

Bron R. Taylor et al, *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*

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For an encyclopedia devoted to an exploration of the “relationships between human beings, their diverse religions, and the Earth’s living systems” (vii), the defining factor can be none other than the very definitions of “religion” and “nature”. This foundational importance of definition is well-recognized by Taylor. Since there is no broadly accepted definition of religion, Taylor and his colleagues had to choose one of various possibilities; what they settled on is based on David Chidester’s vague definition, who argued in his 1996 *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa* that the term “*religion* has been a contested category[;] a single, incontestable definition of religion cannot simply be established by academic fiat” (ix), and who consciously proposed a vague definition: religion is “that dimension of human experience engaged with sacred norms” (ix). Based on this, the editors of *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature* (ERN) adopted a working definition of religion as “that dimension of human experience engaged with sacred norms, which are related to transformative forces and powers and which people consider to be dangerous and/or beneficent and/or meaningful in some ultimate way” (x). In his introduction Taylor further states that “for many, this meaningfulness and the sacred norms associated with it have much to do with nature” (x). He acknowledges that nature itself is a problematic and contested term, but defines it as “that world which includes—but at the same time is perceived to be beyond—our human bodies, and which confronts us daily with its apparent otherness” (x). These “minimalist definitions” (x), when combined into the term “nature religion”, become “any religiosity that considers nature to be sacred (extraordinarily powerful in both dangerous and beneficial ways) and worthy of reverent care” (x).

Many would object to these definitions, as Taylor admits, but he was faced with the problem of finding working definitions for the encyclopedia. The choices he made came from a stock which has been floating in the Western academic world since the beginning of the enterprise of the study of religion. This enterprise itself emerged from a specific historical context in the Western world characterized by a radical redefinition first of Christianity and then of all religions. Thus, the particular worldview

which informs the choice of definitions—and hence the scope of ERN—is deeply entrenched in the post-Renaissance understanding of religion in the Western world. Given this specificity, ERN cannot be expected to provide viewpoints of various religious traditions on nature as they are understood by the practitioners of those religions, but merely the perspective of the Western Academy on those views.

This is obvious in the choice of entries. Key terms chosen for major entries, thus, lack intrinsic links with the overall worldview of the religious traditions they purport to represent, and are instead based on ad hoc external considerations. In the case of Islam, for instance, one would expect any encyclopedia on religion and nature to include a major entry on *ḥimā*, the protected pasture; ERN does not. It in fact summarily dismisses this important aspect of Islamic tradition with regard to the protection of nature: “Though the classical legal traditions contain material dealing with the environment, such as forbidding cruelty to animals, regulating water distribution and establishing undeveloped zones (*himas*) for the protection of watersheds, to attribute to them an environmental ethic in the contemporary sense would be anachronistic” (859). This rather puzzling statement is in the main entry on Islam, an entry which also informs us that “when Palestinians seek to assert territorial claims by planting olive groves, one cannot say that this is an ‘Islamic’ issue, since many Palestinians are not Muslim” (859)!

In addition to the lack of many defining concepts, one would also expect a certain imbalance to have crept into the encyclopedia due to the lack of organic links with the religious traditions being discussed; ERN is replete with this. For example, the main entry on Islam, which is supposedly providing a history of Islam, its specific views on nature, the epistemological basis of the legal framework regarding nature, the Qurʾānic perspective on nature and its relationship with God and humanity, and many other aspects of Islam and nature, is restricted to four pages—whereas an entry entitled “Dogs in the Islamic Tradition” is spread over almost half that space. In addition to this specific entry on “Dogs in the Islamic tradition” the same subject takes up one-third of the space devoted to another entry, “Dogs in the Abrahamic Traditions”, which unequivocally attributes a saying to the Prophet which is considered spurious in the other entry (“Muhammad further established that a woman, a donkey and a black dog interrupt the prayer,” 498). This particular entry, which seems to have emerged from nineteenth century Orientalism, uses “Moslem” for “Muslim” and makes a totally baseless claim: “a dog by the

name of Kitmir will be allowed to enter paradise (Qurʾān C?XVIII:17), because of its praiseworthy behavior toward some youngsters whose lives were in danger” (498). Disregarding the ambiguity of the referred verse due to the presence of “?” in the reference given by ERN, one can take it to mean the seventeenth verse of the eighteenth chapter of the Qurʾān, though the reference is actually to the dog of the youths who had taken refuge in a cave, who are called *aṣḥāb al-kahf* in the Qurʾān (*al-Kahf*: 18). The word “kitmir” is not a Qurʾānic word at all, nor does the Qurʾān say anything about this dog’s entrance into Paradise.

The task undertaken by Taylor and his colleagues in compiling ERN was obviously not easy. Their choice of definitions made it even more complicated. “Religion” and “nature” as defined by ERN have forced a large range of disparate material into the encyclopedia—from Earth Bible to Eden Ecology, and from Eco-Paganism to Radical Environmentalism—which renders it useful for readers from the great shopping mall filled with smorgasbords of religions, cults, and spiritualities, but of little use to any serious reader looking for authentic religious perspectives on nature.

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