
**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.

With this introduction I am issuing a broad invitation to participate in this ongoing investigation. Most importantly, I wish to signal strongly my intention 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.

Toward a Collaborative, Interdisciplinary Inquiry

The *JSRNC* will welcome articles, forums, review essays, scholarly perspectives essays, and special issue proposals, within three broad areas of inquiry:

1) *Constructive and Normative Studies*, which have to do with religious and ethical perspectives regarding human obligations to ecosystems and to other organisms. Examples include:

- a. Research rooted in religious and philosophical investigations of a tradition's understanding of what constitutes the proper relationships among human beings, their social structures, and the earth's living systems.
- b. Analyses or articulation of ethical arguments from one or more religious perspectives, including 'world religions', 'nature religions', 'new religious movements', 'lived religion', and so on. In other words, these thematic issues and articles may explore any religious form of nature-related spirituality.
- c. Perspectives on and debates engaging postmodern theory and the 'social construction of nature'; and related to domestic and international law, political philosophies, and public policies.

2) *Social Scientific and Cultural Studies*, which involve qualitative or quantitative analyses spotlighting the religion variable in human/environment relations. Examples include:

- a. Research grounded in cultural studies, ecological and economic anthropology, environmental history, cultural geography, sociology, political science, historical ecology, and social movement theory (to name a few).
- b. Analyses of relationships, both historical and contemporary, among nature-related religious perceptions, worldviews, and values, and of human behaviors that impact nature, including the consumption of natural resources, breeding and fertility rates, lifestyle and livelihood choices, social organization and forms of political mobilization.

- c. Analyses of the role of nature-related religion in environmental degradation, protection or restoration; or in precipitating or exacerbating social conflict; or in ameliorating such conflict.
- 3) *Natural Science Studies*, which explore, through any branch of the natural sciences, the connections between humans and the living systems upon which they depend. Examples include:
- a. Research grounded in cognitive science or evolutionary biology.
 - b. Analyses of theories that purport to reveal the natural, evolutionary roots of religious and ethical beliefs, values, and behaviors, such as sociobiology.
 - c. Analyses of the role of natural science in religious thought and behavior, such as those exploring how scientific narratives and cosmologies are being integrated into religious belief systems, and how environmental ‘conservation sciences’ can assume a religious dimension in their formulation and practice.
 - d. Critical reflections on the theoretical, philosophical, and practical aspects of ecological science for religious traditions and ethical debates.

The above tripartite description articulates the approaches to the religion/nature/culture nexus in a way that parallels conventional divisions in the academy, namely the humanities, natural sciences, and social sciences. My intention in laying them out in this conventional way is to underscore the welcoming message to scholars from these diverse, broad disciplines. The journal seeks, however, not to reify such disciplinary boundaries but to help shatter them. The best scholarship is already doing so, recognizing that there are always blurred boundaries between these approaches and great insights to be found both within and between traditionally understood disciplines. 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. I will labor as editor to make this journal a place where there are no disciplinary barriers, such as jargon, to scholarly communication and debate.

Taboo-Free Inquiry

I am wholly convinced that the richness and potential of this developing field of inquiry can only be realized by (1) counteracting disciplinary myopia, encouraging all involved to acquaint themselves with the ways in which scholars with other backgrounds approach the same phenomena, and (2) creating taboo-free inquiry zones, where no question is illicit

and no approach or argument is precluded by facile hopes or *a priori* assumptions. Only then can we ensure the field will develop in its most promising directions and quickly correct itself if it veers off course.

Most of those drawn to this journal will know that the discourse to which I am referring has had many scholarly antecedents, including most directly this journal's previous incarnation as *Ecotheology*, which published eleven volumes between 1996 and 2006. *Ecotheology* was especially well focused on the now longstanding debate about the role of theistic religion in nature-human relationships and is an important wellspring of the broadened inquiry represented by the *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture*. Indeed, it is almost impossible to imagine the emergence either of *Ecotheology*, or its reframed apparition as the *JSRNC*, were it not for the now-famous critique by Lynn White, who argued that Christianity played a decisive role in precipitating the worldwide degradation of ecosystems (White 1967).² Other readers may be familiar with the journal *Worldviews: Environment, Nature and Culture*, which began publishing in 1997 and, in its own way, broadened the discussion. *Worldviews* focuses especially on what some label 'world religions', and the complicated relationships such religions have with what is rendered as 'nature', in various cognate ways to the English word, in different traditions.

