

## ON FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR RELIGION AND ENVIRONMENT: APPROACHING RELIGION FROM EXTRACTIVE ZONES

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I grew up driving across I-90 from eastern South Dakota to the Black Hills every summer. Along the way I absorbed “Green Religion.” Surrounded by ecological and geological wonders, I believed that the best cathedrals are amidst the pines and sensed that marvels like unimpeded star-speckled skies can evoke religious devotion and scientific curiosity together. It wasn’t until much later in life that I would know to identify these experiences as part of the *greening of religion*, but such formative encounters are part of what would make the study of religion and environment eventually “click” for me.<sup>1</sup>

“Greening Religion” approaches to religion and environment have had this effect—and continue to have this effect—for many teachers in the field as well as our students. For over two decades, an influential group of scholars have inspired academic and lay interest in the influence of diverse religions, from Jainism to Indigenous lifeways to Christianity, on environmental action.<sup>2</sup> For those who

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<sup>1</sup> Donovan O. Schaefer, *Wild Experiment: Feeling Science and Secularism after Darwin* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022)

<sup>2</sup> See, in particular, the introductory documents to The Religions of the World and Ecology conference series, organized by Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim.  
<https://fore.yale.edu/Publications/Books/Religions-World-and-Ecology-Book-Series>.

didn't grown up in a religious tradition, or grew weary of institutionalized religion but whose environmental activism sparked a kind of spirituality of nature, learning to call these experiences "Dark Green Religion" have had a similar effect of consolidating points of interest and investigation within an intellectual community.<sup>3</sup>

Many who have shared the privilege of summer vacations, access to green spaces, and time to encounter nature for emotional-spiritual renewal may share this kind of "origin story" for their interest in religion and environmental studies. Such experiences are not just affective, experiential motivators, but methodological starting points, directing attention to particular sites of concern, audiences, and interlocutors. Turning my religion and environment scholarly focus from the wonders of natural spaces to the anxieties of climate change with its global scope, and then more recently to rage against unjust petrocultures and extractivism has brought me to reflect on how different affects and experiences orient us to different audiences or sites of concern and call for different methods and starting points.

Not a half mile away from many of my formative Green Religion experiences is the site where General Custer, his troops, and accompanying miners first found gold—a "discovery" that finally provided legitimacy to unabashedly break the Treaty of Fort Laramie (1868). This treaty was between the US government and the Oglala, Miniconjou, Hunkpapa, Blackfeet, Cuthead, Two Kettle, Sans Arcs, Santee, and Brulé bands of Lakota people as well as the Yanktonai Dakota and Arapaho Nation. It marked lands in current day South Dakota, Wyoming, Nebraska, and Montana as "unceded Indian territory" while establishing the Great Sioux Reservation which included ownership of the site sacred to the Lakota, the Pahá Sápa or Black Hills. After the initial discovery of gold, the treaty was never legally altered or annulled but merely ignored—a conclusion supported by the 1980 Supreme Court decision in *United States v. Sioux Nation of Indians*.<sup>4</sup> Neither my experience in the established religion orientation of the Greening Religion movements nor my engagement with the anti-institutional orientations of Dark Green Religion had prepared me to see that my affective, experiential,

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<sup>3</sup> Bron Taylor, *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> The Supreme Court ruled that land including the Black Hills had been covered by the Fort Laramie Treaty and had thus been taken illegally by the US government. As part of the decision, the court declared the tribe was owed monetary compensation for the land plus interest. The Lakota Tribe has refused payment (with interest, now over \$1 billion) and insisted on the return of their land.

and methodological starting points were themselves embedded in extractive zones.<sup>5</sup>

I fully admit this reflects a problem for me as a scholar of religion and environment. Yet, since it signals a problem with orientations, assumptions, gut-level responses, and perspectives rooted in histories of settler colonialism and white privilege, these are not merely the result of individual circumstance but signal broader, shared problems baked-in to particular academic approaches. With Max Liboiron we could emphasize that since these are problems connected to “ways of being in the world,” they are, in particular, problems of scholarly method.<sup>6</sup>

