

Can the Song of Songs be described (also) as a form of dark green religion?

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Abstract

Bron Taylor defines dark green religion as follows: "...a deep sense of belonging to and connectedness in nature, while perceiving the earth and its living systems to be sacred and interconnected." It not only emphasises a felt kinship with the rest of life, but it evokes awe, wonderment and humility towards nature that binds to something "greater than oneself." Does the intimate "oneness" and living in the moment of the two young lovers in the Song also extend to a diminishing of the self and an experience of oneness with a greater, timeless, mysterious reality? In order to determine whether the Song of Songs complies with a form of nature spirituality, the notions of belonging, interconnectedness and sacredness were investigated as they appear in this ancient book of love. It was found that the Song is representative of a form of dark green religion of a non-doctrinaire, immanent kind. It exhibits ubiquitously the notions of belonging and connection (kinship with nature, an interconnectedness and interdependency of the web of life) and the sacredness of the earth and its inhabitants (their intrinsic worth that evokes awe, wonderment and humility). The experience of sensuality, living mindfully in the moment, transforms into a timeless spirituality of connection to "another, mysterious world."

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications:

The relevance of reader-orientated appreciations of biblical texts, notably ecological hermeneutics, is demonstrated; this approach can also be extended to other sacred texts apart from the Bible; furthermore, it points to the need for the ongoing dialogue also with the natural sciences.

Key words: dark green religion, nature spirituality, belonging, interconnectedness, sacredness, Song of Songs.

Introduction

The severe drought towards the end of 2015 in South Africa, one of the worst in the country in decades, has given the word "green" a new and enlivened meaning. When some rain fell at the

beginning of 2016 and the first sprouts of greenery appeared, there was a sigh of relief throughout the country. Everyone intuitively knew “green” meant new life and survival for all, for humans, animals and plants. This matches the appreciation of “green” with water, since time immemorial and since the dawn of humankind. People know that “green” spells life, it is an index of the life-force that permeates nature allowing life to thrive (Kaplan & Kaplan 1989:9). It is therefore apt also that in the research environment that religion and theology (amongst many disciplines) find themselves, “green” has received specific acknowledgement in the past few decades, for instance in eco-theology. An example is the Earth Bible Project of Norman Habel and others (see e.g. 2001; 2009) emphasising a “green” reading of the Bible, embracing the Earth as a “subject” and exposing unbridled anthropocentrism. Bron Taylor (2010) can perhaps be seen as Habel’s cognate within the broader field of religion studies, with a similar embracing of nature in its own right by articulating dark green religion. There is an overlap between these articulations of appreciating Earth, even to the extent of “revering” nature as something sacred. Earth Bible hermeneutics, for instance, emphasises nature’s intrinsic worth, the interconnectedness (kinship) of all life and the “voice” of Earth (Habel 2009:61-74), while dark green religion highlights the notions of belonging, (also) interconnectedness and the “sacredness” of nature (Taylor 2010:13). Importantly, even though the last-mentioned term is a religious term, dark green religion does not necessarily in all instances subscribe to a meta-physical world of non-material beings and spirits.

Whereas Bron Taylor has focused on a wide variety of influential people, their writings, modern movements, and so on (see below) to describe dark green religion, I have in this article focused on a specific text in the Bible, namely the Song of Songs, to determine if it can be described as “dark green.” Earlier Earth Bible contributions on the Song have provided a good foundation to be able to answer the question of the “greenness” of this ancient love song, and building on these contributions it will be determined if the Song is also “dark green.” In what follows a rather lengthy explanation of what “dark green religion” comprises is tabled. I then read the Song (or parts of it) through this hermeneutical lens where especially the notions of belonging, interconnectedness and “sacredness” are emphasised. Dark green religion assumes a deep-seated sensuous experience of nature evoking a metaphysics of interconnection. Does the Song include nature while highlighting the sensuousness of love, and is the result also an extended spiritual intimacy of “oneness” that binds to a reality “larger than oneself”?

What is dark green religion?

Bron Taylor introduces his book *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future* (2010) with the statement that dark green religion might seem like a phantom without any single sacred text, institutional hierarchy or charismatic figure(s) spreading its message (2010:ix). It is therefore not recognised as an official religion by the Parliament of World Religions but nevertheless represented at this body. Even though it consists of a bricolage of viewpoints, diverse ethical codes and prominent figures it is not a phantom (2010:217) but becomes manifested in its sincere embracement and conferring of intrinsic worth on the natural world. It implies a deep connection to the natural world, and therefore adheres to the etymological definition of “religion,” “...from the Latin *re* (again) and *ligare* (to connect)...” (2010:2). It is not only “green” emphasising mainstream religions’ general ethical responsibility towards the environment but “dark green”¹ for its emphasis on the depth of consideration of nature as precious and even sacred (2010:2, 13). It expands the narrow boundaries and intellectual definitions of traditional religions and transfers religious-like emotionality to the experience of nature. An apt expression of the latter is found with cell biologist Ursula Goodenough who highlights an inward religious-like response of awe, wonderment, respect and reverence in her naturalistic appreciation of nature, accompanied by a deep-seated sense of “green” morality (2005:1372). Apart from this inward and moral response, she (2005:1372) also emphasises an interpretive response typical of religion: “Why is there anything at all rather than nothing? Does the universe have plan? Purpose? How do we think about death?”² “Dark” can, however, also include a negative stance toward society, a form of misanthropy as it sometimes surfaces in radical environmentalism. Taylor (2010:5-10) points out how early roots and exponents, for instance nature religions (e.g. *Animism*, the belief that inanimate objects and forces have consciousness [E.B. Tylor]), the monistic pan (-en) theism of Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677) or the deistic “natural religion” of non-anthropocentric, non-materialistic indigenous peoples praised by Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), the