The emergence of these journals has been tremendously valuable. Their expressed desire to broaden subject matter, geographic range, and disciplinary horizons is laudable. I would not want to edit a journal under these titles, however, for I think they frame the inquiry in ways that are unduly confining and insufficiently welcoming to the broadest range of interdisciplinary scholarly work that I envision for the *JSRNC*.

To illustrate: Theology, whether or not it is fused with ecology, presumes and seeks to understand God in some way. It assumes, therefore, many things about the nature of reality that are not obvious to unbelievers and are admittedly not verifiable empirically. Such premises limit the range of possible interdisciplinary discourse. For example, a naturalistic explanation for religious consciousness is difficult to reconcile with most theistic faith.³ Such discontinuity limits the prospective engagement of theists with a wide variety of evolutionary theorists, cognitive scientists,

2. That the thesis remains unproven has not reduced its prominent role in religion-related environmental debate since its publication (Whitney 2005; Proctor and Berry 2005).

3. In a journal with theology in the title, for example, one would not expect to see reviews (or at least appreciative ones) of reductionistic analyses such as Dawkins (2006), Dennett (2006), or any number of earlier naturalistic theorists of religion.

and others, who seek in natural processes explanations for all consciousness, including religious perceptions.

The term *worldview*, meanwhile, was coined originally in German as ‘*weltanschauung*’ by Wilhelm Dilthey (1978) in the nineteenth century, and developed and made more sophisticated and useful for cross-cultural comparison by generations of scholars up to and including the further development of the trope by Ninian Smart more than a century later (1996, 2000). The term inevitably places the premium for understanding religion on apprehending *beliefs*, especially religious/meta-physical and ethical ones. This is the case even though Smart himself linked such beliefs to other important dimensions of religious life, including its experiential, organizational, artistic, ritual, and political expressions. Nevertheless, the ‘worldviews’ approach has typically paid insufficient attention to the important roles religion plays in public spheres and how systems of meaning and religious identities are ‘enacted’.

Terminology matters. It can focus our attention in ways that are heuristically valuable and even shape the scholarly methods we deploy. But the tropes we use can also be confining, occluding from vision phenomena that might well be relevant to the question before us. It is clearly, therefore, worth asking whether the title of the new journal facilitates the purposes envisioned for it.

To begin an answer we need to examine the title’s constitutive terms. In the forum which makes up the heart of this first issue of the *JSRNC*, a number of scholars in their own ways wrestle with the title’s contested and problematic terms. These analyses can be read profitably in juxtaposition to my own reflections here, which I will restrict to the word ‘religion’.

‘Religion’

There has been much debate about the origin, development, definition, and utility of the word *religion*. A primer follows on some major ways in which this term (and its adjectival and adverbial forms) has been understood and contested, accompanied by my conclusion that the term can be a valuable one for our inquiry into nature-human relationships. This terminological excursus will be successful if it is illuminating to those unacquainted with recent debates about the term.

There are, it seems to me, several problems and opportunities inherent in the term *religion* and its cognates.

First, there is no consensus either about what the word means or what characterizes the phenomena. Does religion have a substantive essence,

for example, or does it function typically or universally in certain ways? The lack of consensus is due in part to the multiplicity of both substantive and functional definitions of religion that have proliferated since scholars began thinking analytically about what they take the phenomena to be.

Second, some scholars have argued that the term has often been used to stigmatize other peoples, often leading colonized or otherwise marginalized peoples to be viewed by more powerful ones as not fully human and undeserving of moral consideration. As David Chidester once summarized this perspective, ‘the terms of *religion* and *religious* are so damaged by their colonial, imperial, and globalizing legacy that they should be abandoned in cultural analysis’ (2005: 27).⁴ In other words, according to this point of view, these terms should be jettisoned in favor of terminology with less violent baggage.