This is where I think religion and environment discourses need to be heading: Give close attention to and methodological starting places from extractive zones.<sup>7</sup> Production and consumption of extracted resources like oil and coal, after all, are

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<sup>5</sup> My understanding of the extractive zone is informed here by Gómez-Barris who defines it as “the colonial paradigm, worldview, and technologies that mark out religions of ‘high biodiversity’ in order to reduce life to capitalist resource conversion.” She goes on to define extractivism as “colonial capitalism and its afterlives: extending from its sixteenth century emergence until the present day and including the recent forty-year neoliberal privatization and deregulation process, as well as the rise and fall of the progressive states called the Pink Tide in Latin American nations.” Macarena Gómez-Barris, *The Extractive Zone: Social Ecologies and Decolonial Perspectives* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), xvi.

<sup>6</sup> Liboiron, *Pollution is Colonialism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021), 1, fn. 1.

<sup>7</sup> For more on religion and extractive zones, see the special issue of *Religions* on “Religion in Extractive Zones,” especially Rowe, Sideris, and Zenner, “Religions in Extractive Zones: Methods, Imaginaries, Solidarities,” *Religions* (forthcoming). This approach wouldn’t be to replace or exclude others, but to emphasize the importance of a close examination of the imbrications of extractive zones and religious systems. This, for example, marks a strategic and methodological difference from the approach articulated by Bron Taylor in the *Encyclopedia of Religion & Nature* (London and New York: Continuum, 2008). Where Taylor calls for the “widest variety of perspectives to engage the meaning and relationships that inhere to the human religious encounter with nature” (x) and the “widest possible range of phenomena related to the relationships” between humans, religions, and Earth’s living systems (vii-viii), the approach I’m advocating for here would not expand to the “widest possible range,” but zoom in to foreground the dynamics of racial capitalism and extractivism. Significantly, as critical race theorists have emphasized, universalization (the “widest possible”) moves come with their own set of blinders. The *Encyclopedia* includes entries on “crop circles,” “Sexuality and Ecospirituality,” “Zulu War Rituals,” “Wicca,” “Disney,” and “Fly Fishing.” But it does not include indexed terms, let alone entries, on extractive zones, extraction, colonization, or decolonization. Exxon is included with references in four individual entries, but oil, petroleum or fossil fuels are not listed in the index. The aim of studying religions in and from extractive zones would not be to account for any or every manifestation of the religious, but to zoom in on the production, functioning, and impact of racial capitalist extraction and the multiple ways religious praxis and discourse gets employed in these contexts.

the primary drivers of climate change<sup>8</sup> and sites of massive social, economic, and racial injustice.<sup>9</sup> Even in the turn away from fossil fuels to “renewables” or “green energy,” extractivism is intensifying. Increasing evidence suggests that green and “renewable” energy is not functioning as replacement for hydrocarbons, rather renewable energy is merely providing an additional source of energy.<sup>10</sup> Even if it would replace fossil fuels, all the batteries, solar panels, and green technologies require mineral extraction for their production, meaning that extractive activities will only be expanding and intensifying in any techno-driven “renewable” economy.<sup>11</sup> A focus on extractive zones would also not necessarily entail ignoring environmental concerns like multi-species justice and biodiversity loss, but would emphasize their interconnection. For example, as Macarena Gómez-Barris emphasizes, extractive zones are not coincidentally selected in biodiverse regions

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<sup>8</sup> “Fossil fuels—coal, oil and gas—are by far the largest contributor to global climate change, accounting for over seventy-five per cent of global greenhouse gas emissions and nearly ninety per cent of all carbon dioxide emissions.” (“Causes and Effects of Climate Change,” United Nations, Climate Action. <https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/science/causes-effects-climate-change#:~:text=Fossil>).

