating a new mythopoesis of post-supernaturalistic nature religion. I also look at the complex interaction of religion/science and the role reverence for nature plays in this dialogue. I argue that the nature religion schema put forth by Taylor and the “physiology” put forth by Crosby can help us better theorize emerging strands of post-supernaturalistic religious-like sentiments and narratives that continue to grow 150 years after Darwin’s theory revolutionized both science and religion.

Keywords
mythopoesis, Gaian Earth Religion, science, post-supernaturalistic

The Production of Post-Supernaturalistic Mythopoesis in Contemporary Nature Religion

“In the poetry of almost all ages, one finds evidence of the popularity of environmental ideas.”
—Clarence Glacken

This paper will build on the above insight about poetry offered by the environmental geographer Clarence Glacken. I maintain that the nature poetry

---

1) The author would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers who offered insights about and constructive criticisms of this submission. Any remaining errors are of course my own.

being written by certain poets found in North America beginning in the later 1800s, as well as certain passages found in nonfiction science writing by preeminent North American ecologists, biologists, physicists, and other scientists written over the past several decades, can be seen to constitute a modern mythopoesis that is both contributing to and emblematic of an emerging post-supernaturalistic nature religiosity increasingly found in industrialized countries (and especially in the “West”). If current factors of both environmental degradation and the ongoing development of ecological and evolutionary insights continue, then it is highly likely that such religiosity will gain increased global adherents in the coming decades.

Religion and nature scholar Bron Taylor posits that "Nature religion is most commonly used as an umbrella term to mean religious perceptions and practices that are characterized by a reverence for nature and that consider its destruction a desecrating act. Adherents often describe feelings of belonging and connection to the earth—of being bound to and dependent upon the earth’s living systems." In his book Dark Green Religion, Taylor delineates a variety of emerging nature religions, including what he terms “Gaian Earth Religion.” This form of nature religion “understands the biosphere (universe or cosmos) to be alive or conscious, or at least by metaphor and analogy to resemble organisms with their many interdependent

---

3) I use the term post-supernaturalistic nature religion to highlight that such an emerging religious worldview regarding nature is influenced by evolutionary insights and the environmental sciences. This terminology is in contrast to nature religions/religious views of nature that are embedded in already existing supernaturalistic religions and/or that posit some supernaturalistic energy/deity/life force that is within/the creator of nature, evolution, and ecosystemic processes (see below, next page). As such, the development of post-supernaturalistic nature religion is not the same as the existence of non-supernaturalistic religious belief systems, which have a longer history within human cultures. I thank Lucas Johnston for helping me differentiate these two tropes.

4) Taylor (2010: 5) (author’s italics). He also points out that "It is important to distinguish between green religion (which posits that environmentally friendly behavior is a religious obligation) and dark green religion (in which nature is sacred, has intrinsic value, and is therefore due reverent care). These two forms are often in tension and sometimes in direct conflict" (ibid.: 10). My argument focuses on what Taylor is calling dark green religion; or what Roger Gottlieb argues is the "oldest and the newest of world religions" (2001: 31). For a further exploration of nature religion in North America, see Albanese (2002; including especially pp. 21–22, which address evolutionary thinking and natural religion) and Zaleha (2010). See also Thomas Dunlap’s work that looks at environmentalism—especially in an American context—as a religion (2004); and more recently, Lucas Johnston’s work that investigates how holistic interpretations of physical and life sciences impact the sustainability milieu and carry out religious-like work (2010).
parts. Moreover, this energetic, interdependent, living system is understood to be the fundamental thing to understand and venerate.” 5 There exists within Gaian Earth Religion a subcategory that Taylor calls Gaian Naturalism, which “is skeptical of supernaturalistic metaphysics.” 6 The proponents of Gaian Naturalism “express awe and wonder when facing the complexity and mysteries of life and the universe, relying on religious language and metaphors of the sacred (sometimes only implicitly and not self-consciously) when confessing feelings of belonging and connection to the energy and life systems in which they inhabit and study.” 7 This paper takes as a starting point that post-supernaturalistic nature religion cosmologies are developing within certain ecoliterary, evolutionary biologist, astrophysicist, and conservationist biologist/ecology circles and uses Taylor’s definition and categorization of Gaian Earth Religion, and especially Gaian Naturalism, to help elucidate this phenomenon.

Furthermore, it accepts the premise that what Taylor calls Gaian Naturalism has at minimum a “family resemblance” to, or is a functional equivalent of, “religion,” if it is indeed not an outright new form of religious production. The emergence of post-supernaturalistic religious belief systems, especially within the trope of nature religion, is a result of the Darwinian revolution in science coupled with the impact of Darwin’s theory on subsequent Western religious production. For example, both emic and “traditional” etic (often operating within a colonial legacy and equally influenced by Eliade’s sui generis approach to religion) definitions of religion tend to assume the existence of/belief in some sort of a supernaturalistic deity/deities and/or being/s. Traditional religions and definitions of religion also tend to point to an eschatological belief system that is aligned with concepts such as sin, redemption, liberation, rebirth, or return to an ancestral dwelling place. Post-supernaturalistic nature religions problematize these, until recently, dominant understandings of religion, for this form of religion does not point to a supernatural deity (or a this-worldly deity or to this-worldly nonmaterial beings), nor does it have an eschatology based upon a personalized soul/ego that experiences release, damnation, rebirth, or the like (whether individually or collectively). 8 This is

5) Ibid.: 16.
6) Ibid.: 16.
7) Ibid.: 16.
8) If pressed to look at their theories in a religious light, some evolutionary biologists, astrophysicists, and other scientists would say their eschatological views are simply that the universe will continue to unfold ad infinitum; that eventually the sun will grow so large that its
radiant heat will kill all life on Earth. In other words, natural processes will continue on this planet, and some day—who knows when—will do so without the presence of humans. Furthermore, these processes, as will be explored below, require no belief in a deity and can be seen as sacred in and of themselves.