Third, there are disputes over the boundaries of religion. Are certain things essential to it, such as beliefs about supernatural beings or extraordinary forces? Such questions become particularly relevant to discussions surrounding what constitutes ‘nature religion’. For there to be nature-oriented religion and/or spirituality, for example, must people believe in supernatural realities? Or is a more nebulous sense that nature is ‘sacred’ in some way sufficient to trigger the term religion when describing people who have such perceptions? Is the presence of terminology that typically accompanies religious forms sufficient evidence that associated beliefs and/or practices are religious?⁵

4. Chidester cited Talal Asad (1993), Timothy Fitzgerald (1999), and Russell T. McCutcheon (1997) as examples of such argumentation; for more recent examples of such argument see Dubuisson (2003), and compare Masuzawa (2005). Chidester demurred from their arguments that the term religion should be abandoned, however, even though he had demonstrated particularly well how the development of religion and religion-related terminology can function in oppressive ways (Chidester 1996). The most recent critiques Chidester cited are more politicized versions of Wilfred Cantwell Smith’s argument in 1963 that scholars should abjure the term in favor of terms like ‘faith’—which Smith (problematically) considered less problematic. On such arguments see Saler (1993: 27–69) and Stuckrad (2003), and for an important recent work on terminology in religious studies see Mark Taylor (1998), especially the essays on the terms ‘religion’ and ‘sacred’. As shown also by Guthrie (1996) the word sacred is as contested as the term religion. On the possibility of a ‘comparative study of religion’ see also the balanced and nuanced remarks by Jensen (2003).

5. For relevant discussions see Albanese (1990, 2002) and Taylor (2005, 2001a, 2001b). For a discussion of whether outdoor sports in general can be considered religious, see Price (1996) and for a case study focused on surfing which buttresses Price’s argument, see the online version of ‘Surfing into Spirituality’ at www.religionandnature.com/bron.

These three problem areas can be put even more simply: Is religion a useful term for analysis? If it can be, what are the ways it should be understood? Where does religion end, and where do social phenomena that are not religious begin?

There are various ways to address such conundrums. My own answers differ depending on whether I am writing up my own research or serving in an editorial capacity. My differing definitional approaches are grounded in practical judgments as to their scholarly utility in different cases. In what follows I will reflect on my approach to religion in my role as editor, for this will underscore the interdisciplinary nature of the journal and invite diverse scholarly work.

First, it is important to recognize that exploring the etymology of the term religion does not resolve its meaning or preferred usages. Many scholars have explored the roots of the term and its development over time, especially since the Enlightenment in the West.⁶ Drawing on Feil (2000), Auffarth and Mohr explicate what they think is most likely the earliest root of the term.

For the Romans, *religio* especially denoted ritual precision. Being religious, 'having religion', did not mean believing correctly, but performing acts such as sacrifice or oracles (*sacra et auspicia*) at the right point in time and in the right series of parts: *religio, id est cultus deorum* (Lat., 'Religio, that is, the worship/cult of the gods'). Proverbially, the 'augur's smile' is that of the specialists who preside over the 'tricks'. *Superstitio*, then, the counter-term to 'religion', was not aberrant *belief*, as it is usually translated, but aberrant *activity*, wrongly performed, exaggerated, often excessive or unauthorized (Auffarth and Mohr 2006: 1608-9).

Others suggest the term might be traceable to the Latin root *leig*, meaning 'to bind' or 'tie fast', or to *religāre*, which could be rendered 'to reconnect'—from the Latin *re*(again) and *ligare*(to connect). It is impossible to establish definitively which are the earliest roots, and questionable whether this is particularly important in the contemporary study of religion.⁷

Many scholars elect to focus on the roots that have to do with binding and connecting, finding them more analytically useful. I did so myself in an earlier study exploring nature-based spirituality, in which I concluded

6. See Feil (2000) for an exhaustive study or begin with two valuable but shorter overviews, Smith (1998) and Auffarth and Mohr (2006). I am grateful to Kocku von Stuckrad for his help with etymological leads and other helpful comments on this introduction.

7. Daniel Dubuisson (2003: 22f) likens etymological speculation to myth-making, an argument I am grateful to Sarah McFarland Taylor for pointing out to me when she reviewed a draft of this introduction.

that feelings of belonging and connection—of being bound to and dependent upon the earth’s living systems—are a common denominator found in most forms of what I there construed as ‘nature religion’ (Taylor 2001a, 2001b; cf. 2005). In a different way, in his book on religion in American popular culture, David Chidester tethered his theory of embodied religion, which he considers related to the human sense of touch, to this etymological possibility:

If we give credence to etymology—and if we accept that *religio* has its roots in *religāre*, ‘to bind’ [more literally re-bind]—then we have a tactile basis for the very notion of religion. From its ancient origins, according to this rendering, religion has been about binding relations, either among humans or between humans and gods, relations that have constituted the fabrics and textures, the links and connections, the contracts and covenants of religion. In this respect, although religious discourse might very well point beyond all that can be seen, heard, smelled, tasted, or touched, it points with a hand that is religiously bound. Tactility, in this view, is a fundamental bond of religion (Chidester 2005: 75).