¹ Taylor (2010:223-224) steers away from naming his approach *deep ecology*, because the latter does not necessarily embrace religious sentiments; he also avoids *Paganism* despite its nature emphasis, because of its baggage of polytheism and belief in non-material spiritual beings; *nature religion* (*a la* Catharine Albanese) is also too wide to include some religions proper where nature becomes a center point.

² She herewith also echoes her religious naturalistic stance in her earlier work (Goodenough 1998:xx): “For example, the evolution of the cosmos invokes in me a sense of mystery; the increase in biodiversity invokes the response of humility; and an understanding of the evolution of death offers me helpful ways to think about my own death.”

biocentrism and mysticism of Francis of Assisi, all share a deep respect, sympathy, compassion for and intimate bond with all creatures.

Following on these few general remarks, Taylor (2010:13) describes dark green religion more specifically as follows:

...a deep sense of belonging to and connectedness in nature, while perceiving the earth and its living systems to be sacred³ and interconnected. Dark green religion is generally deep ecological, bio-centric, or eco-centric, considering all species to be intrinsically valuable, that is valuable apart from their usefulness to human beings. This value system is generally (1) based on a felt kinship with the rest of life, often derived from a Darwinian understanding that all forms of life have evolved from a common ancestor and are therefore related; (2) accompanied by feelings of humility and a corresponding critique of moral superiority,⁴ often inspired or reinforced by a science-based cosmology that reveals how tiny human beings are in the universe; and (3) reinforced by metaphysics of interconnection and the idea of interdependence (mutual influence and reciprocal dependence) found in the sciences, especially in ecology and physics.

This viewpoint also reminds of Norman Habel, the pioneer of the Earth Bible Project, who emphasises the internalisation of an ecological worldview.⁵ The latter implies a replacement of humans' almost default anthropocentrism with a new eco-centric consciousness of a kinship and interdependency of all life forms (2009:43). Just how important worldviews/ideologies/theologies/meta-narratives are in determining the (green) ethical agenda is illustrated by Benavides (2005:548-554). By postulating mystical or utopian realms, religions distance themselves from reality. However, some symbolic-ritual systems succeed in maintaining an equilibrium between humans and their environment, especially in small-scale societies. Large-scale societies with their accompanying (often obsessive) ideologies can, however, have a devastating ecological effect.⁶ The general truth of *credenda* and *agenda*

³ In an earlier contribution Taylor (2008:89) expresses himself as follows: "By dark green religion, I mean religion that considers nature to be sacred, imbued with intrinsic value, and worthy of reverent care."

⁴ Similarly as countercultural ideas flourish in an alternative "cultic milieu," so the same kind of ideas of embracing nature bind diverse people together in the non-mainstream "environmental milieu" (Taylor 2010:14).

⁵ Habel (2009:43) describes this worldview as follows: "Earth is a living planet that originated in cosmic space and evolved into a living habitat; Earth is a fragile web of interconnected and interdependent forces and domains of existence; Earth is a living community in which humans and all other organisms are kin, who live and move and have their common destiny."

⁶ Benavides (2005:548-549) shows how the careful (eco-aware) management of pig utilisation amongst the small-scale Tsembaga of New Guinea (studied by Roy Rappaport) maintains an ecological equilibrium, able to sustain

fitting hand in glove applies not only to traditional religion and ethics but includes dark green religion and its accompanying ethics of care also, and therefore the plea for a new eco-consciousness inspiring the (re-) “greening”/vitalising of our planet.

Taylor (2010:14-15) identifies four types of dark green religion that can be schematically represented as follows (and confirming its diversity):

| | | |
|------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------|
| | <u>Animism</u> | <u>Gaian Earth Religion</u> |
| <u>Supernaturalism</u> | <u>Spiritual Animism</u> | <u>Gaian Spirituality</u> |
| <u>Naturalism</u> | Naturalistic Animism | Gaian Naturalism |

The line between supernaturalism and naturalism is porous (and therefore dotted) and representatives sometimes find themselves in both worlds. *Spiritual animism* assumes that spiritual intelligences or life forces animate natural objects or phenomena, they are derived from an assumed, objective supernatural world and therefore worthy of veneration. Examples here are the typical nature religions that personify a tree, animal, mountain, river, et cetera, as a “revelation”/incarnation of a higher unseen, non-material force or being. A modern proponent that Taylor (2010:17-18) refers to is the American Buddhist-Animist writer Gary Snyder who claimed that you can hear “...voices from trees.” New Age spiritual groups often also claim the channeling of the spirits of other assumed beings (2010:22). *Gaian spirituality* is according to Taylor “organicist” and holistic (2010:16), regarding the universe as a living organism consisting of interdependent parts. Upholding and expressing itself as a supernatural consciousness through this whole is God, Brahman, the Great Mystery or whatever name is chosen to symbolise the divine cosmos.