Because of the cosmology afforded by Darwin’s insights into evolution: that life has evolved by naturalistic adaptation, devoid of any workings of supernatural beings or animate spirits; and furthermore, our “soul” or ego-identity is simply a mix of genes, culture, and the workings of the synapses and neurons in our brain that ceases to exist once our body no longer draws breath and metabolizes calories. Such an evolutionary understanding, if taken seriously, challenges the supernaturalistic religious belief systems that humans have constructed both prior to and after 1859. Furthermore, an emergent post-supernaturalistic religious worldview represents the ways in which religions and religious traditions are social constructs that both reflect and are shaped by larger cultural power struggles and shifting epistemological terrains (Mack 2001; Engler and Grieve 2005).

However, despite the above move towards a post-supernaturalistic cosmology, Gaian Naturalism does contain attributes of religions as traditionally understood and studied. These include feelings of affinity towards a “larger” whole, efficacy of ethical action, a moral code, and states of awe.

The environmental philosopher Donald Crosby provides another example of a scholar exploring the emergence of religious naturalism, including post-supernaturalistic nature religion, or what he calls “religion of nature.” For Crosby, such a religion of nature “contends that nature is the most appropriate focus of religious commitment and concern .... It is the source of our lives and of all that is valuable, meaningful, and important in our lives. This is so despite the fact that nature has no personality or consciousness, nor is it created or presided over by a conscious being or animated by some kind of immanent, purposive spirit or spirits. Nature has no purpose bestowed upon it from without.” Such religious naturalism takes “the whole of nature [to be] the focus of religious commitment and concern .... The whole of nature is thus religiously ultimate as well as metaphysically ultimate.” As with Gaian Naturalism, religion of nature contains attributes of religions traditionally understood and studied. Taken together, Crosby and Taylor can be seen to both be theorizing about an emergent post-supernaturalistic nature religion “current” with their respective categories.

———

10) Ibid.
11) Ibid.: 491.
The point of this paper is to show that the process of myth making, or the human propensity to use language—whether metaphorical, mythical, or poetic—to express the ineffable, is found in all religions. If there is indeed an emerging phenomenon of a post-supernaturalistic nature religion that does not posit the existence of a supernaturalistic Being/s, then it, too, has its own myth making and language of poetics. As this paper will explain, this is indeed the case.

Mythopoesis

In the following passage from his book *Soil and Soul*, the Scottish poet and eco-activist Alastair McIntosh describes the process of mythopoesis:

> Reality is “mythopoesis”—an interesting word, combining the prefix “myth” and the Greek origin of the word poetry—poesis—which literally means “the making”. [sic] Mythopoesis is therefore about the construction of reality from story.

In essence, then, mythopoesis is an ascribing of poetic, affective, and evocative meaning to reality through poetry, metaphor, and artistic phrases,

---

12) Notice the aforementioned feelings of awe tend to be expressed using poetic language. One reason is that states of religious awe, terror, and/or union tend to be ineffable, but humans attempt nonetheless to share these experiences with other humans. Most do so using poetic language. Equally, many sacred texts found across the globe have sections and/or passages that are at their core mythopoetic. Lastly, many autobiographies of spiritual and/or religious leaders use mythopoetic metaphor and poetry to convey their felt sense of the divine and experiences they had that led them to become a person of faith (or that strengthened their pre-existing faith)—the popular poetry of the Sufi mystic Rumi is a prime example. These examples of mythopoetics are legion and constitute a significant part of “insider” religious discourse. William James was in this territory when he wrote, “there thus seems to be no one elementary religious emotion, but only a common storehouse of emotions upon which religious objects may draw, so there might conceivably also prove to be no one specific and essential kind of religious object, and no one specific and essential kind of religious act” James (1982: 28). His “storehouse of emotions” is in part referring to what I am calling mythopoetics. Note, too, that James is open to the possibility of multiple religious “objects,” and thus “acts” that can trigger such religious-like emotions. From this perspective, nature, ecosystem functions, and/or the evolved universe are rightly seen as religious “objects,” capable of producing religious feelings and emotions. Lastly, mythopoetic passages and the feelings that inspire them invariably tend to border on, and at times directly pass into, the realm of religiously sanctioned ethical actions and behaviors. In other words, mythopoetics can also be used to dictate proper ethical actions toward the divine and its creation/s (see footnote 19, below, regarding David Takacs).

13) McIntosh (2004: 45).
passages, and uses of language; more often than not, this ascription is grounded in some form of religious belief system. Such use of language helps create and concretize beliefs and worldviews about reality, while in the process shaping the ethics and identities of those exposed to the mythopoetic language.

In a telling statement resulting from an examination of myth in contemporary Western circles, which includes post-Enlightenment rationalism, Geoff Berry concludes that there is “no style of consciousness or rationality [which] can escape the fundamental human instinct for the sacred that is the hallmark of the ‘truly’ mythic” (Berry 2005: 34). I choose this passage for two reasons. One, to highlight that what a person or culture defines as “sacred” is nebulous. As Veikko Anttonen explains, “the sacred is first and foremost a cognitive category, the representations of which are culture-dependent. The scholar of religion cannot take a theological stand and address the sacred as an aspect or an agent of a presumed other-worldly reality, but must view religious categories as symbolic constructions and representations of human cognition” (Anttonen 2000: 277). This means that, in the case of post-supernaturalistic nature religions, what is considered “sacred” (and here I accept that for something to be “religious,” it must posit some concept of the sacred) is a this-worldly understanding of the earth and its processes and subjects as being worthy of reverence, veneration, and possibly “worship.” This understanding also happens to be culture-dependent, resulting from Darwinian insights into evolution as well as findings from molecular and chemical science and astrophysics and, concurrently, the lineage of nature literature and poetry that is unique to North America.14