If Chidester is right about touch being critical to religious life and perception, then this insight would certainly be pertinent to the *JSRNC*’s enquiries; for the exploration of the natural relationships between senses, like touch and religious life, would then obviously warrant further exploration.

Such examples suggest that etymology can provide an analytical springboard for saying interesting things about religion. Such study cannot, however, clarify the best way to understand religion or resolve its boundaries. Nevertheless, such ambiguity plays a salutary role in creating an open field for the creative and plural construction of and contention regarding the term religion.

So our inability to resolve to everyone’s satisfaction the definition of religion should be viewed positively. This is especially the case in an endeavor such as we are setting for ourselves with this journal. The ambiguous roots of the term have helped produce a host of perceivers and lenses through which the nature/human/culture nexus can be scoped. Each combination of perceiver and lens can produce a different understanding and generate alternative hypotheses that are worth pursuing. These diverse perceptions may yield confusion and chaos and preclude consensus—but also dramatic insights as the field of view broadens.

The diversity and debate over definitions should, therefore, be viewed as a resource for our inquiry rather than a distraction from it. In a book advancing a theory of religion with some creative new turns, Tom Tweed wrote, ‘No constitutive disciplinary term is elastic enough to perform all the work scholars demand of it’ (2006: 39). Exactly—and this

is reason enough to resist the imposition of a universal, governing definition of religion. Here I am speaking especially to myself in the role of editor of this journal. If the journal is to be taboo-free inquiry habitat, it cannot, *a priori*, preclude any approach (or definition) from the ferment. Tweed continued his thought in a way that responded to those who would eschew use of the word: 'we should continually refine and revise our understanding of the term for purposes and contexts, not abandon it' (2006: 39-40).

This also makes sense, for it is through this process of refining and revising that misguided or even malicious constructions of the term will, over time, become obscure. It is by messing around, even playfully, with inherited terms and understandings, that valuable new insights will be gained. But my overarching argument here is pragmatic. We need terminology, however fluid and contested, in scholarly analysis. As David Chidester and Jonathan Z. Smith have put it:

We require rigorous conceptual terms for analyzing authoritative discourses and practices that transact with the transcendent, the sacred, or the ultimate in all areas of human life. For better or worse, the terms religion and religious can be useful in highlighting these meaningful and powerful human formations (Chidester 2005: 27).

'Religion' is not a native term [it is not, in other words, a term that most people use self-descriptively]; it is a term created by scholars for their intellectual purposes and therefore it is theirs to define. It is a second-order, generic concept that plays the same role in establishing a disciplinary horizon that concepts such as 'language' plays in linguistics or 'culture' plays in anthropology. There can be no disciplined study of religion without such a horizon (Smith 1998: 281-82).

Smith's words demonstrate the relevance, by analogy at least, of the discussion thus far, to the other key terms in the title of the new journal: Both nature and culture are likewise hotly contested terms, and in a similar way, disputes over them are heuristically valuable.⁸

My perspective on 'religion', then, which will govern many of the editorial choices I shall make in the upcoming journal issues, has an affinity with the simple statement about the value of the term religion once made by Benson Saler: 'The power of religion as an analytical category... depends on its instrumental value in facilitating the formulation of interesting statements about human beings' (Saler 1993: 68). Like Saler, I am not attached to the term religion *per se*, except where its construction

8. For a discussion of these contestations with regard to culture, see Masuzawa (1998); regarding advocates and critics of understanding nature as a social construction, see Haraway (1991), Evernden (1992), Soulé and Lease (1995), Cronon (1995a, 1995b) and Callicott and Nelson (1998).