Naturalistic animism and *Gaian naturalism*, however, is sceptical that some “...spiritual world runs parallel to the earth and animates nonhuman natural entities...” (2010:22). It does, however, subscribe to a (naturalistic) metaphysics of interconnection, kinship and belonging permeating the whole of the universe. And it often expresses itself very much in the well-known “religious” jargon of awe, reverence, wonder and delight (2010:40).⁷ This is markedly

both humans and animals. In large-scale India, however, the ideological obsession with purity (and also upholding the caste system), constrains recycling practices through the degrading of garbage collectors.

⁷ Cell biologist Ursula Goodenough (1998:xi-xxi), whose father was a Methodist preacher, and still attends church but not as a theistic believer, provides a telling example. She finds religious emotions and their expression in the well-known religious jargon when experiencing the wonders of nature, very apt. Dawkins, however, regards the

so since Darwin brought about a Copernican revolution in biology with his view on our common ancestor. His widely quoted appreciation of the “...grandeur in this view of life...”⁸ with which he concluded his *On the Origin of Species* (1859:490), implies no need for nonmaterial divine/spiritual beings (Taylor 2010:23). Cognitive ethologists like Mark Bekoff for instance, are convinced not only of the mindfulness of animals (e.g. canines) but of their morality as well. Whereas others see only tiny, first sparks or beginnings of morality in animals (Van der Waal 2006:14), he is convinced it is the real thing. His animistic perception becomes clear in his appreciation of the eye of an animal as a portal to its inner emotionality (2010:24).⁹ The well-known primatologist, Jane Goodall, another example of this line of thought, is aptly called “an animist missionary” (Taylor 2010:26). Goodall believes animals have souls just like humans (2010:29), animating “intelligences” derived from some superordinate intelligence (2010:31). The latter shows that, even though she is a natural scientist she retains something of a theism, acknowledging that not all can be explained by science, and admitting an oceanic feeling of oneness when exposed to nature (2010:31). As mentioned above, for some the boundary between the natural and supernatural is permeable. Another prominent name, also to have inspired Goodall is Thomas Berry, the Roman Catholic priest turned “geologian” (Ellard 2011:301), whom Taylor refers to as an excellent example of Gaian spirituality (2010:27). Berry most probably inspired many for the call of a new mind-set, that of ecological consciousness (see above), scientifically informed by the grand meta-narrative or the “Epic of Evolution” as Goodenough describes it (2005:1372). Ellard (2011:301-320) succinctly captures some of Berry’s thoughts: he says everything in the universe is the universe, everything is connected genetically, chemically and sub-atomically. We do not live on the earth, we are the earth and we fascinatingly have become expressions/carriers of the consciousness embedded in the universe from its beginning.¹⁰ Moreover, if one wants to discover “god” or the numinous Presence, look at the universe, because the “...sense of the divine is ...fundamentally evolutionary” (Ellard 2011:312). Compared to evolution the

use of religious talk in scientific circles as treason towards the fraternity. Taylor (2010:177) correctly argues that Dawkins’s definition of “religion” is far too narrow.

⁸ The full quote reads as follows: “Thus, from the war of nature, from famine and death, the most exalted object which we are capable of conceiving, namely, the production of the higher animals, directly follows. There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved.”

⁹ Taylor (2010:24) succinctly describes these encounters with animals as “eye – to – eye epiphanies.”

¹⁰ Berry eloquently says: “Often, after a few classes on cosmology and its significance, I ask my students, ‘how old are you?’ It takes a few minutes, but if I have done my job well, they offer me the correct answer – around 14 billion years old. We were there at the beginning...” (cited in Ellard 2011:309).

narrative of the Bible and its theistic thoughts (especially transcendence and redemption) should be shelved for the moment. Berry can therefore thank “gravity” (amongst many other divine descriptions), a fascinating mysterious force for keeping the universe intact and even suggests a feast day for “gravity” in the churches.

James Lovelock, Gaian naturalism’s¹¹ “founder,” became known for his Gaia (Greek goddess of the earth) theory of the living earth as a self-regulating organism, although not in a sentient way. Describing the earth as Gaia is therefore only a metaphor, she is not “god” (2010:35-6), but even so she can be “trusted” (2010:38). Other than an ecologised theism (e.g. Anne Primavesi), Lovelock opts for a Gaian “religion” of nature, confirming his epistemological stance as a mainstream scientist. He is critical of the Abrahamic religions’ so-called (anthropocentric) sustainable development and stewardship (2010:36). Callicott (2005:1168), to a limited extent appreciative of the latter, is nevertheless stark in his criticism of the Abrahamic family of religions as ignorant primitive superstition.