A religion is not a static entity, but a category of understanding for its adherents (and for scholars) that is in a continual process of becoming, requiring what David Chidester and Edward Linenthal call “symbolic labor production” in order for it to remain pertinent.15 The mythopoetics of what Taylor calls Gaian Naturalism, and Crosby religion of nature is evidence of this production of symbolic labor that is necessary to both create and

---

14 See, for example, Worster (1996) and Gatta (2004).
15 See Chidester and Linenthal (1995) Introduction. Interestingly, the debate between science and religion, as well as the current dispute of viewing this world as sacred for its own non-supernaturalistic intrinsic meaning versus seeing this type of worldview about the world as being atheism/not religious, is also evidence that supports Chidester’s and Linenthal’s central thesis that religion, and the production of religious space and meanings, is an inherently political act and struggle.
maintain a religion and, more importantly, help give voice to what a religion considers to be sacred. This brings me to my second reason for choosing the above passage: even something considered as “secular,” “rational,” and “urbane” as science has its own element of myth and myth making and its own concept of the sacred. The mythopoesis represented in both nature poetry and passages from nonfiction science texts can be seen to be examples of a “making of the reality” that is a this-worldly post-supernaturalistic nature religion.

Science and Religion

In a significant part of today’s cultural landscape, science and religion are often seen as being at odds. Many people who hold the view that the two are separate enterprises tend to posit a positivistic belief that science deals with observable and measurable laws of the planet (and universe), while religion deals with that which science can not prove: the existence of some form of deities and/or supernaturalistic and nonmaterial life forces.

In his article “‘Science’ and ‘Religion’ Constructing the Boundaries,” Peter Harrison traces the development of the field that is today known as science. He points out that in the 16th and 17th centuries, natural philosophy and natural history were the dominant modes of studying nature, taking place within a larger religious worldview. Equally, in the 17th and 18th centuries, he writes, “‘Science’ and ‘religion’ were not independent entities that might bear some positive or negative relation to each other, and to attempt to identify such connections is to project back in time a set of concerns that are typically those of our own age” (Harrison 2006: 86). The cleavage witnessed today between the two disciplines did not occur until the 1800s, largely as a result of Thomas Huxley and his colleagues in the “X-Club” in England, who strived to:

Place a secular science into the center of cultural life in Victorian England. It served the political purposes of this clique to deploy a rhetoric of conflict between theology and science. ... Largely as a consequence of the efforts of those who sought to promote the political fortunes of “science,” there emerged the historical thesis of an ongoing science-religion conflict .... The enduring legacy of this group ... has been the perpetuation of the myth of a perennial warfare between science and religion .... By the end of the century [19th], there was an almost universal, if tacit, understanding that the term “science” excluded the aesthetic, ethical, and theological ... we can now see that over the course of the past 150 years a remarkable reversal has taken place. Whereas once the investigation of nature had derived status from its intimate
connections with the more elevated disciplines of ethics and theology, increasingly during the twentieth century these latter disciplines have humbly sought associations with science in order to bask in its reflected glory—whence bioethics and science-and-religion. The nineteenth century saw the baton of authority pass from those pursuing the religious vocation to the new breed of scientist.\(^{16}\)

Observable here are intimations of the political process of creating sacred narratives and symbols about which Mack, Engler and Grieve, and Chidester and Linenthal write. More importantly, science, as Harrison explains, is a constructed category, as is religion. In fact, they are symbiotic categories, politically bound, where the “birth of ‘science’ was part of the ongoing story of the ideation of ‘religion’” (2006: 93). In this respect (i.e. seeing science as a fluid boundary with multiple narratives), it is possible to talk about different sciences, including findings of science that can be seen to fall within the purview of religion of nature and Gaian Naturalism, as well as speaking of scientists whose beliefs and views (resulting from scientific insights) can be considered to be religious, equally manifesting as instances of religion of nature and Gaian Naturalism.\(^{17}\)

It must be noted that there are critics who claim that the post-modern, scientific worldview has become the dominant belief system of today. Furthermore, these critics often state that this secular worldview advocates that there is a lack of transcendent meaning and value in our lives and in the created world at large. These critics tend to be people of faith who are


\(^{17}\) The scientific method—generating hypotheses and then testing them for “truth,” while leaving open the possibility for further refinement of the original hypotheses (or their disapproval) so that we can learn more facts about the universe—is in and of itself a process that generates a cosmogony and can lead to the creation of a cosmology. This process can also be “worshipped.” In this respect, I am not referring in this paper to science and scientists who could be labeled as following “scientism,” the reification and worship of science as a method and discipline in and of itself that is capable of generating all truth claims about reality. I also recognize that science is a problematic category, as Harrison argues. One aspect of science that has been criticized is that, etymologically speaking, science means splitting off from reality (Draffan and Jensen 2004: 25). By conducting controlled scientific experiments, the scientist is actually cutting her/himself off from reality while also producing knowledge and technology that can be used to further harm, change, and exploit natural processes. In one respect, scientists who could be considered to fall within the religious categories explored in this paper can be seen as attempting to correct this “value-free” on one side, or hegemonic, self-righteous power hungry legacy of science (as outlined by Harrison) on the other. For further critiques of science, its technologies, the scientific method, and a response to the view that science is “value-free,” see Merchant (1980) and also Levins and Lewontin (1985).
apologists for religious beliefs, with one example that is pertinent to this paper coming from Christian poet Nathan Scott, Jr., who claims that one result of modernism is the subsequent “Decline of Figuralism,” with figuralism referring to the “prophetic occurrence” that is traceable through biblical exegesis from the New Dispensation all the way back to the Old Testament [sic] (Scott 1971: 3). He continues:

In figural thought one thing does, to be sure, represent or signify another thing .... There is always something abstract, and even abstruse, about pure allegory, for the literal meaning is the least important part of it: what matters is the spiritual significance which the imagery of the story is intended to adumbrate. But figuralism is always firmly grounded in the empiricist concreteness of actual experience.  