and deployment, or an analysis of the controversies over it, can illuminate our world. Saler argues we should recognize the peril that can accompany explicit definitions: ‘Explicit definitions are explicit heuristics: they guide or impel us in certain directions. By doing so they tend to divert our attention from information beyond the channels they cleave, and so choke off possibilities’ (Saler 1993: 74). This is why it is important both to recognize the dangers of explicit definitions as well as their value (they focus analytic attention and therefore help produce insights about religion). The sum of individual perspectives is the provision of multiple lenses and observers and thus a valuable, wide, and at least potentially self-corrective field of view.⁹

The heart of Saler’s approach is to note that there are many dimensions and characteristics of religious beliefs and practices. He believes that the best way to explore the phenomenon ‘religion’ is to observe the widest possible variety of the beliefs, behaviors, functions, etc., which have been associated with the notion. Borrowing a phrase from Wittgenstein, Saler argues that with such an approach, it is possible to profitably explore the rich ‘family resemblances’ among beliefs and practices related to the religious dimension of human life and culture.

Family Resemblances

What are these resemblances, the elements that are constitutive of religion? It would be an article in itself to review lists previously assembled, or to invent a new one while carefully tracing each characteristic to the observers who attended to them. So here I will take the liberty to dispense with a careful scholarly genealogy of each proffered trait, in order to list some that have typically been articulated. My goal is to give the scholar, uninitiated in this somewhat arcane discussion, an idea of what a list of characteristics might include.¹⁰ The following list is inspired by

9. Kocku von Stuckrad (2003: 260-62) has called for just such a ‘polyfocal approach’, tracing it to Friedrich Nietzsche who wrote: ‘There exists only a perspective viewing, only a perspective “comprehension” [“*Erkennen*”]; and the more affects concerning a matter we present, the more eyes, different eyes we are able to employ for the same matter, the more complete will be our “understanding” [“*Begriff*”] of this matter, our “objectivity”’ (Nietzsche 1999: 365; italics original). Quoted and translated by Stuckrad (2003: 262).

10. For a good starting place see Saler’s discussion (1993: 170-72) of the ‘religion-making characteristics’ offered by the philosopher William Alston (Alston 1967: 141-42), and about Southwold’s ‘polythetic classification’ of religion (Southwold 1978: 370-71). I found Alston’s and Southwold’s lists illuminating and they contributed significantly although loosely to the brainstorming presented in the 14-point list in the main text. Careful observers will hear echoes in this list from many well-known

diverse sources and includes a few of my own nature-focused twists. I think it can provide one framework for the analysis of phenomena that are often if not usually present in what Westerners would call religion. I wish to stress that, at least as an editor of this journal, I will not insist that any of these often typical characteristics is essential to triggering the analytic use of the term religion. Religion often, if not usually, is characterized by:

1. Beliefs in or concern about (and regarding) supernatural beings or spirits, or dramatically extra-ordinary forces, which are sometimes explicitly understood as divine or holy or conceptualized with a similar cognate.¹¹
2. Division of the world into sacred and profane objects or domains or spaces.
3. Ritual acts and forms, often focused on sacred objects or spaces, but sometimes also having to do with seemingly mundane matters, such as birth, food preparation and consumption, and death.

religion observers, including Schleiermacher (1996 [1799]), Müller (2002 [1873]), Tylor (1871), Frazer (1994 [1890]), Durkheim (1965 [1912]), Weber (1978 [1925]), James (2002 [1902]), Otto (1958), Eliade (1959), Geertz (1973), Guthrie (1993), and Asad (1993), in addition to those cited above. Jonathan Bentall, who has also wrestled with polythetic understandings of religion, has argued provocatively that archeology and anthropology as well as a variety of social movements and phenomena that are not self-consciously religious have 'religoid' features (2006). I am grateful to him for his comments on an earlier draft of this introduction, after which I enriched my list, adding specific references to trance states, conversion experiences, and martyrology.

Even as amended, my list remains far from complete, of course, and is provided primarily in the hope of introducing the unacquainted reader to an idea of the variety of traits and characteristics that often are associated with religion. This might also stimulate the reader's own reflections about the characteristics of what we often call religion. Saler's *Conceptualizing Religion* (1993) is especially worth consulting when considering the definition and boundaries of religion.