<sup>9</sup> See Nick Estes and Jaskiran Dhillon, eds., *Standing with Standing Rock: Voices from the #NoDAPL Movement* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2019). See Lauren Redness, *Oak Flat: A Fight for Sacred Land in the American West* (New York: Random House, 2020). See also, Imbolo Mbue, *How Beautiful We Were: A Novel* (New York: Random House, 2021), a fictionalized compilation of in-depth research on the social, political, economic, environmental and gender-based violence endured by local communities in oil extraction zones around the world.

<sup>10</sup> Several political and world economy leaders have recently promised to increase renewables—while also expanding fossil fuel extraction. Nearly all of the “top 20 fossil fuel-producing countries”—including those who are also promising to increase renewable energy production—are projected to drill for more oil and gas in 2030 than ever before (David Gellas and Manuela Andreoni, “Coming soon: more oil, gas and coal,” *New York Times*, Nov 9, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/09/climate/coming-soon-more-oil-gas-and-coal.html?pvid=ssprdkBgjPwdi-MIegJmrJxY&u2g=c&smid=url-share>). This is part of the dynamic York and Bell have traced in energy transitions from the past two hundred years. They argue we have never had a modern energy transition—only energy additions. (Richard York and Shannon Elizabeth Bell, “Energy Transitions or Additions? Why a Transition from Fossil Fuels Requires More than the Growth of Renewable Energy,” *Energy Research & Social Science*, 51 (2019): 40-43.)

<sup>11</sup> Research on EU access to minerals necessary for renewable technologies suggests that EU demand for lithium and other minerals for electric cars and energy storage will increase 21-fold by 2050. For wind turbines, demand for rare earth minerals will increase 4.5 times by 2030 and 5.5 times by 2050. Joint Research Centre, “Solutions for a resilient EU raw materials supply chain,” March 16, 2023, [https://joint-research-centre.ec.europa.eu/jrc-news-and-updates/solutions-resilient-eu-raw-materials-supply-chain-2023-03-16\\_en](https://joint-research-centre.ec.europa.eu/jrc-news-and-updates/solutions-resilient-eu-raw-materials-supply-chain-2023-03-16_en). See also, Thea Riofrancos, “The Rush to ‘Go Electric’ Comes with a Hidden Cost: Destructive Lithium Mining,” *The Guardian*, June 14, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/jun/14/electric-cost-lithium-mining-decarbonisation-salt-flats-chile>.

but are often a focus of extractive endeavors for precisely this reason.<sup>12</sup> This all suggests that the extractive zone will only increasingly be at the heart of social-environmental justice issues—from global climate change to local toxic pollution, land appropriation, and biodiversity loss—into the foreseeable future.



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But what this means for the study of religion—the kinds of theoretical and methodological shifts it requires—remains under-examined. Extractive zones are clearly sites of religious contestation and resistance.<sup>13</sup> But as energy humanities and petroculture scholars have amply demonstrated, energy intensive and extractive practices have also produced culture.<sup>14</sup> I and an increasing number of other religion scholars have also emphasized that a significant swath of this cultural production has been religious—even as religions have informed and infused desires and logics of extraction.<sup>15</sup> This is true even from the beginnings of religion as a scholarly endeavor rooted in extractive epistemologies.

While some religion and environment scholars have emphasized the importance of not assuming the category of religion and paying more critical attention to how religion has been constructed as a discourse in relation to

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<sup>12</sup> Gómez-Barris, xvi.

<sup>13</sup> See footnote 10.

<sup>14</sup> Imre Szeman and Dominic Boyer, eds., *Energy Humanities: An Anthology* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017); Sheena Wilson, Adam Carlson, and Imre Szeman, *Petrocultures: Oil, Politics, Culture* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017).