This passage is important for two reasons. First, it shows the “spiritual significance” which results from mythopoesis. In other words, the poetics of religious language has tangible religious significance for both the creator and audience of such language. Second, Scott Jr. highlights that figural, poetic language is always grounded in actual, empirical experience. For the poetics of an emergent post-supernaturalistic nature religiosity, the spiritual significance is the actual empirical experience of earth processes of evolution, birth, and decay, coupled with the embodied experience that follows from residing within complex ecosystems. Followers of religion of nature and Gaian Naturalism see these ecosystems themselves as being spiritually significant creators of biodiversity such that these ecosystems, too, are sacred and contribute to the overall intrinsic worth of planet Earth. Furthermore, as Crosby explains, “What is religiously and metaphysically ultimate for religion of nature ... is not just nature in its present form—although that is certainly prominent in its compass

---

18) Scott (1971: 8).

9 The biologist and philosopher of science David Takacs problematizes this ascription of sacrality to biodiversity and ecosystemic processes, noting especially the political repercussions of such a move: “By activism on behalf of what they call biodiversity, conservation biologists [he devotes numerous pages to Edward O. Wilson] seek to redefine the boundaries of science and politics, ethics and religion, nature and our ideas about it. They believe that humans and the other species with which we share the Earth are imperiled by an unparalleled ecological crisis, whose roots lie in an unheeded ethical crisis. Biodiversity is the rallying cry currently used by biologists to draw attention to this crisis and to encapsulate the Earth's myriad species and biological processes, as well as a host of values ascribed to the natural world. An elite group of biologists aims to forge a new ethic, in which biodiversity's multiplicity of values will be respected, appreciated, and perhaps even worshiped” (Takacs 1996: 9).
of concern—but nature as a dynamic, ever unfolding, eventually and inevitably self-transcending process of creation, destruction, and ceaseless change.”

These are the insights that critics of those who hold a post-supernaturalistic metaphysics miss when they make a criticism of modernity akin to the following by Nathan Scott Jr.:

But once the world, as it were, is “defiguralized”—once it is detached from the occult reality of which it was presumed by the archaic imagination to be a kind of veil—must it not then become an affair of taciturn blankness and inert facticity, something lusterless and distant, from the body of whose death the soul can only escape into its own inwardness? This may well be the fundamental dilemma of modernity, the issue which, in underlying everything else spiritually problematic for the people of the present time, is the fundamental religious problem of our age .... The term that has enforced itself upon us as most comprehensively describing our modern experience of the world is alienation.

It is precisely this opprobrium toward science that the emergent existence of a reverent, mythopoetic, post-supernaturalistic nature religiosity disproves. Rather than seeing a lifeless, valueless, inert planet devoid of any poetic or sacred significance, from which sapiens are alienated, adherents

---

20) Ibid.: 491.
22) Writing more recently, Christian apologetic and poet Paul Mariani claims that, “Given Western culture’s preoccupation with the secular and its sentimental clamoring after the new, there’s only a slim chance that a sacramental perspective will even be recognized” in this culture (Mariani 2002: 224). Given our preconceived cultural notions about what is religion/religious, and what can be considered to be sacred, it is of no surprise that many scholars and lay practitioners alike do not see the poetics of ecoliterature and science writing as being religious or that exemplars of a post-supernaturalistic nature religiosity do not have a sacramental perspective of life. Granted, “religion” is still grappling with the repercussions of Darwin/evolution, so that post-supernaturalistic sensibilities tend to currently reside on the margins of the contemporary religious landscape. Furthermore, Taylor’s Gaian Naturalism and Crosby’s religion of nature are recently constructed categories that have yet to enter into mainstream or academic discourse, which currently makes it hard for (a) people to self-identify as Gaian Naturalists or to hold to a physisology [Crosby’s term, vs. theology (ibid.: 498)] (including those being studied in this paper), or some other relevant and like-minded trope (for example, an “evolutionary nature worshipper;” or seen as a bumper sticker on the occasional vehicle: “tree hugging dirt worshipper”), and (b) for other people to know such a trope and religion exists. However, the characteristics that constitute a post-supernaturalistic nature religiosity exist in the public domain, and therefore a criticism such as Mariani’s misses out on the strong, efficacious belief many hold towards evolutionary processes and the diverse life forms that exist on the planet, which they consider to be sacramental in various ways.
of forms of post-supernaturalistic nature religiosity see a world and universe of which sapiens are members. For those who exhibit this type of nature religiosity, the universe (and especially planet Earth) is felt to be alive, valuable, and “sacred” in its own right.

Mythopoetics of Post-Supernaturalistic Nature Religion—The Poetry of Science

If Crosby and Taylor are correct in their theorizing about religion of nature and Gaian Earth Religions, then we should expect to see evidence that substantiates their claims.\(^{23}\) Further, if mythopoetics is an aspect of religion, we should expect to see evidence that there is a poetic structuring of reality that is being written about by Gaian Naturalists and in post-supernaturalistic nature religion more broadly. In this section, I will analyze the work of two contemporary scientists who I would label and classify as being within the post-supernaturalistic nature religion category of Gaian Naturalism and who thus subscribe to a religion of nature—Edward O. Wilson and Carl Sagan—to see if such mythopoetic structuring and ascription of said religious reality is indeed occurring.

Edward O. Wilson is winner of both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Medal of Science, professor of biology at Harvard University, and creator of the theory of “biophilia,” whose many publications have garnered him prestige and respect around the globe.\(^{24}\) He is a self-professed secular humanist (2006) who does not believe in the existence of non-material spiritual beings. I will be quoting from his recent book The Creation: An Appeal to Save Life on Earth (2006) to analyze how it falls within the rubric of the mythopoesis of Gaian Naturalism and how Wilson himself is an exemplar of someone who could be called a follower of post-supernaturalistic nature religion.