I have concluded that, for the purpose of my own research, it generally makes sense to say that, for the term religion to be apt, I would expect to hear religious terminology and observe a perception of some sort that is related to divine or sacred beings, or things, or forces. But contra the entry in Smith and Green (1995) and the assumption of many scholars, I do not think that people must believe in supernatural divine beings for the term religion to be fitting. I prefer, for example, the way Thomas Tweed speaks of 'forces' rather than the more limiting 'beings' or 'spirits' in his definition (Tweed 2006: 54). 'Forces' is easily applied to the kinds of nature religion that I have often focused upon elsewhere (Taylor 2004, 2005).

11. Of course, the meaning and utility of most of the terms used in this list are contested, and further critical reflection on them will be undertaken in this journal, but not here.

4. Beliefs and practices about and believed to be related to earthly and/or otherworldly destruction, and/or redemption/salvation/healing (where healing may alternatively be physical, emotional, spiritual, or all three).
5. Practices and techniques including trance and other extraordinary states of consciousness.
6. Processes and pressures that seek to get individuals or groups to alternate or retain religious allegiances and belief systems—conversion experiences and the failure or reversal of such experiences.
7. Affective feelings and experiences of awe, mystery, shame, love, empathy, devotion, hatred, or rage, which tend to be evoked through ritualizing or other routinized practices, and are generally believed to be conducted in the presence of sacred beings, places or things, or in concert with their wishes.
8. Beliefs in and practices (often, if not usually, with strong anthropomorphic dimensions) related to communicating or communing with supernatural or divine or extraordinary powers, or ultimately meaningful beings, or spirits, or forces.
9. Understandings of the cosmos and the place of the earth and people and other living things in it, often understood as having ultimate meaning or as being some kind of holy order; such understandings may provide a sense of well-being, belonging, and/or connection between individuals and the wider spiritual/ethical communities with whom people feel associated. Such religious understandings help people to cope with life's inherent difficulties and find meaning, especially in the face of anomie realities such as suffering and death.
10. *Ethical* understandings of the *proper* place for people and other living things in the world; these may promote or hinder social solidarity (i.e. identify morally considerable kin groups) and/or function to serve the economic, prestige, and power interests of some individuals and groups more than, or at the expense of, others.
11. Beliefs and practices which divide humans (and/or other living things) into hierarchical classifications and reinforce the same distinctions, which often involve the labeling of some people as divine (or at least as having special lines of communication with divine beings or places), others as ordinary (or human), and others as evil (or subhuman), thereby legitimating the repression of the latter.

12. Beliefs, including narrative cosmogonies and cosmologies, which are not empirically demonstrable but are strongly reinforced through education, reinforcement/reward, penalties for deviance, and other social means.
13. Sacred narratives (written or oral), which are often understood to have been given to people in some special/holy way, from some special/sacred place, for some special/holy purpose.
14. Spiritual leadership, religious specialists, and physical/spiritual healers, who teach and assist seekers and devotees, and sometimes resist or fight (either directly or by example, exhortation, and administration) perceived, spiritual adversaries.
15. Beliefs and practices that govern (and sometimes consecrate) the ways people use and transform their various habitats, and that sometimes tend strongly to reinforce or work against certain forms of socio-economic organization (namely, beliefs and practices that shape and influence their environments).
16. Beliefs and practices that draw directly and indirectly on natural symbols and events for various characteristics of the lifeways and practices related to some or many of the above characteristics (namely, beliefs and practices shaped or influenced by their environments).

I have engaged in this brainstorming about ‘family resemblances’ because I have found the idea valuable, both in thinking about nature-related religion, and in thinking about the boundaries of inquiry that any journal must establish. With this notion in mind I am not focusing so much on what, if any, boundaries surround religion. Instead, I am dwelling on the ways people are in reciprocal production with each other and nature, and on the complicated ways in which beliefs, perceptions, and practices—which may be explicitly, implicitly, or ambiguously religious—are all involved in these organic-cultural processes. As Saler concluded,

In the [family resemblance] approach recommended here, there are no clear boundaries drawn about religion. Rather, elements that we may perceive as ‘religious’ are found in phenomena that numbers of us, for a variety of reasons, may not be prepared to dub religions. But if our ultimate purpose as scholars is to say interesting things about human beings rather than about religions and religion, appreciation of the pervasiveness of religious elements in human life is far more important than any contrivance for bounding religion (Saler 1993: 226).