Apart from the few examples of “dark green religionists” provided by Taylor above, he also highlights a few influential figures on own soil, North America (2010:42-70). With the arrival of the first European immigrants in America, driven by their Christian Puritanism (2010:43) of dualism and anthropocentrism, both the land and its native inhabitants had to be “civilized” and saved (2010:43). There were, however, some who opposed this denigrating of nature and prepared the way for prominent “dark green” names such as Ralph Emerson, Henry Thoreau and John Muir. Both Emerson and Muir, through their writings, can be labelled as animist/pantheist who emphasized a direct, sensuous experience of nature. Their ways, however, part with Emerson holding on to a Platonic dualism whilst Muir departed from a supernaturalistic worldview (2010:50, 69). More needs to be said on Henry Thoreau. Shortly before his death in 1862, he had read Darwin’s, *On the Origin of Species* (1859), but does not seem to have assimilated it as thoroughly as he probably would have liked. Taylor (2010:51-54) summarises his views in eight, dark green themes: the simple, natural, and undomesticated (free) life – wild is preferred to cultivation and humans have to be in touch with their animal nature; the wisdom of nature – a first-hand, sensuous experience of nature becomes his epistemology; a religion of nature – his sense of belonging (to be connected) is, however, post-Christian, and he believes he can learn more from native Indians than from Christ; laws of

¹¹ Another well-known “Gaian naturalist” is Aldo Leopold known for his land ethic, viewing land not as a commodity but as community (Taylor 2010:31-32).

nature and justice – he opposed slavery; an ecocentric moral philosophy – he strongly opposed anthropocentric domination and urged vegetarianism; loyalty to and the interconnectedness of nature – humans have their place in nature and are reunited with earth after death; moral evolution: the necessity of human moral/spiritual/scientific growth – he was ambivalent to natives who were sources of wisdom but also scientifically ignorant and superstitious; ambivalence and enigma – he believed in a natural “... metaphysics of interconnection and belonging...mused in ways both animistic and pantheistic ... expressing a reverence for life and intimating a biocentric kinship ethics” (2010:54).

Apart from some versions of dark green religion departing radically from traditional, institutionalised religions, it also has an activist side, namely radical environmentalism that explicates the other meaning of “dark.” It vehemently opposes (*inter alia*) Abrahamic anthropocentrism (Taylor 2010:75) by putting the earth first. This branch of dark green religion similarly consists of diverse convictions and ethical stances, believers and non-believers, activists and pacifists (2010:77). An interesting emphasis is apocalypticism, “...the end of the known world ... grounded in environmental science” (2010:84). Adherents to this radicalism are often accused of “ecotage,” with their defence that they are only preventing “ecocide” (2010:87, 91). The shadowy side of these sentiments, however, raises criticisms also of fascism and misanthropy (2010:101), the latter exposing these individuals’/groups’ almost complete ignorance of the plight of poor and suffering human communities.

An interesting manifestation¹² of dark green religion appears as surfing spirituality. Having been a life-saver and surfer himself, Bron Taylor aptly describes the sensuality of the surfing experience transmuting into an uplifting spirituality (2010:103-126), almost a living in the moment as in Zen Buddhism (2010:117).¹³ Quoting from a surfer magazine Taylor says “the pure act of riding on a pulse of nature’s energy,” connects one to Mother Ocean, the marine equivalent of the terrestrial Mother Earth (2010:104, 116) and often aptly called “soul surfing.” This is tapping into the source of life, the sea as our evolutionary origin (2010:125). The experience of nature, including the marine animals, is “powerful, transformative, healing¹⁴ and

¹² In his chapters 6, “Globalization with Predators and Moving Pictures,” and 7, “Globalization in Arts, Sciences, and Letters,” Taylor (2010: 127-179) provides many more illuminating appearances/representations of dark green religion.

¹³ “Some of the most dramatic examples of heightened consciousness are what happens perceptually in dangerous situations, especially when a surfer is riding ‘in the tube’ of a large hollow wave. Such situations intensely focus one’s attention, forcing one to truly ‘live in the moment’” (Taylor 2010:117).

¹⁴ Quoting Jay Moriarty, interesting hormone releases happen in the brain (Taylor 2010:118): “A good dose of fear is soothing for the human psyche. When the brain detects danger, the human body sends out norepinephrine to every part of the body. Once this danger has passed, the body sends dopamine to the brain, a pleasurable

sacred” (2010:104), and it often leads to an ethos of care (even activist) for the marine aquatic systems. Although surfers are sometimes guilty of territorialism, there is more than often a social comradery among surfers sharing their deep feelings for the ocean, similar to a group of “believers.” Surfing has its own myths, rituals, symbols, terminology and technology and it therefore makes sense when it is often referred to as an aquatic nature religion (2010:104, 125). The experience of being connected to something greater than oneself, need not necessarily imply nonmaterial divine beings (2010:122).

To sum up: dark green religion that might have seemed like a “phantom” at first, is very real and has a wide-spread manifestation in its more organised forms¹⁵ but also in its spontaneous expressions, as its adherents underwrite its “green” values. Its four types point to a broad definition of “religion” with permeable boundaries, especially between those that believe in the existence of nonmaterial spiritual beings and those that do not. Whether “intelligences” and organic wholeness (as in Animistic and Gaian Spirituality) have their origins in some supernatural all-encompassing “Intelligence” (God), or whether they are the outcome of a scientifically informed evolutionary process (as in Animistic and Gaian Naturalism), all followers of dark green religion stand in awe and fascination before nature’s wonders. Both cherish the natural world as precious, even sacred and therefore worthy of caring, as they experience a deep-seated connectedness, belonging and an interdependent kinship with the universe as we know it. Many believers in the “supernatural” that we find in traditional, pre-industrial societies will venerate/worship nature, and those who believe in a natural, evolutionary (Darwinian) worldview, somehow cannot escape “religious talk” to express their astonishment of the “miracle”¹⁶ of nature. This happens markedly through a first-hand sensuous experience of the natural world. It is time to take a closer look at the sensuous Song of Songs, does it also think as highly of nature as dark green religionists do?