To begin with, Wilson’s book takes the form of a letter to an imagined Southern Baptist Pastor who Wilson is communicating with, and which Wilson uses as the occasion to express his belief in the intrinsic sacredness
of biodiversity and life on earth. In this respect, the title “The Creation” can be seen to be a play-on-words regarding the creation story in Genesis. It is also a subversive title, forcing the reader (and intended religious audience) to have to take Wilson’s treatise seriously, for if God saw that creation “was good,” as stated in Genesis, then a follower of God’s revealed truths must equally see that the creation is good and worthy of protection. Wilson is writing this letter as he feels that something has gone amiss with modern humans and their treatment of the creation, as evidenced by the current state of environmental malaise and rapidly shrinking loss of biodiversity. As a result, Wilson is trying to bridge the gap between science and religion to create a union of concerned believers—whether secular or religious—who believe in the inherent sacredness of the Earth so that they will be moved to protect its ecosystemic processes and biodiversity.

What Wilson is inspired to protect and exemplify is Nature, “all on planet Earth that has no need of us and can stand alone” (Wilson 2006: 15). However, he notes that, “because we are part of it, the fate of the Creation is the fate of humanity” (Wilson 2006: 14). Notice that for Wilson, we are not separate from the rest of life, nor morally or spiritually above it—we are part of it. Furthermore, for Wilson, the Creation is not the result of the actions of a supernatural, transcendent Being; rather, it is the result of evolutionary processes, discernible by insights of molecular biology, chemistry, geology, and ecology. For Wilson, and this is an ideal example of what I mean by a post-supernaturalistic mythopoetics of Gaian Naturalism and/or religion of nature, “Earth, and especially the razor-thin film of life enveloping it, is our home, our wellspring, our physical and much of our spiritual sustenance” (Wilson 2006: 7). This passage reflects a this-worldly Earth-centered religiosity, even pointing to a spiritual reality that is manifested on the planet’s surface that we are embedded within. Nowhere in this passage or book does he posit the existence of any sort of supernaturalistic or transcendent deity or life force. Instead, he writes of evolutionary processes, of the dance of survival and reproduction, about how “human nature was genetically encoded during the long stretches of time that our species lived in intimacy with the rest of the living world” (Wilson 2006: 69).

Even the five sections of the book, and the book as a whole, can be considered to be a treatise of post-supernaturalistic mythopoiesis. The sections are evocatively titled The Creation, Decline and Redemption, What Science Has Learned, Teaching the Creation, and Reaching Across. Interspersed throughout the book are pictures and drawings of various organisms: fishes, microbial life, butterflies and other insects, as well as photographs of “pristine” tracts of nature. Wilson speaks of glorifying microwildernesses,
processes and habitats of nature too small for the naked eye but worthy of study and appreciation. His normative task includes showing how science education should be offered to all children so they will be able to act on their natural inclination to learn about the earth and thus be more inclined to protect it: “When the scientific exploration is made entertaining and combined with education, a new form of civic institution takes root” (Wilson 2006: 22). It could be argued that this new form of civic institution he refers to is really the flowering of Gaian Naturalism and religion of nature in citizens of the earth.

Toward the end of the book, after pages of relating experiences he has had while doing fieldwork, teaching, and working to save biodiversity, what I consider to be a truly poetic, evocative, and descriptive passage emerges:

Each species is a small universe in itself, from its genetic code to its anatomy, behavior, life cycle, and environmental role, and a self-perpetuating system created during an almost unimaginably complicated evolutionary history. Each species merits careers of scientific study and celebration by historians and poets. Nothing of the kind can be said for each proton or hydrogen atom. That, in a nutshell, Pastor, is the compelling moral argument from science for saving the Creation.  

Wilson holds out that science best explains our place in the universe and is the best tool we have for understanding the human place on the planet in comparison with the rest of creation. From this comes the felt obligation

---

26) In the parlance of religious studies, Wilson’s cosmogonic “myth” is as follows: “Life was self-assembled by random mutation and natural selection of the codifying molecules. As radical as such an explanation may seem, it is supported by an overwhelming body of interlocking evidence. It might yet prove wrong, but year by year that seems less probable. And it raises this theological question: Would God have been so deceptive as to salt the earth with so much misleading evidence?” (Wilson 2006: 166). He continues, explaining how there is no proof for Intelligent Design, which is what some people of faith posit as a rebuttal to evolution. What is important to notice in this aside is that a significant number of people who can be labeled as followers of post-supernaturalistic nature religion have spent a considerable amount of time grappling with issues of faith and religion. Many have come to accept the sacrality of the Earth as complete and religiously moving in and of itself with no need of or evidence of a “God.” Furthermore, they vociferously support their beliefs using poetic language, as seen above. In fact, Wilson closes the book by writing to the Pastor: “I hope you will not have taken offense when I spoke of ascending to Nature instead of ascending away from it. It would give me deep satisfaction to find that expression as I have explained it compatible with your own beliefs. For however the tensions eventually play out between our opposing worldviews, however science and religion wax and wane in the minds of men, there remains the earthborn, yet transcendental, obligation we are both morally bound to share” (Wilson 2006: 168). This obligation of course is the caring for Creation—the biodiversity and life processes of the planet—and is transcendental in that it supersedes generational and ideological disputes.
to be responsible stewards of life, having had “reveal[ed] the full magnitude of Creation” to us by science, which shows that “we are but one of many species on a little-known planet.”