To summarize, then, analyzing family resemblances is valuable, regardless of the great differences that inhere in different peoples and

places, and despite the absence of any clear, essential, universal trait that everyone will agree constitutes the ‘essence’ of the phenomenon. Such an approach to conceptualizing religion leaves ‘in play’ and open to contestation the definition of religion. It also leaves open discussions even about whether and the extent to which the contestation is important, while insisting that the critical thing is to learn valuable things about people, their environments, and their earthly co-inhabitants. Moreover, if we can reason by analogy, then it may be that part of the value of the terms ‘culture’ and ‘nature’ lies also in their ambiguity and therefore their elasticity and contested dimensions. Thus, in the struggle to construct these notions in useful ways, and understand the relations among them, we are indeed likely to find much that is valuable and worth saying about the things we use these terms to represent.

This Inaugural Issue

It seemed inevitable to me, when thinking about this inaugural issue, that I would need to begin by wrestling with the problem of how this journal would conceptualize ‘religion’. This seemed to me especially important, given the intention of facilitating a broad, interdisciplinary discussion. I am keenly aware of the extent to which most people, including many scholars for whom the study of religion is a sideline, tend to operate with explicit or implicit understandings of religion based largely on the religions with which they are most familiar given their own geo-cultural-personal location.

I hope that this introduction will ensure that a wide range of scholars will understand that the *JSRNC* provides a broad umbrella under which they can present whatever work they feel is pertinent to the religion/culture/nature nexus. I also would hope it will allow us to examine a wide range of nature-related spirituality and practice, some of which might seem, at first glance at least, like ‘quasi-religion’ or ‘implicit religion’ (Bailey 1997).

That others will have different operational definitions of religion is expected and most welcome. The definitional reflections found in this introduction and in other contributions to this inaugural issue introduce only a few conundrums that arise in the quest to understand the natural dimensions of religion and culture.

I have elsewhere provided a list of the questions that have driven my interest in this field (Taylor [ed.] 2005: xii-xiii).¹² I certainly hope that

12. The entire ‘Introduction and Readers’ Guide’, cited here, is also available online at www.religionandnature.com/ern (with other sample entries).

contributors to these pages will address some of these curiosities in the coming issues. The journal, however, is here to generate and pursue a much wider range of questions than any single individual can identify; the questions it will pursue and the manner of its investigations will therefore be decisively shaped more by its readers and contributors than by its editor.

It is with this idea in mind that this inaugural issue includes a wide range of perspectives analyzing the past, present and hoped-for future of what is emerging as our common, interdisciplinary field. Most of these reflections were invited and presented initially during a forum that focused on this emerging field and its problems and prospects, which was held during the April 2006 inaugural conference of the International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture.¹³ (This forum will continue in the third issue of the *JSRNC*.) This issue also includes (immediately after this introduction) the keynote address by Yale University's Stephen Kellert, who models beautifully the ways in which a scholar can integrate the natural and social sciences with the humanities when thinking about religion and nature.

By now it is likely obvious that I have not provided a typical editorial introduction, which introduces each of the subsequent contributions and suggests ways the issue might be most profitably read. No such guidance is needed from me—and I would not like to spoil the surprises contained in this issue by revealing beforehand the issue's insights and fault lines. I invite the reader to read the articles in the order presented or in any other order. I am confident that in these pages you will find a stimulating invitation to deeper questioning and perhaps even inspiration for future research. Most of all, I hope you will feel that the *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* will be a valuable venue for collaborative, interdisciplinary investigation, and that you will elect to consult and submit to it with regularity.

Notes and Acknowledgements

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13. For information about this meeting, including its program, see www.religionandnature.com/society, then the 'past events' link.

14. The antecedent publication to *Ecotheology* was *Theology in Green*, which began publishing in 1992 as a small distribution publication distributed largely in the

The staff of the new journal, especially those involved from the beginning of this new and arduous project, also deserve special recognition: Gavin Van Horn, Joseph Witt, and Luke Johnston. The officers of the International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture, have all made special contributions to this endeavor, often providing important services without significant lead time.

I also wish to thank all the scholars who have already provided peer reviews, and welcome others to such service (you can volunteer via the journal's website at www.religionandnature.com). The quality of our reviewers will be apparent to all when we publish our annual list, acknowledging their contributions to the quality of this journal. Finally I want to thank Janet Joyce, publisher of Equinox Publishing Ltd., who was one of the first to recognize and support this field of inquiry, which is its own form of scholarly contribution.

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