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chemical, as a way to congratulate the brain for surviving. These chemicals are what make people want to surf big waves.”

¹⁵ Taylor (2010:180) is convinced that the dark green religion movement has the potential to become a fully acknowledged terrapolitan “...global, civic, earth...” religion.

¹⁶ On a personal note Taylor (2010:220-221) accepts the theory of evolution as the best explanation for the beauty, diversity and fecundity of our biosphere. In the same breath he also acknowledges the universe as a Great Mystery that is beyond our knowing, at least from the vantage point we call time. He also thinks that metaphysical speculation is a waste of good time, although it might be an interesting hobby to some.

ancient book of love. Although distinguished they often overlap but together they enhance the ultimate experience of nature. In what follows it will also become clear that I choose for a plain sense reading of the Song, namely the celebration of erotic love. In my view this was the reason for the Song's original creation. Despite it having one of the richest reception histories of all biblical books, for most of its afterlife it has ironically been interpreted against its own grain, notably so by the allegorical interpretation.¹⁷ The latter is understandable probably due to the Song's metaphoric character, evoking an endless array of meanings. However, many of these meanings are so distanced from the text that the need for the latter in fact becomes redundant to emphasise a particular ideological/theological stance.

Belonging. An apt way to verify the notion of belonging in the Song is to determine if the two lovers are "at home" in nature. Do the protagonists intuitively feel that they belong there, that nature is a love-friendly refuge, a safe haven where they can fulfil their love for each other? Or is nature (wild nature especially) a place to steer away from, as it was generally believed not only to be inhabited by wild and dangerous animals, but also a place where demons and gods might reside? Schochet (1984:3-4) therefore describes the general Israel-Nature relationship as rather "cool" and distanced, and humans need to subdue and control it, a clear anthropocentric attitude. The Song, however, is an exception with its subversive (LaCoque 1998) and liberative content (Fontaine 2001:127-128) as it collapses the dichotomous boundaries between city and rural, upper and lower classes, male and female and for the purpose of this article, between culture and nature, and between wild and tamed nature (Whedbee 1993). Landy therefore describes the principal metaphor of the Song as a "rural retreat," a retreat from culture to nature (1983:31, 190). Fontaine adds that faunal and floral imagery dominates when compared to the social metaphors in the Song (2001:128). But from what did the two lovers need to get away from? They had to stay out of sight of the glaring, censoring eye of the (patriarchal) community (e.g. 1:6; 8:1; 8:8-9), who would condemn the seemingly not married or formally betrothed couple (Fontaine 2001:130). And for this purpose the escape to nature becomes very appropriate. The fit into nature to fulfil a specific purpose is referred to by the environmental psychologists Stephen Kaplan and Rachel Kaplan (1989) as "compatibility." It refers to the tallying of the environment with one's purposes (1989:185) and characterised by "...a special resonance between the natural environment and human inclinations" (1989:193). This makes sense, because this is where we come from and where we belong, and this applies even to

¹⁷ See for example Pope (1977:89-229) for an encompassing historical overview of the diverse nuances of this approach to the Song.

modern urban dwellers who have mostly departed from earlier rural life. Is the Song “compatible” with nature, does the latter serve as a “home” for the needs of human beings?

A telling example illustrating nature as “home” in the Song will suffice, namely one from wild nature, although cultivated nature similarly serve as haven for the two lovers. The two lovers are quite at home in the “wilderness” throughout the Song (e.g. 2:14, 3:6, 4:8 and 8:5) and in Song 1:15-17 (wild) nature becomes their safe love nest, explicitly called their “house” (v. 17). The almost echoing of each other’s words of admiration conveys their fascination for each other and is continued with the description of their “bed,” their “house” and their “roof” that is similarly attention-grabbing.¹⁸ Their natural home consists of a verdant carpet of ground coverage with the green canopy of cedars and cypresses forming a protective roof. According to Munro trees convey security and stability in the Song, compared to flowers that signal delicacy and beauty, and fruits love that has matured (1995:86; see also Longman 2001:108). Apart from the protection of the trees, the cedars and cypresses (and other woods of the Lebanon, see 3:9) also suggest preciousness and durability, aptly fit for sacred and royal usage (Barbiero 2011:81). This green “bower” then, being both secure and precious, is an ideal, secluded spot for the consummation of their love. The latter is exactly the purpose of this natural breakaway, evoked by her “eyes are doves” (v. 15), communicating messages of love (Barbiero 2011:79; Keel 1986:71-74)¹⁹ and appreciating the dove as an almost universal symbol of love (Exum 2005:112). The lusciousness of fertile nature, especially the evocative colour of green, is elegantly verbalised by Fontaine (2001:134): “The ‘green couch’ is an index of all that may be conveyed by the color of growth and a textual link to the life-force²⁰ of Earth intensely at work in the real world...” The two lovers’ natural home therefore also transfers/connects them to a kingly/heavenly world of bliss²¹ which all lovers share.

¹⁸ The repetition of “our” bed, “our” house and “our” roof aptly expresses their oneness (Barbiero 2011:80).