A contemporary of Wilson’s is the astrophysicist and novelist Carl Sagan (1934–1996). Sagan, too, received a Pulitzer Prize and was well versed in the art of using descriptive, poetic language; also, like Wilson, Sagan was an atheist who spent a considerable amount of his life reading scripture and engaging in theological debates. He was one of the first people who attempted to create a dialogue between religion and science so the two human enterprises could work together to protect the environment. I use as my vade mecum for Carl Sagan the transcripts of his lectures given on the occasion of the Gifford Lectures in Glasgow, Scotland in 1985. As these were an oral presentation given to a public audience, the case can be made that they represent a form of early proselytizing for Gain Naturalism and a religion of nature.

Akin to Wilson’s book, Sagan’s lectures (and subsequent book) can be seen as a practice of mythopoesis as a whole. The lectures are structured to give a picture of the universe and our miniscule place in it. At the same time, Sagan used his lectures as an occasion to evoke feelings of awe, respect, and grace for the fact that humans are alive in space and reside on a life-giving orb. The lectures and book are full of pictures of galaxies, stars, and planets which coincide with the points Sagan is making about science, math, and the origins, fragility, and preciousness of life. Equally, the book/lectures can be seen as an argument to disprove the concept of a supernatural, transcendent, Western God and an argument for a kind of faith in the universe; or, as Crosby writes, “Religion of nature cherishes spirituality, but the kind of spirituality it commends is embodied and this-worldly. Its focus is not upon miraculous incursions from another world but upon the haunting wonder and limitless challenge and fascination of ordinary things in this world.”

---

28 Published posthumously by his wife in the book *The Varieties of Scientific Experience: A Personal View of the Search for God* (Sagan 2006). Again, like with Wilson’s book, notice the subversive choice of title. William James gave an early Gifford Lectures presentation that subsequently became a bestselling book in religious studies, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Sagan, on one level, is giving honor to James and that book; on another level, he is using the same occasion of the Gifford Lectures to offer a counter-argument (albeit from the point of view of this paper one that is still religious).
29 Ibid.: 493. To offer an example, and to show that exemplars of post-supernaturalistic nature religion adherents like Wilson and Sagan have thought deeply about religion, Sagan
We begin on page two, when Sagan was just beginning his very first lecture, and already the mythopoetic project of dealing with awe enters the picture: “By far the best way I know to engage the religious sensibility, the sense of awe, is to look up on a clear night.” He continues, hoping to impress on the audience the miracle of our existence: “I stress that the universe is mainly made of nothing, that something is the exception. Nothing is the rule. That darkness is a commonplace; it is light that is the rarity” (2006: 2). During his conclusion of the first night’s Gifford Lecture, Sagan relates the following “religious” passage:

I don’t propose that it is a virtue to revel in our limitations. But it’s important to understand how much we do not know. There is an enormous amount we do not know; there is a tiny amount that we do. But what we do understand brings us face-to-face with an awesome cosmos that is simply different from the cosmos of our pious ancestors …. It is true that humility is the only just response in a confrontation with the universe, but not a humility that prevents us from seeking the nature of the universe we are admiring …. I would suggest that science is, at least in part, informed by worship.30

We see in these mythopoetic passages evidence of the emerging Gaian Naturalism that Taylor locates within the larger rubric of Gaian Earth Religion, and of what Crosby calls religion of nature. In these passages, Carl Sagan, one of the world’s pre-eminent scientists and astrophysicists, is talking about a science informed by “worship.” He urges an exploration of the Earth and the universe that is driven by an admiration born of humility. Lastly, he argues that the traditional religions, especially in the West, of humankind are limited in their scope, breadth, and understanding of the laws of the universe. Notice that this message of Sagan’s is completely devoid of any mention of or appeal to supernaturalistic beings and is conveyed in a vernacular and style that can be considered archetypically mythopoetic.31

shares that “The number of external galaxies beyond the Milky Way is at least in the thousands of millions and perhaps in the hundreds of thousands of millions, each of which contains a number of stars more or less comparable to that in our own galaxy. So if you multiply out how many stars that means, it is some number … something like one followed by twenty-three zeroes, of which our Sun is but one. It is a useful calibration of our place in the universe. And this vast number of worlds, the enormous scale of the universe, in my view has not been taken into account, even superficially, in virtually no religion, and especially no Western religions … a general problem with much of Western theology in my view is that the God portrayed is too small. It is a god of a tiny world and not a god of a galaxy, much less of a universe” (Sagan 2006: 27–30).30


I am limited in conveying just how strong this aspect of his presentation/book truly is, for I am unable to replicate here any of the pictures of stars, galaxies, and planets that he
In later lectures, Sagan speaks of how “the universe is consistent with the evolution of life,” (Sagan 2006: 53) showing his affinity with Wilson in accepting evolution—on both a micro (Earth) and macro (cosmos) scale—as his cosmogonic myth. Relating other mythopoetic insights of post-supernaturalistic nature religion, he speaks about how “Extinction is the rule. Survival is the exception;” (Sagan 2006: 66) “At the molecular level, we are all virtually identical;” (Sagan 2006: 67) “And yet, if we are merely matter intricately assembled, is this really demeaning? If there’s nothing in here but atoms, does that make us less or does that make matter more?” (Sagan 2006: 102). This last statement can be seen as a rebuttal to those sympathetic with mainstream religions who view science as being devoid of meaning. For Sagan, life has intrinsic meaning and, like Wilson, he feels it is worthy of protection. In concluding this section on mythopoesis coming from science writing, I quote at length another passage from Carl Sagan that has strong religious overtones:

I suspect life and intelligence are a cosmic commonplace. But not so common that they’re on every world. And in fact in our solar system we may discover that there is life only on this world. This says that life is not guaranteed, that life requires something special, something improbable. I’m not for a moment suggesting it requires miraculous, divine, mystical intervention. But in a natural world, you can have probable events and you can have improbable events. And I’m sure this depends on the nature of the environments of the other planets. But there isn’t any other planet that’s just like the Earth, and, so far as we know so far, there isn’t any other planet that has life on it.  

showed during his speech to help bring about a more expressive and poignant feeling of induced awe.