<sup>15</sup> Darren Dochuk, *Anointed with Oil: How Christianity and Crude Made Modern America* (New York: Basic Books, 2019). Terra Schwerin Rowe, *Of Modern Extraction: Experiments in Critical Petro-theology* (London: Bloomsbury, 2023). The work of the Energy, Extraction and Religion Seminar at the AAR is a good example as well.

nature,<sup>16</sup> what hasn't been readily recognized or given sufficient critical attention are the ways that religion discourses, knowledge production and constructs of what will become identified as modern religion emerged in historical extractive zones and through extractive (methodological and epistemological) practices. Charles Long was a key early advocate of a shift within religious discourses to attend more critically to the construction of the category of religion. He emphasized the beginnings of the study of religion in Enlightenment contexts employing and reinterpreting information gleaned from racialized, colonial encounters. Long analyzed the crucial location of the emergence of modern religious concepts as emerging from the transcultural contact zones of colonialism and enslavement.<sup>17</sup> Fetishes, in particular, emerged as a key example of something identified with "primitive religion" that was seen as an impediment to the ability to make rational economic decisions about the value of matter. As Long emphasizes, with reference to anthropologist William Pietz, the concept of the fetish emerged first in 16th century texts written on the Gold Coast of Africa when Portuguese merchants encountered West African peoples. Here the fetish, theorized as a religiously-induced mistake in attributing value to matter, was born. From there, Enlightenment thinkers like Charles de Brosses would take up the concept to think about the ways people value things, the relationship between rational economic valuing and religious beliefs, and a theory of human moral and intellectual development that could be traced—following E. B. Tylor's *Primitive Culture*—according to a continuum of religions stretching from primitive animists to fully rational Christian monotheists.<sup>18</sup> These are the roots of modern religion—and while Long emphasizes that these concepts emerge in transcultural contact zones, given their location on the African Gold Coast with emerging traffic of enslaved persons and mineral wealth, Lisa Sideris, Christiana Zenner, and I argue that we could also identify these as extractive zones.<sup>19</sup>

But extraction formed more than an historical origin point for modern constructions of religion. As Jennifer Reid emphasizes in a volume dedicated to honoring Long's legacy in religious scholarship, "Long's specific contribution to this tradition of scholarship has been in probing the ways in which the study of religion has been informed by both the methods of the Enlightenment sciences

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<sup>16</sup> Taylor, "Introduction," *Encyclopedia of Religion & Nature*, vii-xxi.

<sup>17</sup> Long, "Transculturation and Religion: An Overview," *Ellipsis . . . : The Collected Writings of Charles H. Long* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 145-56.

<sup>18</sup> Long, "Indigenous People, Materialities, and Religion: Outline for a New Orientation to Religious Meaning," in *Religion and Global Culture: New Terrain in the Study of Religion and the Work of Charles H. Long*, Jennifer Reid, ed., 167-180. (New York: Lexington Books, 2003). See also Jay Kameron Carter's text engaging Long with a chapter specifically focused on the fetish in *The Anarchy of Black Religion: A Mystic Song* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2023).

<sup>19</sup> "Religions in Extractive Zones: Methods, Imaginaries, Solidarities," *Religions* (forthcoming).



and also the data extracted from various geographical locations that constituted the arena of European colonial expansion.”<sup>20</sup> As Long emphasizes, the modern construct and study of religion depended on the extraction not just of material objects, but of ideas, concepts, and constructs. So, from Long’s perspective, extraction forms not merely the geographical site of the production of modern religion, but, also, depends on extracted knowledge as well. Modern religion has been funded by and is founded on extraction.

If religion and environment discourses are going to take seriously the ways current environmental crises are not “unprecedented” so much as merely the next iteration in long histories of coloniality<sup>21</sup> and imperialism,<sup>22</sup> then starting from extractive zones can help orient our theorizing of both nature and religion to see these dynamics. After all, it is not just that 21st century climate change poses a moral problem that outstrips religions’ moral imaginaries. Modern religion has itself been produced through the very conditions that brought about that current moral conundrum.