¹⁹ In ancient iconography doves often fly from the eyes of a goddess to a god and sometimes *vice versa*. Keel (1986:74) says: “Die Tauben aber können vor dem altorientalischen Hintergrund in diesem Kontext nur die bedeutung von Liebesbotinnen habe. Und der Satz wäre dann zu verstehen: ‘Deine Blicke sind Liebesboten.’”

²⁰ Both Fontaine (2001:134) and Arbel (2000:94) see in the “greenery” some subdued allusion to procreation, otherwise almost absent in the Song. In regard to the latter Fischer (2014:816, 817) says the following of the woman as garden (4:12-5:1): “This is also a subtle reference to fruitfulness, since plants are pollinated by the wind as the exotic expresses the erotic that overpower both lovers. In this regard the woman is not only passive as the metaphor of the wind may suggest, but active in producing the abundance of the garden ... The inclusion of the metaphor of the wind in the garden metaphor ... forms an even more powerful metaphor because other aspects such as fertility or procreation are included.”

²¹ Apart from merely a natural setting, the couch (*‘ereś* instead of *miškāb* evoking luxury; see Pr 7:16, Am 6:4-6; Barbiero 2011:81; Fox 1985:106), cedar beams (*qōrā* – 2 Chron 3:7) and cypress rafters (*rāhīt*) – the building materials of palaces and temples (Barbiero 2011:81; Gerleman 1981:113, 114; Rudolph 1962:128) – also subtly evoke an image of opulence.

Belonging, or the experience of being part of nature, also has to do with mundane things like survival and not only merging with it through the blissful experience of love. Of this the Song is well aware as it also reflects the Earth as “workplace” (Fontaine 2001:130).²² Since the dawn of humankind people had to adapt to make a living on the earth, to know it well enough to ensure also their physical well-being. Shepherd fiction in the Song is nevertheless authentic as the lovers are presented knowing the best grazing fields and watering locations (e.g. 1:7-8; 4:1-2, 5; 6:5-6). The Song knows especially the natural weather cycles: 2:11ff “See, the winter is past; the rains are over and gone. Flowers appear on the earth; the season of singing has come, the cooing of doves is heard in our land...” This implies also a keen and sober observation of nature to adapt to its annual rhythms and ensure the continuation of life, making it a liveable habitat/home that is reliable, trusted and obviously treasured! The implied idea of “trust” especially is proprietary to religious thought. Nature can be similarly trusted as God, as has been indicated in Gaian thought above (Taylor 2010:38). Although the Song is a pre-scientific book and only indirectly pedagogical, it reminds of the wisdom perspective that regarded nature as “school” to take lessons from (Habel 2001:25). A close observation of reality (including nature) to know its order, ensures success in life (Loader 1986:103).

Interconnectedness. Where the earth as home in the Song already implies our connectedness with nature, this notion becomes more foregrounded in the following three ways. It happens through the “linguaging” (symbolising) of the human and non-human characters through metaphorisation and personification, the experience of “oneness” through sexual intimacy and a metaphysical connection to a greater whole.

Metaphor and personification are reciprocally united, so that “...humans [are] ‘becoming’ Nature and Nature [is] ‘becoming’ human” (Viviers 2001:149; Fischer 2014:811). Nature metaphors help us to understand and explore the unknown (tenor) through the known (vehicle) (Fontaine 2001:128-9), and is therefore good to think by. Personification is *inter alia* also a way of conferring worth onto non-human beings or objects, we acknowledge them as something of ourselves. This already is a recognition of the Earth’s intrinsic worth. The lover metaphorised as a gazelle darting over the mountains (2:8-9) evokes an image of strength, swiftness, virility and uninhibited freedom. But this approaching animal soon becomes humanised as it peers through the lattice of the woman’s home and speaks, 2:10 “Arise, my

²² Fontaine (2001:131) indicates that although the foodstuffs in the Song - wine, oil, milk, honey, pomegranates, nuts, etc., might sound paradisiacal they are the actual produce of the land of Israel (see e.g. Num 13:23).

love my fair one and come away.” The woman is pictured as a shy dove in the clefts of the rocks (2:14), but she instantaneously becomes human having an attractive “face” and an appealing “voice.” The song of the turtle dove announcing spring is contagious, if the lovebird sings, humans should echo the “time of singing” (2:12), they are “kin” in nature’s choir. Moving from animals to plants, “...the reciprocity of metaphorisation and personification” (Viviers 2001:150) is again aptly illustrated in Song 4:12-5:1. The woman is an exotic, delectable garden of plants, spices and springs, but this garden becomes an acting “subject” in its own right, not only full of life and sustaining life, but also “commanding” the winds to spread her luring fragrances (v. 16). “Woman becomes ... delectable garden and garden becomes desirable woman. By experiencing the one you sense the other” (2001:150).²³ Referring to another garden scene, 6:2-3 among the many in the Song, Gerleman (1981:189) points out that the border between reality (real garden) and metaphor (garden as human) in the Song is blurred, and the two often coalesce.