32) The postulates of evolution do not require the belief in or existence of supernaturalistic beings, an insight that is a result of first the Copernican revolution but more importantly, Darwin’s theory of evolution. In terms of what is considered sacred, as pointed out earlier in the paper, Darwin’s scientific insight of genetic evolution was needed so that the current emergence of post-supernaturalistic nature religion was made possible; if what is sacred is culture-dependent, then cultural concepts such as those under discussion need to have developed so that the teachings of science and evolution (and products of technologies like the Hubble Telescope, which Sagan utilizes in his mythopoesis) are accessible to the population at large, allowing the concepts to subsequently enter into a cultural discourse of sacrality.

33) Sagan (2006: 195). To further underscore comparisons with Wilson and Sagan, Sagan too does not see humanity as being separate from, flawed, or above the rest of life in any way. This is a common theme in both Gaian Naturalism and religion of nature, and post-supernaturalistic nature religion in general. Significantly, this connection with the rest of life carries with it ethical norms: we must do what we can do protect the rest of life, for all of it (human and non-human) is intrinsically sacred and worthy of respect and reverence.
Mythopoetics of Post-Supernaturalistic Nature Religion—The Poetry of Nature

Eco-literary critic J. Scott Bryson posits that ecological poets write not of a Transcendent Spirit of nature, but of “specific and physical entities” that have been “ravaged” by humanity (Bryson 2000: 140), and that they “emphasize the inherent value of [nature] in and of [itself], rather than as mere manifestations of a deity that created and permeates [it]” (Bryson 2000: 140–141; author’s italics). This paper accepts Bryson’s definition of ecological poetry and agrees that these poets write of the inherent value of natural processes, natural places, and use of the senses to interact with and appreciate non-supernaturalistic sacred life forms, contributing to an emerging mythopoesis of post-supernaturalistic nature religion.

Bryson’s definition of ecological poetry is shared in the following passage: “I tentatively define ecological poetry ... as a subset of nature poetry that, while adhering to many of the traditions of the mode, also takes on distinctly contemporary problems and issues, thus resulting in a version of nature poetry generally marked by three primary characteristics. The first is an emphasis on maintaining an ecocentric perspective that recognizes the interdependent nature of the world; such a perspective leads to a devotion of specific places and to the land itself, along with those creatures that share it with humanity .... For ecological poets, the world is a community made up of interdependent and interrelated subjects. This awareness of the world as a community tends to produce the second attribute of ecological poetry, an imperative toward humility in relationships with both human
and nonhuman nature .... Related to this humility is the third characteristic of ecological poetry, an intense skepticism concerning hyperrationality, a skepticism that usually leads to a condemnation of an over technological modern world and a warning concerning the very real potential for ecological catastrophe" (Bryson 2000: 141–143).

Interestingly, these three characteristics of ecological poetry are very similar to the attributes of mythopoesis found in contemporary nonfiction science writing, exemplified by Wilson, Sagan, and others like Rachel Carson. They are also symptomatic of the attributes most commonly found in post-supernaturalistic nature religion. Furthermore, regarding the salient point from Anttonen regarding culture-dependent concepts of sacred, coupled with the insight from Chidester and Linenthal about the political process of symbolic labor production, we see that the recent genre of ecopoetry evidences both of these theorized processes at work. Bryson outlines these processes, pointing out that in the second half of the 1800s, the genre of poetry,

Especially poetry dealing with the natural world—was ... undergoing a significant revolution. For centuries, what had loosely been termed “nature poetry” had dominated English literature. From Beowulf to Blake, much of the literature produced by English-speaking writers contained heavy doses of natural subject matter and imagery. Yet ... by the latter part of the nineteenth and the early part of the twentieth, what was considered an overly romantic nature poetry had lost credibility, largely as a result of nineteenth-century science and the drastic changes in the way Westerners envisioned themselves and the world around them. Darwinian evolutionary theory and modern geology would hardly allow readers to accept a poem that unselfconsciously anthropomorphized nonhuman nature or celebrated nature’s intentional benevolence toward humans. By the early part of the twentieth century, therefore, anything sounding like the old romantic nature poetry was rarely written, and if it was, it was even more rarely taken seriously (Bryson 2000: 135–6).

Notice again that emerging post-supernaturalistic nature religion, in both its poetic, descriptive attributes and its cosmogony and cosmology, is in large part a result of the Darwinian evolution. John Gatta succinctly points out that “the full import of evolutionary thought ... took decades to permeate American culture,” pointing to one potential reason why scholars of religion have been remiss to notice the growing phenomenon of post-supernaturalistic nature religion, as found in Gaian Earth Religions/religion of nature (Gatta 2004: 143). Gatta also writes that,"post-Darwinian scientific developments have encouraged the modern resurgence of ecospiritual attitudes and beliefs," many of which are this-worldly and post-supernaturalistic (Gatta 2004: 147). This passage further buttresses the
claims being made in this paper. Furthermore, Gatta argues that, “love, not rage, has inspired the larger and better share of present-day nature poetry. This love of earth typically involves embracing the particularity of visible things while honoring an invisible web of spiritual and biotic affinities. It means affirming humanity’s felt relation to some larger life-presence that transcends scientific materialism and personal egotism. To that extent its tenor is broadly religious …. The poet’s religious viewpoint may grant the possibility of transcendence while quite rejecting supernaturalism” (Gatta 2004: 226). While astute, Gatta’s analysis clearly misses the this-worldly, post-supernaturalistic tenor and beliefs evidenced by many authors of contemporary nature poetry and eco-poetry.