While neither Greening Religion nor Dark Green Religion approaches have sufficiently analyzed religion and nature in the context of extractive zones, there are aspects of both methodologies they could build from. Dark Green Religion could build from its call for closer attention to the historical construction of religion as outlined above. Greening Religion could build from its activist/participant and ethical orientation. Bron Taylor, the author of *Dark Green Religion*, is critical of Green Religions for their overly engaged, ethical, activist, and participant approach. He calls for a historical approach that “places the priority on simply understanding the relationships between *Homo sapiens*, their religions and other cultural dimensions, and their livelihoods, environmental, and so on.”<sup>23</sup> Taylor clarifies that he is not advocating a “value-neutral” approach, but one that would “bracket value assumptions.” Yet, given

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<sup>20</sup> Reid, “Introduction,” in *With this Root About My Person: Charles H. Long & New Directions in the Study of Religion*, Jennifer Reid and David Carrasco (eds), vii-xx. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2020).

<sup>21</sup> The term, of course is Anibal Quijano’s and is the focus of decolonial work. Recent work within the energy humanities has focused on telling the story of climate emergency as a history of energy extraction rooted in the colonization and enslavement of sugar plantations (see Dominic Boyer, *No More Fossils* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2023). For his part, Amitav Ghosh weaves postcolonial and decolonial perspectives to re-narrate the history of climate emergency rooted in long histories of colonialism and extractivism in *The Nutmeg’s Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022).

<sup>22</sup> Mohamed Amer Meziane, *The States of the Earth: An Ecological and Racial History of Secularization*, trans. Jonathan Adjemian (New York: Verso, 2024). Thanks to J. Kameron Carter for alerting me to this text.

<sup>23</sup> Bron Taylor, “Critical Perspectives on ‘Religions of the World and Ecology’” in *Encyclopedia of Religion & Nature* (London: Continuum, 2010), 1376.

the historical propensity for religion scholars—precisely in the mode of standing back and “simply understanding”—to engage in epistemological extraction as Long has emphasized, I would argue that religion and nature methods from extractive zones would require the value positionality of engaged, activist, justice-oriented, repair-driven, participant-observer approaches.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, such an approach would also require a critical analysis and reassessment of Greening Religion’s idealist tendency to resource religions (or even “mine” them) for improved environmental ethics.<sup>25</sup> In any case, the methods of a religion scholar in extractive zones could not find solace in any kind of onto-epistemology that would assume binaries between acting and knowing, feeling and thinking, or academy and activism.

There is much yet to be worked out in precisely articulating how a religion and environment scholar would be engaged as participant-observer committed to social-environmental justice but also avoid extracting knowledge and resourcing religion. As Willis Jenkins emphasizes in a 2009 review essay on the field of religion and ecology, the methodological differences between Greening Religion and Dark Green Religion track along lines that have divided (at least North American) religious studies from theological approaches.<sup>26</sup> From this perspective, the task for future religion and environment scholars marks a fundamental need to upend established disciplinary divides that have defined the study of a religion as a whole and reimagine religious/theological studies methods, this time self-consciously, critically, and responsively from extractive zones.

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<sup>24</sup> For more on these approaches, see Rowe, Sideris, and Zenner (forthcoming) as well as Joseph Witt, “Religion, Extraction, and Just Transition in Appalachia,” *Religions* 15 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15101261>.

<sup>25</sup> Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim, “The Challenge of the Environmental Crisis,” *Religions of the World and Ecology Series Forward*, <https://fore.yale.edu/Publications/Books/Religions-World-and-Ecology-Book-Series/Challenge-Environmental-Crisis#10>. Thanks to Evan Berry for pointing out a reliance on “mining” metaphors in religion and environment discourses (Berry, “Opening Comments” at the Workshop on Religion, Environmental Crises & Extractivism, Arizona State University, Feb. 5-6, 2023).

<sup>26</sup> Willis Jenkins, “Religion and Ecology: A Review Essay on the Field,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 77.1 (2009): 187-97.