Part of the connection to nature, both physically and spiritually, is obviously also the connection of the two lovers in intimate, sexual union – e.g. 2:16 “My lover is mine and I am his; he browses among the lilies.” It is interesting how often scholars cannot resist the challenge to put the experience of orgasm in their own elevated words, for instance Fontaine (2001:141): “Drugged on our own pheromones, pounding blood awash in mind-altering, biochemically active neurotransmitters as the organism prepares to reproduce, dazed and overwhelmed by stimuli, we experience (an almost mystical) union with Earth that is fuelled by sexual sensory overload.” This breakdown of the individual ego that collapses the boundaries between male and female, culture and nature (2001:139), is remarkably similar to what happens during the so-called *unio mystica* in religious meditation. It is aptly explained by what happens in the brain when the so-called “orientation association area” that determines the body’s borders, is put on hold, both during sex or meditation. The result is an intense feeling of becoming one, or merging, with another or with the deity or “a greater reality” when the body’s borders can no longer be drawn.²⁴ Religion and sex, at least according to our brains, are closely related.

²³ In an excellent, recently published (deconstructive) study on the Song, Meredith (2013:69-109), however, critically questions the *ipso facto* acceptance that gardens are always good. Gardens, notably walled ones, are symbols of rather crude human/male domination over nature and also of the female body where the latter is metaphorised as garden.

²⁴ By focussing, for a moment, only on the physical brain, we see how religion follows the same neurological paths as the satisfaction of our normal, earthly needs. In the brain, there is an area known as the “Orientation Association Area.” This area, that receives sensory input from other parts of the brain, helps us to determine the boundaries of our bodies, and to determine our “ego.” During sex, the autonomic nervous system, both the sympathetic (“arousal”) and parasympathetic (“quiescent”) systems, are stimulated to a climax, and to prevent the

We find a telling example of a transporting into and being connected to a “greater (metaphysical) reality” towards the end of the Song, 8:5-7. The two lovers coming from the wilderness *en route* to Jerusalem, also reminds of Song 3:6. The wilderness and apple tree combine the experience of both wild and tamed nature. Danger (including death) as well as the forces of life²⁵ is often associated with the wilderness and is therefore a suitable context for contemplation on the phenomenon of love itself (v. 6-7). Following their own moments of intimacy under the apple tree,²⁶ the woman recalls the lovemaking of her lover’s mother resulting in conception and birth. She is not only absorbed in their intimate private world of love but also transported to the (metaphysical) universal world of love of all lovers, where the experience of the power of love is almost beyond belief (v. 6-7). Many agree that Song 8:6-7 forms the climax of the Song²⁷ and comprises its only explicit contemplative part. Exum (2005:245) succinctly recaps this reflection as “...love is experienced as astonishing, overwhelming, confident, undeterred, deep, and strong as death.”

Sacredness. The notion of sacredness in dark green religion where the earth is viewed as intrinsically valuable can take either a naturalistic form of awe and admiration (e.g. Darwin) or linked to the mysterious “divine.” The Song is exemplary of the latter but characteristic of good poetry characterised by an “escaping” element, it shows and it hides. It evokes the mystery of another world without becoming (dogmatically) explicit. Carol Fontaine especially, writes illuminatingly on nature imagery as an index or sign of ultimate meaning, or in her own words,

“overload” of the brain, sensory input to the orientation area is placed on hold. The result – the intense feeling of becoming one, or merging, with another. Exactly the same thing happens with religious meditation. Certain rituals stimulate the same arousal and quiescent systems of the brain, and eventually results in a cut-off of sensory input to the orientation area. The body’s borders can no longer be drawn, and then the *unio mystica* with the deity follows, or if there is not a personal god involved, the unification with everything during the movement into *nirvana* (Newberg *et al* 2001:19-20, 38, 42, 87, 114-115, 124-127).

²⁵ Astarte, the goddess of love, one amongst many other divinities representing life’s forces, is often associated with the desert (Barbiero 2011:146-147, 447).

²⁶ Under the apple tree (*šām* [“there”] strongly emphasised; Barbiero 2011:449) has both erotic (see also 2:3, 2:5, 7:8) and mythological overtones (Gerleman 1981:215; Pope 1977:663; Murphy 1995:191), and together with the hapax *mitrappeqet* (“leaning”), *’ōrartikā* (“I rouse you” is erotic here - Munro 1995:84, 123; see also refrain of adjuration 2:7, 3:5, 8:4) and repeated verb *hābal* (“conceive”), the purpose of this retreat is highlighted – lovemaking, with the latter leading to contemplation!

²⁷ Fischer (2011), however, argues a strong case from linear, concentric and cyclical structural perspectives, that the garden scene (4:12-5:1) is the centre of the Song, but he nevertheless links these two sections theologically. He interestingly points out how the narrator/omniscient interpreter in 5:1 “Eat, friends, drink, and be drunk, beloved!” can be understood as the “voice of God” (2011:66), the same voice also raised in the wisdom saying of 8:6b-7 reflecting on love as a divine gift (2011:67-68).

“Where there’s smoke there’s fire” (2001:133). This we have noticed already where exposure to nature transports to another, greater world of mysterious powers and forces.

Fontaine (2001:137-139) points out three earthly signs or links to (ultimate) power, namely vegetal, animal and elemental. The green couch (1:15-17) has been touched upon already where the green colour of new growth links to the invisible life-force invigorating and energising the earth to bring forth its produce. Another telling example is Song 7:7-8 “Your stature is like that of the palm and your breasts like clusters of fruit...” This comparison to the well-known palm tree evokes the earth’s fertility and personified (*inter alia*) as Asherah, the fertility goddess of Canaan, often presented as a branched, fruit-bearing tree (Fontaine 2001: 134-135; Keel 1986:222-232)²⁸. Within the ancient, pre-scientific mind the appearance of new life in spring must derive from some personal rather than impersonal force.