Some of the eco-poets Bryson mentions in his work are Wendell Berry, Gary Snyder, and Mary Oliver. Other notable nature poets include Denise Levertov, John Haines, and Loren Eiseley, to name just a few. This section will analyze a few passages from the award winning eco-poet Mary Oliver, showing how she is creating a poetics that can be grafted into the mythopoetics of post-supernaturalistic nature religion. I begin with a passage from When Death Comes:

> And therefore I look upon everything
> as a brotherhood and a sisterhood,
> and I look upon time as not more than an idea ...
>
> and I think of each life as a flower, as common
> as a field daisy, and as singular ...
>
> and each body a lion of courage, and something
> precious to the earth.

> When it’s over, I want to say: all my life
> I was a bride married to amazement.
> I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms

> When it’s over ...

> I don’t want to end up simply having visited this world.²⁴

She writes of similar sentiments in her poem The Fawn, this time weaving in a personal view of organized religion:

> Sunday morning and mellow as precious metal
> the church bells rang, but I went
> to the woods instead.

²⁴ Oliver (1992: 10–11).
A fawn too new
for fear, rose from the grass
and stood with its spots blazing,
and knowing no way but words,
no trick but music,
I sang to him.

He listened.
His small hooves struck the grass.
Oh what is holiness?

The fawn came closer,
walked to my hands, to my knees.

I did not touch him.
I only sang, and when the doe came back
calling out to him dolefully
and he turned and followed her into the trees,
still I sang,
not knowing how to end such a joyful text,

until far off the bells once more tipped and tumbled
and rang through the morning, announcing
the going forth of the blessed.\textsuperscript{35}

We find in these poems characteristics that are religious, belying especially affinity with post-supernaturalistic nature religion. Oliver deals with the inevitability of death, but faithfully asserts that each body of every life form is precious and sacred. She also writes about fully engaging this world, of not being just a visitor waiting for entry into either Heaven above (notice her choice to enter into nature, not into church) or a meditator’s samsara. Like Wilson and Sagan, Oliver expresses an equality of humanity with the rest of life and creation, claiming we are all sisters and brothers. Significantly for Oliver, the rest of creation can be communicated with and is both holy and blessed for simply being; it is here and alive, just as we are, with no further conditions such as a Divine Creator needed for reverent awe. These themes of post-supernaturalistic nature religion are on offer in another poem, titled \textit{Spring}.

\begin{quote}
I lift my face to the pale flowers
of the rain. They’re soft as linen,
clean as holy water. Meanwhile
my dog runs off, noses down packed leaves
into damp, mysterious tunnels.
He says the smells are rising now
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{35} Oliver (1979: 13).
stiff and lively; he says the beasts
are waking up now full of oil,
sleep sweat, tag-ends of dreams. The rain
rubs its shining hands all over me.
My dog returns and barks fiercely; he says
each secret body is the richest advisor;
deep in the black earth such fuming
nuggets of joy! 36

Oliver offers here a poetics that speaks of reverence for life and for nature;
of the possibility of communication with this-worldly other-than-human
beings; of praise for the mystery and joy of life; and a recognition of the
sacrality of each life form that exists on the planet. The seasonal rhythms of
nature, and by default of evolution, are recognized and honored, as noted
in the title of the poem, Spring. Lastly, the process of rain—so central for
the existence of life—is apotheosized, becoming “holy water” in Oliver’s
poetic script.

Lastly, in a collection of short stories, Oliver writes

I think as an ecologist. But I feel as a member of a great family—one that
includes the elephant and the wheat stalk as well as the schoolteacher and the
industrialist. This is not a mental condition, but a spiritual condition. Poetry is
a product of history, and our history is inseparable form the natural world. 37

By relating her own influences—the insights of ecology and science,
marrined to an emotive kinship with the family of creation—we see that
the poetics of Mary Oliver are indeed part of a mythopoetics of post-
supernaturalistic nature religion. Significantly, she shares that her beliefs
constitute a spiritual condition, albeit one that is not separate from the
natural world and that does not require a supernaturalsitic being. With her
popularity (Oliver has won a Pulitzer Prize for Poetry and a National Book
Award for Poetry) and inspirational influence, Mary Oliver can be seen to
be both a creator and exemplar of post-supernaturalistic Gaian Naturalism
and religion of nature.

Conclusion

This paper has explored post-supernaturalistic nature religion, in part by
building on Bron Taylor’s theoretical analysis of Gaian Earth Religion and

36 Oliver (1983: 45).
Donald Crosby's religion of nature. If we follow up on Clarence Glacken's claim that poetry of all ages points to the popularity of environmental ideas, we can see that in a post-Darwinian world, these ideas are actively contributing to the development of an emerging and maturing post-supernaturalistic nature religion. This religion is consistent with other religions in that it has a mythopoetics, but one which uniquely points to an evocative, this-worldly, non-supernaturalistic, earth-based sacred reality, as can be seen in the writings, poetry, and sentiments of Edward O. Wilson, Carl Sagan, and Mary Oliver.

Further analysis of poetically descriptive passages from other scientists and ecopoets, especially those hailing from North America, will most likely reveal continued evidence which points to the growing body of people who can be considered to follow post-supernaturalistic nature religion. This analysis is important both for our work as scholars of religion and nature so as we can better understand and analyze the changing landscape of the religion/nature/culture interface (including developing a more robust analysis of how "secular science" and ecopoetry passages can be seen to contribute to the production of religious-like beliefs and sentiments); and because two of the main impetuses for the growth of post-supernaturalistic nature religion (evolutionary science and the environmental crisis) are going to continue to build cultural capital, both in the West and globally. It is likely that the dominant concern of this century will be those related to the current anthropocene era, including continued ecosystem stresses and especially climate destabilization. Attempts by humans to make sense of these processes will surely be varied, but the role of religion, and specifically post-supernaturalistic nature religion, has the potential to play an important factor in attending to this concern.

References