The refrain of adjuration (2:7; 3:5; 8:4), “Daughters of Jerusalem, I charge you by the gazelles and by the does of the field: Do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires,” is a conspicuous example of animals that provide the link to divine powers. It is remarkable that they take centre stage in a sacrosanct formula, seeing that an oath is normally sworn in the name of the national God (Bloch & Bloch 1995:9; Fontaine 2001:136). LaCocque (1998:62, 63, 86), along with many commentators, points out the subtle, divine allusions of this oath that the original audience of the Song would not have missed: “*YHWH tseba’ôt* [Lord of hosts] has become *tseba’ôt* [gazelles]; while *El Shadday* [God Almighty] has been changed into *’ayelôt hassadeh* [hinds of the field].” He regards this as part of the subversive nature of the Song. Fontaine (2001:135-6), however, argues that it could function as a euphemism where God is only indirectly alluded to, to avoid blasphemy within the erotic context of the Song. She also allows for an iconographic explanation where gazelles, deer, goats, et cetera, are closely associated with the fertility goddesses of the ancient Mediterranean world (Fontaine 2001:136; Pope 1977:86; Keel 1986:89-94), and therefore “...fitting signs of divine power in the context of oath-taking.” The oath thus evokes not only the personified fertility powers of Israel’s neighbours but in a subtle way that of their national god as well.²⁹ Whatever interpretation is

²⁸ Keel (1986:226): “Der Geliebte als Palme ist einer jener Theomorphien, die sie als das Höchste erscheinen lassen, das der alte Orient zu sehen und zu erfahren imstande war.”

²⁹ Keel (1986:94) says: “Man schwört nicht bei der Gottheit selber, sondern bei ihren Attributen, in unserem Falle den scheuen, agilen und die liebespotenten Geschöpfen der Wildnis. Die Substitution der Gottheit durch ihre Repräsentantinnen mildert einerseits den Polytheismus, erhält der Beschwörung andererseits aber doch die sakrale Aura und verschafft ihr damit stärkeren Nachdruck...” Fontaine (2001:137) argues that the anthropomorphic male version of God is avoided in the Song to foreground nature: “...the divine takes the shape of Earth in all its forms...” According to Viviers (2008) the patriarchal God of Israel is avoided, probably to retain something of its gender inclusiveness (even though limited).

chosen, it is clear that animals in the Song are highly valued, even adorned with “ultimate meaning” as representatives of the powers of a greater, cosmic world.

On the elemental links of power, Fontaine (2001:137-8) distinguishes between earthly and celestial elements. In the Song’s only “philosophical” section on love itself (8:6-7), “love is as strong as death...the grave...it burns like blazing fire, like a mighty flame, many waters cannot quench love...”, the elements of earth, fire and water evoke the ultimate cosmic powers as personified in Canaanite mythology. The Canaanite gods Mot (Death/Sheol), Resheph (fire) and Yam (Sea), although not directly mentioned, are clearly visible between the lines. But it is not only the earthly elements that beget intrinsic worth in this way, the Song does the same also with celestial forces, of which Song 6:10 provides a fine example: “Who is this that appears like the dawn, fair as the moon, bright as the sun, majestic as the stars in procession?”. The beloved (woman) becomes deified within the familiar Canaanite pantheon, where sun, moon and stars were regarded as gods and goddesses. Fontaine (2001:139) highlights for instance the “...lusty goddess Ishtar...frequently imaged dressed for war, surrounded by a circle of stars...along with symbols for the sun and moon.” The boundaries between earth, loved one and deity are fluid: “Earth becomes person, person becomes Earth, and both are identified with the divine” (Fontaine 2001:140).

To recap the intrinsic worth of nature in the Song, inclining to the “sacred”/“ultimate,” LaCoque (1989:31) reiterates a panentheistic view by saying God is not mentioned in the Song, but to be tasted, smelled, heard, seen and touched. And in similar vein Fontaine (2001:141) says: “Only fools ignorant of love can maintain that the divine is absent from this most sublime Song.” The Song interacts creatively with its surrounding mythologies and “transmutes” it for the second temple sensibilities, but still steering clear of the essentialist naming of the national, anthropomorphic, male god (Fontaine 2001:137, 140).

Conclusion

So, can the Song of Songs be described as a form of dark green religion? It has hopefully become clear from the above that it can. It does give an indication of an awareness of what Taylor describes as “Spiritual Animism,” of “intelligences” invigorating also the earth’s non-human inhabitants. Its spontaneous transportation to another world, a greater whole, also testifies to the organicist sentiments of “Gaian Spirituality.” Being generated in a pre-industrial, pre-scientific world this ancient book of love can obviously not be expected to adhere to

“Naturalistic Animism” or “Gaian Naturalism,” or a scientific, naturalistic worldview. Its world abounds with beliefs in personalised forces, unseen gods and goddesses that are in control of life. It, however, maintains a fine balance between the subtle evocation of these divinities but without identifying them explicitly. But it does have an awareness of the natural functioning of the Earth’s eco-systems (for its time obviously). The Song might not be completely eco-friendly as it is not completely woman-friendly either (Exum 2005:80-81), but its overall thrust is that of a spontaneous embracement and valuing of nature.

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